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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Tuesday 21 March 2017

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH

The Secretary of State was asked—

Domestic Students of Medicine

1. **Rebecca Pow** (Taunton Deane) (Con): What steps he plans to take to increase the number of opportunities for domestic students to study medicine. [909354]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): We are funding 1,500 additional medical school places each year to ensure that the NHS can continue to deliver safe, compassionate and effective care well into the future. Around 500 places will be made available in September 2018, and the remaining 1,000 places by September 2019.

Rebecca Pow: In Taunton Deane, we are desperately short of trained health professionals, from dermatologists to nurses, but one of the worst shortages is of GPs, with some practices not even able to get locums. I know Ministers are working on this, but could my right hon. Friend update me on what the Department is doing to encourage more medical students to become GPs? It is hard to believe they do not want to come to Somerset, but what are we doing to encourage them?

Mr Hunt: There is no greater champion for Somerset than my hon. Friend. What I would say to her is what I would say to all medical students, which is that general practice is going to be the biggest area of expansion in the NHS over the coming years; in fact, we are planning to have the biggest increase in GPs in the history of the NHS.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): It will take many years for the doctors the Secretary of State has just talked about to come on stream, and we have a workforce crisis in the NHS now, partly because of the cuts the Government made in the last Parliament, but also because of their irrational pursuit of the hardest of Brexits. He could do something very simple today to address this crisis in the short term, and that is to announce that all EU nationals who do vital work in our NHS will be able to stay when we leave the European Union.

Mr Hunt: The one simple thing the Government are not going to do is refuse to listen to what the British people said when they voted on 23 June. We will do what they said—it is the right thing to do. However, the right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to highlight the vital role that the around 10,000 EU doctors in the NHS play in this country. I can reassure him that the number of doctors joining the NHS from the EU was higher in the four months following the referendum result than in the same four months the previous year.

23. [909376] **Helen Whately** (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that Kent, with its excellent academic institutions and strong life sciences sector, would be an ideal location for a new medical school, and will he support emerging plans to establish one?

Mr Hunt: I can absolutely confirm that the garden of England would be an ideal place for a new medical school—alongside many other parts of the country that are actively competing to start medical schools as a result of the expansion in doctor numbers. It is an independent process run by the General Medical Council, and we will await what it says with great interest.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): On this wonderful first day of spring, will the Secretary of State think anew about the training of GPs? We want more GPs, we want them highly trained and we want them to know that someone who suffers from atrial fibrillation should not be neglected and should not be put on aspirin or warfarin, but should be given the new anti-coagulants.

Mr Hunt: The hon. Gentleman speaks very wisely about this, and he is one of a number of people who say we need to look at the training we give GPs on patient safety, on growing, new areas like mental health, and on things like the identification of cancers. This is something we are having an ongoing discussion with the Royal College of General Practitioners about.

Sir Simon Burns (Chelmsford) (Con): Given the importance of training new doctors and nurses to the future of the health service, will my right hon. Friend welcome the building, which will commence later this summer at the Anglia Ruskin University in Chelmsford, of a new medical school that is solely there to train doctors to meet the needs of people in Essex and beyond its borders?

Mr Hunt: I absolutely welcome that, and I know my right hon. Friend has personally championed it as a local MP. The historical mistake that those on both sides of the House have made is not to do long-term workforce planning for the NHS, and that is something we want to put right.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Plans to train more UK doctors are absolutely welcome, but the Secretary of State knows that it takes at least 10 years to train a doctor, so what is his response to the surveys by the British Medical Association and the GMC showing that, having been left hanging for nine months, 40% to 60% of EU doctors are thinking of leaving?

Mr Hunt: My response is the one I give many times in this House, which is to stress to all those doctors how valued they are as critical parts of the NHS. We do not see any evidence of the number of doctors joining from the EU going down. The NHS is one of the best health services in the world, and it is a great place for people from other countries to work and train.

Dr Whitford: The workforce is one of the biggest challenges right across the nations of the UK, and particularly in rural areas, as we heard earlier. With a 92% drop in the number of EU nurses coming to the UK and a 60% increase in the number who left last year, how does the Secretary of State plan to avoid an NHS staffing crisis immediately post-Brexit, before there is time to train anybody extra?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Lady needs to be very careful in her use of statistics, because she will know that one reason for the drop in the number of nurses coming from the EU is that prior to the Brexit vote we introduced much stricter language tests, as that is better for the safety of patients and a very important thing that we need to get right. We are very confident that nurses will continue to want to work in the NHS, because it is a great place to work.

A&E Waiting Times

2. **Dr Rosena Allin-Khan** (Tooting) (Lab): What estimate he has made of the number of patients who waited more than 12 hours for treatment in A&E in the last 12 months. [909355]

6. **Christian Matheson** (City of Chester) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the reasons for the increase in the number of patients waiting more than 12 hours to be admitted to A&E in the last 12 months. [909359]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): Between February 2016 and January 2017, there were just under 3,500 waits of longer than 12 hours from decision to admit to admission. That is completely unacceptable, which is why the Government took urgent steps to free up NHS bed capacity in this month's Budget.

Dr Allin-Khan: Earlier this month, the chair of the Royal College of General Practitioners said that the "best place for GPs" is working within their communities to provide the highest possible general practice quality. What forecast has the Secretary of State made of the reduction in A&E waiting times next winter as a result of the new GP triage units in A&E departments? Does he agree that this is simply a small sticking plaster on the gaping wound that is our drastically underfunded NHS?

Mr Hunt: Let me just tell the hon. Lady what is happening to what she says is a "drastically underfunded NHS". In her local hospital, St George's, we have got 36 more doctors—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady had a question, it was rather overlong and the least courtesy she can do the House is to listen quietly and with good manners to the reply.

Mr Hunt: Thank you, Mr Speaker. To continue, let me say that in this so-called "drastically underfunded NHS", the hon. Lady's local hospital—St George's in Tooting—now has 36 more doctors working in A&E than there were in 2010. However, we also think that as a lot of people go to A&E departments with minor injuries and things that can be dealt with by GPs, we need to have GPs on site, and this Parliament we are planning to have 5,000 more doctors working in general practice.

Christian Matheson: In January, more than 1,000 patients at the Countess of Chester's A&E unit had to wait more than four hours and only 81% of patients had to wait less than four hours. Now that the 95% target has been abandoned, until at least midway through next year, what guarantee can the Secretary of State give my constituents that we will not get a repeat of this next winter?

Mr Hunt: On the contrary, we have not abandoned the 95% target—we have reiterated its importance. There is, however, one part of the United Kingdom that has said it wants to move away from the 95% target—Wales. The Welsh Health Minister said last week:

"You can go to A&E and be there five hours but have...a good experience."

That is not looking after patients; it is giving up on them.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): On this important issue of A&Es, does the Secretary of State agree that it makes no sense at all for my local clinical commissioning group to be bringing forward a business case to spend an extra £300 million on bulldozing Huddersfield royal infirmary and downgrading our A&E?

Mr Hunt: I recognise the very strong arguments my hon. Friend makes and the strong campaigning he does on behalf of his constituents. We are waiting for the final recommendations to come from his local CCG, but I agree that too often we have closed beds in the NHS when we do not have alternative capacity in the community, and we need to be very careful not to repeat that mistake.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): The cost of presenting with a minor ailment at a pharmacy is only 10% of the cost of presenting at A&E. What more can be done to help persuade those who present themselves to A&E that the pharmacy sector could be a better use of their time?

Mr Hunt: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend on that. Despite the current debates, the pharmacy sector has a very bright future, and we have set up a £40 million integration fund precisely to help pharmacists to play more of a role in the NHS and, in particular, to reduce pressure on A&Es.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): This year, the winter crisis in A&E has been the worst ever. Things have got so bad that, rather than waiting in A&E, record numbers of people are just giving up—I am sure there are many who wish the Secretary of State would do likewise. In January, nearly 1,000 people were stuck on trolleys waiting more than 12 hours to be

admitted to A&E. Will the Secretary of State accept that that is far more than just a small number of isolated incidents? After five years in the job, he has to accept responsibility for the crisis he has created.

Mr Hunt: I accept responsibility for everything that happens in the NHS, including the fact that, compared with 2010, we are seeing 2,500 more patients within four hours every single day. We are also seeing a big increase in demand, which is why there were particular measures in the Budget to make sure that we return to the 95% target, including £2 billion for social care, which is £2 billion more than the Labour party promised for social care at the election.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): The urgent care centre at Corby has done much to relieve the pressures on Kettering A&E, and it is a class leader. Given the announcement of £100 million for new triaging projects, would the Secretary of State like to visit the Corby urgent care centre to see this beacon of best practice at first hand?

Mr Hunt: That is a very generous offer, and if I possibly can, I would love to take my hon. Friend up on it.

Cough-assist Machines

3. **John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP):** What steps his Department is taking to ensure that clinical commissioning groups follow best practice commissioning policy on access to cough-assist machines for people with muscle-wasting conditions. [909356]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (David Mowat): Cough-assist machines are one of a variety of respiratory treatments that may be appropriate for sufferers of conditions such as motor neurone disease or muscular dystrophy. In the end, it is a matter of clinical judgment.

John Mc Nally: There are good examples of best practice cough-assist commissioning policies for muscle-wasting conditions that can be followed by health boards and CCGs. Given the hard work being done to extend the lives of those who suffer from muscular dystrophies, what support and assistance can the Department provide to Muscular Dystrophy UK to ensure that such policy is more widely adopted?

David Mowat: It is not for the Government to direct clinicians regarding the efficacy of particular treatments; it is for clinicians to decide, based on guidance from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence and others. In developing its recent motor neurone disease guidance, NICE found that the evidence base for the routine use of cough-assist machines was weak. However, the matter is kept under review, so that may change as and if new data emerge.

NHS: Export of Procedures

4. **Charlotte Leslie (Bristol North West) (Con):** What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the export of procedures developed by NHS professionals. [909357]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): Many NHS bodies work with their international peers, and each makes its own assessment about the effectiveness of intended collaboration, rather than any determination being made at a national level. Trusts should only pursue opportunities that deliver value for money and do not impair their ability to deliver NHS services.

Charlotte Leslie: A team of clinicians at Southmead hospital in my constituency, led by Professor Tim Draycott, have developed and are now exporting internationally a system of maternity healthcare that is transforming maternity safety and childbirth. What is the Department doing to provide further support and ensure that the evidence base the team have developed is embedded and incorporated in policy making in this place?

Mr Dunne: My hon. Friend will be aware that the professor to whom she refers has presented his findings to the Secretary of State. Partly in response to that, we have set up an £8 million innovation fund to help to take such initiatives forward and to spread best practice throughout the country.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): May I endorse what the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Charlotte Leslie) said? In the area of diabetes, for example, our country has some of the best clinicians in the world. Will the Minister ensure that the next time the Prime Minister goes on an official delegation she takes one of these professors with her to show the rest of the world what we are able to do for conditions such as diabetes?

Mr Dunne: The right hon. Gentleman is an acknowledged expert on diabetes. I have visited facilities around the world, including in Abu Dhabi, where Imperial College London has a joint venture with the diabetes centre there. The UK is an acknowledged expert, and we are launching the national diabetes prevention programme, which will roll out across 10 pilot sites for type 2 diabetes prevention work. I shall encourage the Prime Minister to consider the right hon. Gentleman's proposal that we expand that work on other trade visits, certainly those for health, around the world.

Mental Health Treatment

5. **Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab):** What steps his Department is taking to reduce the number of mental health patients having to travel out of their local area for treatment. [909358]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): This Government were the first to set a national ambition to eliminate inappropriate out-of-area placements by 2020-21. By then, no adult, child or young person will be sent away from their local area to be treated for a general mental health condition.

Paula Sherriff: I thank the Secretary of State for his response. My 17-year-old constituent Jess needed an acute mental health bed. The nearest available was in Colchester. She was allowed to go home some weekends, but it meant an 800-mile trip for her mum. We can only imagine the emotional and financial hardship that that caused. The Secretary of State tells us that he is working

on this matter, and I believe that he does want to improve things, but what progress has actually been made, as this is really, really not good enough for Jess and others?

Mr Hunt: I agree with the hon. Lady and she makes her case very powerfully. We need to make progress and we need to make it fast, particularly for young people, as their recovery can be very closely linked with the potential of their parents to come to visit them. Nearby places such as the Sheffield Health and Social Care Foundation Trust, which do not serve her constituents, have eliminated out-of-area placements and saved £2 million in the process. It is about spreading that best practice.

16. [909369] **John Howell** (Henley) (Con): Schools are often the first point of contact for young people with mental health problems. Does the Secretary of State share my view that we must ensure that school-age children have access to mental health services wherever they are?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend speaks very wisely on this matter. In the end, schools are a vital place in which to spot mental health conditions early. We know that around half of mental health conditions become established before the age of 14, and this will be a big part of the Green Paper that we publish later this year.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): Does the Secretary of State recognise the ways in which poverty, the associated financial strain and deprivation intersect with mental health; understand the need for him to work with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to ensure that mental health is properly recognised in personal independence payment assessments; and recognise that the problem is more acutely affected if people have to travel out of their area of residence?

Mr Hunt: I can reassure the hon. Lady that I have had a number of discussions with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. Indeed, we are producing a joint Green Paper on health and work precisely to make sure that we address those issues.

Philip Davies (ShIPLEY) (Con): Some innovative and award-winning work is being done by Bradford District NHS Care Trust. It is working alongside excellent voluntary organisations and charitable organisations such as the Cellar Trust in Shipley, which is delivering much improved support for mental health patients. Will the Secretary of State congratulate the work that is being done in Bradford, and would he like to pay a visit so that he can share this best practice with other parts of the UK?

Mr Hunt: I am happy to congratulate the Cellar Trust, and to pay a visit if I can find the time to do so. My hon. Friend is right to say that voluntary organisations play a vital role. Very often, they can see the whole picture and they treat the whole person, not just the specific NHS or specific housing issue, so he is right to commend its work.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): Recent figures show that 18 mental health patients were placed more than 185 miles away from their home for treatment, including five from the northern region—Jess

is one such example. Their families will have to travel the equivalent of Manchester to London, or further, to visit them. We have also learned that £800 million was taken out of CCG budgets, which could be funding services such as mental health in-patient beds, just to help NHS England balance the books. Will the Secretary of State tell those patients and families why they should be treated so far from home when their local CCG should be able to fund the in-patient beds they need?

Mr Hunt: With great respect to the hon. Lady, we are the first Government to count out-of-area placements, and to commit to eradicating them. What she does not tell the House is the context, which is the biggest expansion in mental health provision anywhere in Europe, with 1,400 more people being treated every single day, and an extra £342 million being spent this year on mental health compared with last year.

GP Recruitment

7. **David Mackintosh** (Northampton South) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help recruit GPs. [909360]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): As part of our plan to improve access to general practice, we are taking steps to ensure that there will be an extra 5,000 doctors by 2020. We are increasing the number of GP training places, recruiting up to 500 doctors from overseas and encouraging doctors who have retired to return to general practice.

David Mackintosh: I am aware of a number of issues with the recruitment of GPs in my constituency, such as at St Luke's surgery in Duston. Will my right hon. Friend meet me to discuss the issues with that surgery in particular?

Mr Hunt: I am very happy to meet my hon. Friend. He will know that the surgery got an £80,000 grant this year through NHS England's general practice resilience scheme, but I am aware that there are lots of pressures on surgeries such as St Luke's and I am happy to talk about it further.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I am delighted to hear the Secretary of State issue some information about the additional GPs who will be coming on stream in the coming years. How many will be coming to north-east Lincolnshire and when will they be there? We have a critical shortage of GPs and people are struggling to get appointments.

Mr Hunt: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that areas such as Lincolnshire find it particularly difficult to attract GP recruits, which is why we have set up a fund that gives new GP trainees a financial incentive to move to some of the more remote parts of the country. This is beginning to have some effect, and I am happy to write to her with more details.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I warmly welcome the Secretary of State's efforts to recruit more GPs, and I know that he wants all GPs and, indeed, doctors to have high levels of job satisfaction. Is he aware of the fact that reasonable numbers of

doctors are leaving the UK to work overseas? Given the cost of medical training and the money that taxpayers put into that education, will he look at that issue, perhaps by requiring a certain commitment to the NHS?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend raises an important point. There is currently no evidence of an increase in the number of doctors going to work abroad, but there is an issue of fairness because it costs around £230,000 to train a doctor over five years. In return for that, there should be some commitment to spend some time working in the NHS, and we are consulting on that at the moment.

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): GPs around the country are facing unprecedented pressures as they work to deliver the highest possible standards of care, despite underinvestment and increasing patient demand. A record number of GP practices closed in 2016. Are the Government really serious about addressing the problem for the sake of GPs and their patients? If so, why has the promised £16 million resilience fund not been delivered in full, when it was promised by October 2016? There is very little evidence to date of the Government delivering on any of their promises in “General Practice Forward View”, no sign of the extra £2.4 billion, no sign of—

Mr Speaker: Order. We have got the general drift. May I gently say to the hon. Lady that the longer the Opposition Front Benchers take, the less time there is for Back Benchers on both sides? This is becoming a worsening phenomenon. It is not only the fault of the hon. Lady, but it really must stop. It is not fair to Back-Bench Members.

Mr Hunt: During my time as Health Secretary, the real-terms investment in general practice has gone up by £700 million or 8%, and we are planning to increase it by 14%—£2.4 billion—over this Parliament. A lot of extra money is going in, but I recognise that there are still a lot of pressures.

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): The Secretary of State’s plans to recruit doctors will be widely welcomed in Leicestershire, but should he not be making greater use of already properly regulated practitioners—those who are regulated by the Professional Standards Authority—of whom there are 20,000, including hypnotherapists?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend’s ingenuity in bringing these issues up in question after question never ceases to amaze me. As he knows, we recognise that the pressure in primary care cannot just be borne by general practice, but we must always follow the science as to where we get our help from.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): Only recently, a surgery has been closed down in the borough of Halton. There is a clear shortage of GPs. Despite the efforts of the clinical commissioning group to try to find replacements, that has not happened. How will merging CCGs help, and can the Secretary of State rule out any merger between Warrington and Halton?

Mr Hunt: This is something on which we take guidance from what local CCGs say. There are times when the CCGs feel that their scale is not big enough to have the impact they want.

Derek Twigg: You set them up.

Mr Hunt: The hon. Gentleman says from a sedentary position that we set up the CCGs. I remind him that CCGs came together without central prescription as to what their size should be, but we will always listen to the advice we get on the ground if people want to change their size.

Mental Health: Digital Platforms

8. **Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con):** What steps his Department is taking to use digital platforms to encourage people to access help to support their mental health and wellbeing. [909361]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Nicola Blackwood): The Prime Minister herself announced our commitment to developing and expanding digital mental health services, and we have backed that with an investment of more than £65 million. This work includes improving digital technology for the mental healthcare system, developing digital tools and therapies, and improving mental health information and services provided through nhs.uk and 111 platforms.

Mary Robinson: The Minister will know that for people with mental health problems, attending accident and emergency or going to see their GP is not always the best point of intervention, so I welcome measures to improve accessibility. Stockport Healthy Minds, which serves my constituency of Cheadle, provides a range of services such as online self-help courses, one-to-one therapy sessions, and group workshops. What is her Department doing to provide projects like Healthy Minds with the support and accessibility they need?

Nicola Blackwood: In addition to the funding that we are providing to improve the mental health pathways through nhs.uk and 111, we are providing £500,000 for the development of six digital tools, with a particular focus on children and young people’s mental health. I pay tribute to the work of Healthy Minds in my hon. Friend’s constituency and to her own championing of this issue.

Mr Speaker: Order. It is always a pleasure to hear the hon. Member for Hyndburn (Graham Jones), but can I just say to him that it is a good idea to bob consistently, and then one knows of the interest of an hon. Member? On this occasion, he looked at me meaningfully but was not bobbing; I am not psychic. But let us hear the voice of Hyndburn: Graham Jones.

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): I am very grateful, Mr Speaker, for your asking me to ask a question. Mental health is a really serious, and growing, problem. I have been out with my local police force and I appreciate the emphasis on digital technology, but what are we doing on the frontline as well? We cannot just have digital operations. In the Lancashire constabulary, because of the Government’s cuts, we are removing the mental

health worker from the frontline force. While we may be doing something around digital, we are removing mental health services, because that post goes on 31 March. Is this not ridiculous? Is it not the case that the Government do not have a coherent policy on mental health?

Mr Speaker: Order. I was quite tough on the hon. Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper), but the hon. Gentleman took his time—he really did.

Nicola Blackwood: The hon. Gentleman misrepresents the situation entirely. Not only are we investing an extra £1 billion year in mental health services and expanding mental health services at a faster rate than anywhere else in Europe, but we have invested £15 million extra in places of safety for those in crisis and are expanding triage services, precisely to address the problem that he raises of those in mental health crisis who come into contact with the criminal justice service.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: A question of textbook brevity and eloquence from Helen Jones.

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): While digital platforms can be useful in guiding patients to the right service, does the Minister accept that there are still huge shortages of people who can carry out talking therapies, and long waits for child and adolescent mental health services? When are the Government going to stop talking about improving mental health services and actually ensure that the money is going where it is needed to recruit staff?

Nicola Blackwood: We are working extremely hard on increasing staff. We are not only introducing our new mental health workforce strategy, which we will publish shortly, but increasing the number of people who are seeing these services. Four million extra people have seen psychiatry services—talking therapies—and 90% of those patients are being seen within six weeks, which is exceeding our waiting time target.

Data Research

9. **Mr John Baron** (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of the EU general data protection regulation on the availability of data for research in the health sector. [909362]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Nicola Blackwood): We have engaged fully with the health and research community to ensure a positive and beneficial application of the GDPR in the UK. My hon. Friend is right that data are vital to the delivery of safe and high-quality care, but we need to ensure that there is a trusted system in place, and that people understand that their information is secure and have confidence in its use.

Mr Baron: I thank the Minister for that answer, but I have to tell her that when the EU's general data protection regulation becomes enforceable next year, it will be more difficult to share data. Cancer charities, including Cancer Research UK, are concerned because the progress of life-saving research, especially into rare and children's

cancers, would not have been possible were it not for data-sharing. Will she do what she can to shield the UK from this harmful regulation, given that it disproportionately affects us because of the wealth of our data?

Nicola Blackwood: We have been clear that we are going to introduce the data regulation. We are working on exactly how we will do that in a balanced way that encourages data-sharing for the purposes of research in a sustainable NHS. We have set up a sub-group to examine the impact of the GDPR on research. It is hosted by the Wellcome Trust and includes members of the Health Research Authority's confidentiality advisory group, the NHS Confederation, the Medical Research Council, the Department of Health, and the PHG Foundation. We will ensure that this works in an effective way to address the concerns that my hon. Friend has raised.

Enriched Culture Medium Test

10. **Sir Nicholas Soames** (Mid Sussex) (Con): If his Department will take steps to introduce the enriched culture medium test for group B streptococcus for pregnant women; and if he will make a statement. [909363]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): My right hon. Friend will be aware that Public Health England published a paper in June 2015 precisely on this subject, but it concluded that within the currently accepted clinical guidelines there are no clinical indicators for testing women using enriched culture medium methods. This test is not, therefore, recommended for routine use at present.

Sir Nicholas Soames: My hon. Friend will be aware from his reading of the British Paediatric Surveillance Unit report that the incidence of group B strep has increased by 30% over the last 15 years. Does he agree that this matter has gone on for far too long, and that the Government must come to a conclusion to prevent further tragedies?

Mr Dunne: As my right hon. Friend will be aware, the UK National Screening Committee is reviewing the evidence for antenatal screening, including the use of enriched culture medium tests for group B streptococcus, following a public consultation. I understand that its recommendation will be published very soon, and I assure him that I will consider the recommendation very carefully and write to him with my view.

“General Practice Forward View”

11. **Anna Turley** (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): What steps his Department is taking to ensure that NHS England's “General Practice Forward View” has the funding necessary to achieve its goals. [909364]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (David Mowat): “General Practice Forward View” announced that investment in general practice will increase from £9.6 billion in 2015-16 to more than £12 billion in 2020-21. This represents an increase of 14% in real terms, which is almost double the increase for the rest of the NHS. Two years into the forward view, we remain on track to deliver that.

Anna Turley: I appreciate the Minister's response, but the reality on the ground in areas such as Redcar and Teesside is that we face a deficit of £281 million by 2020. How can he reassure my constituents, who are already finding it hard to get an appointment with a GP, that already scarce services will not become even more so?

David Mowat: We do recognise that in parts of the country there are shortages of GPs. As Members have heard, we are planning to have 5,000 more doctors working in general practice by 2020, and a proportion of those will be in Teesside. It is important that we meet that goal.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): GPs in Wycombe cite long hours, bureaucracy and the declining attractiveness of the partnership model as reasons why people do not want to be in general practice. Will the Minister ensure that funding within the forward view is directed to deal with those key problems?

David Mowat: Yes, and the contract discussions that we have just completed with the British Medical Association addressed a number of the issues that my hon. Friend talks about, in terms of the pressures on doctors working in general practice. We acknowledge that the workload pressures are enormous, and, through the contract, we need to do all that we can to mitigate them.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): More than 80% of clinical appointments are carried out by GPs, but they receive a proportionately much lower level of funding. What steps will the Department of Health take to make sure that all sustainability and transformation plans abide by NHS England's recommended allocation of funding to general practice?

David Mowat: One of the criteria by which STPs are being judged is the extent to which they are making this tilt from secondary into primary care, exactly as the hon. Lady suggests. That is precisely why the extra funding for primary care that I have set out is so important and why it is happening.

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): "General Practice Forward View" talks about supporting general practice to improve digital technology for patients. Given the recent data challenges, does the Minister agree that putting a national data guardian on a statutory footing to protect patients and professionals is becoming an imperative?

David Mowat: I know that my hon. Friend has introduced a private Member's Bill in this area, and the Government intend to support it.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): The support that is provided to GP practices in relation to IT, information and so on is absolutely crucial to their effective operation, but problems continue today in my constituency with the service provided by Capita. Capita cannot, for example, now get prescribing certificates for locums and new GPs. When are the Government going to get a grip on this failing contract and, if Capita cannot perform adequately, get someone else to do it?

David Mowat: The hon. Lady is right. There have been issues with the Capita contract, and we have been let down by Capita. We are working hard to get that sorted, and my colleague the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Nicola Blackwood), meets Capita weekly to get this fixed. We are making progress, and we believe that the issues that the hon. Lady refers to will be fixed in the foreseeable future.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): There is a shortage of GPs across Northamptonshire, especially in Kettering, and the age profile of local GPs means that a very large number are about to reach retirement, which will make the problem worse. What can be done to encourage experienced GPs to stay on longer and to encourage those who have retired to come back?

David Mowat: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that one of the things we need to achieve is either to encourage older GPs to work part time or to make it easier for them to step down into more of a mentoring role. With the Royal College of General Practitioners, we have brought forward a scheme called GP Career Plus, which enables GPs in 10 pilot areas—the pilots are being rolled out now—to work as mentors across practice areas, and not to feel as though they have to retire, as GPs too frequently do at the moment.

Heart Disease and Paediatric Services

12. **Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con):** Which hospitals providing congenital heart disease services do not meet the standard for the co-location of paediatric services; and what plans his Department has to stop providing congenital heart disease surgery at those hospitals.
[909365]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): Standards for paediatric co-location for congenital heart disease services are not currently met by the Royal Brompton, Leicester and Newcastle hospitals. NHS England is consulting on proposals to cease commissioning level 1 surgical services from the Royal Brompton and Leicester. No final decisions have been made on the proposed changes. Public consultation continues until 5 June 2017, and I encourage my hon. Friend to participate in that consultation.

Mr Speaker: I doubt the hon. Lady will require any encouragement.

Dr Mathias: Mr Speaker, you are absolutely correct in your comment.

Does the Minister agree that the standards review found that not all clinicians are in agreement about how essential the co-location of paediatric services is, bearing in mind that a child being treated right now at the Royal Brompton will have 24-hour access to all necessary medical specialties? Will he tell us what improvements co-location at the world-class Royal Brompton hospital would achieve?

Mr Dunne: My hon. Friend has considerable expertise, but I am advised that having all relevant children's specialties on the same site is the optimal model of care for the most critically ill children. It promotes closer,

more integrated ways of working between specialist teams, and ensures rapid access to key services, such as paediatric surgery, at the most critical times when they are needed.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Mortality rates for the treatment of congenital heart disease fell from 14% in 1991 to 2% last year. The Royal Brompton, where the service is threatened with closure, does better even than this. What evidence is there that the closure programme will produce any further improvement, and if there is none, why is it being pursued?

Mr Dunne: The hon. Gentleman is right to point out that we have some world-leading patient outcomes for congenital heart disease, and I recognise the statistics that he read out. This is being driven entirely by seeking to improve patient outcomes across the country—improving them even on that very good performance—and to ensure greater resilience of service in some areas where there are relatively low volumes and an over-reliance on locums. I accept that that is not the case at the Royal Brompton, but it is in some of the others.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): The Leeds heart unit is performing very well, and is free from the threat that it was facing, unfairly, a few years ago. Will lessons be learned, however, from the disastrous Safe and Sustainable review process, which pitted hospital against hospital and clinician against clinician? Can we find a much better way—I hope the Minister will tell us that this is happening now—to reconfigure such services?

Mr Dunne: I recognise that when the proposal was put forward back in 2012, it led to a process that we felt was wrong, and we therefore stopped it. This process, we hope, is being conducted in a more rigorous and fairer way, and will lead to outcomes driven, as I say, by improving patient experience.

PFI Liabilities

13. **Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): What the estimated cost of private finance initiative liabilities to the NHS is in (a) 2016-17 and (b) the subsequent three financial years. [909366]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): Labour's legacy cost from the 103 hospital PFI schemes entered into between 1997 and 2010 was a public sector liability of £77 billion. The estimated total NHS PFI payments for the financial year ending at the end of this month is £1.97 billion, and the totals for the next three financial years are £2.04 billion, £2.11 billion and £2.16 billion.

Tim Loughton: Those are alarming figures, so what are the Government doing to support the trusts affected by those expensive and inflexible PFI and other deals reached under the previous Labour Government? What assessment has the Minister made of what the funds could be buying in the NHS now if it was not saddled by this Labour debt legacy?

Mr Dunne: My hon. Friend is right to point out that the Opposition constantly complain about the cost of the PFI programmes that they themselves initiated. The Government are making large efforts to support trusts

in dealing with the PFI legacy. We are giving the seven trusts worst affected by PFI schemes access to a £1.5 billion support fund over a 25-year period. In 2014 alone, trusts negotiated savings worth over £250 million on their contracts.

21. [909374] **John Pugh** (Southport) (LD): On the subject of financial liabilities, what assessment has the Department made of the potential effect of changes to the discount rate on the amount of compensation paid out by the NHS Litigation Authority?

Mr Dunne: The Department is urgently undertaking work to understand what the impact on the NHS will be. There have been regular meetings with the NHS Litigation Authority since the announcement. The Government will adjust the NHSLA's budget to meet the additional costs associated with the change in the discount rate.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Southport (John Pugh) shoehorned Question 21, which we did not reach, into a Question that we did reach. He blurted it out so quickly that it took us a while to notice that it had absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with the private finance initiative. Very naughty boy!

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): PFI always was idiotic. It carried on under the coalition Government and has left a huge financial hangover. Will the Minister have a word with his colleagues in the Treasury, because the Treasury figures on hospital liabilities are different from the figures that some of the hospitals themselves produce? As there is a discrepancy, we do not even know what the liabilities are.

Mr Dunne: The hon. Gentleman has been assiduous, as is his wont, in trying to get to the bottom of the costs of the PFI impact on the hospital in his area. If he has a discrepancy, it would be very helpful if he pointed it out to me in writing. I will then respond to him.

Social Care: Unmet Needs

14. **Rosie Cooper** (West Lancashire) (Lab): What plans his Department has to increase the provision of social care for people with unmet needs. [909367]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (David Mowat): Social care continues to be a key priority for the Government. That is why local authorities in England will receive an uplift in the money available for social care over the next three years of 17% in cash terms. That significant uplift will allow councils to support more people and sustain a diverse care market.

Rosie Cooper: Does the Minister recognise that the figure he has just given—the additional £1 billion in the Budget—is just half of what is needed to fill the shortfall in social care? Will he tell the House what he is doing to ensure that the sector gets the additional money and to stop councils being bankrupted by their social care requirements?

David Mowat: The 17% cash uplift over the next three years exceeds what we have been asked for by a number of stakeholders in the sector. I have conceded at this

Dispatch Box many times that the sector is under pressure. The additional moneys that we have come forward with will help to alleviate that and will make a big difference. In Lancashire, the figure is not 17% over three years; it is 18% over three years.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): The Minister is quite right that central Government are providing extra money for essential care and allowing local councils to raise a precept on the council tax for social care. How will the Government ensure that councils actually spend that money on social care?

David Mowat: Much of the money will go through the better care fund and there is conditionality on that. We expect councils to spend this money, as they have requested it, on social care and we believe that that will be the case. We understand the pressures and have acted.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): But 1.2 million older people are living with unmet care needs. The £1 billion that was announced in the Budget for this year is not enough to prop up the failing care sector, when many councils are suffering contracts being handed back. Given that 1 million people over the age of 65 do not have adult children, will the Minister explain how all those people living with unmet care needs are meant to manage?

David Mowat: The figure on unmet care needs comes from an Age UK analysis. I am meeting Age UK to go through its recent report, but we do not accept that analysis because the Care Act 2014, which had cross-party support, set statutory consistent definitions for what care councils have to provide. It is illegal for that not to be met, and our follow-up work with the Local Government Association has indicated that it is being met. Furthermore, we have put in a 17% increase over the next three years.

Childhood Obesity

15. **Rushanara Ali** (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the Government's effectiveness in tackling childhood obesity in the inner cities. [909368]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Nicola Blackwood): Our childhood obesity plan includes a number of measures, such as the soft drinks industry levy, reformulation and school-based interventions, that will help all children, including those in inner-city communities. We will monitor progress carefully, including through the national child measurement programme. We will routinely publish developments on all key measurements for the programme, but it stands to reason that those who are most in need will benefit most from these interventions.

Rushanara Ali: I thank the Minister for that answer, but it remains the case that childhood obesity is twice as high in deprived areas as it is in more affluent areas. In Tower Hamlets, 20% of children are obese and a third are overweight. What will the Government do to reduce childhood obesity and when will the plan be published?

Nicola Blackwood: The childhood obesity plan has already been published. I think the hon. Lady may be talking about the reformulation targets and the baseline data, which are coming out imminently. The experts in Public Health England are working feverishly to make sure that the data are exactly as they should be. One measure I think she will be particularly keen to see is the investment in schools committed to by the Chancellor in the Budget, including the voluntary healthy rating scheme, which will be published in June.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): What measure is being used to ascertain the success or otherwise of the strategy and when will we know whether it has worked or not?

Nicola Blackwood: As I mentioned, we will be publishing the reformulation baselines against which all future success will be measured. They will include measurement across all industry targets. In addition, we will of course have the voluntary healthy rating scheme for primary schools to recognise and encourage their contribution to preventing obesity.

Topical Questions

T1. [909344] **Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): As part of our ambition to make the NHS the safest healthcare system in the world, I will today be speaking at the largest ever conference on learning from avoidable deaths and what we can do to improve care in the future. As part of that, I can inform the House that the NHS Litigation Authority will radically change its focus from simply defending NHS litigation claims to the early settlement of cases, learning from what goes wrong and the prevention of errors. As part of those changes, it will change its name to NHS Resolution.

Margaret Ferrier: My constituent Pauline Cafferkey was cleared of misconduct last September, following a very public case surrounding her return from Sierra Leone and her contraction of Ebola. Will she receive an apology from Public Health England and will it reimburse her legal costs?

Mr Hunt: With respect to Pauline Cafferkey, who is a very brave lady and who gave very good service to this country and the people of Sierra Leone with her work during the Ebola crisis, the hon. Lady will understand that disciplinary procedures are an independent matter. They are not dealt with by the Government. They have to be done at arm's length and we have to respect whatever is said or done.

T3. [909346] **Amanda Solloway** (Derby North) (Con): I was pleased to see the Government commit to new funding for emergency care in the Budget. As the MP for Derby North, a constituency particularly affected by poor air quality, I am concerned that respiratory admissions to A&E have risen at twice the rate of general admissions over the past five years. What steps is the Department taking to address this issue?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Nicola Blackwood): We are firmly committed to improving the UK's air quality and cutting harmful emissions. We have committed £2 billion since 2011 to increase the uptake of ultra-low emission vehicles, support greener transport schemes and set out how we will improve air quality through a new programme of clean air zones. In addition, in the autumn statement we announced a further £290 million to support electric vehicles, low emission buses, taxis and alternative fuels. I regularly meet the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to see how we can roll out this work.

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab): The Government have not met the four-hour target for A&E since July 2015. In the NHS mandate, finally published yesterday, the Secretary of State is effectively telling hospitals that they do not need to meet it in 2017 and that it only needs to be met in aggregate across hospitals "within the course of 2018".

Is that not the clearest admission that the targets will not be met next year, because in the next 12 months the NHS will be denied the funding it needs and, as a consequence, patients will suffer?

Mr Hunt: Apart from observing that if the hon. Gentleman cares so much about the 95% target he might want to ask his colleagues in Wales why they are looking at scrapping it, on the money let me be very clear: in the next year, the NHS will be getting about £1.5 billion more than his party were promising at the last election and the social care system will be getting £1.5 billion more than his party were promising at the last election. We are doing our job.

Jonathan Ashworth: The Secretary of State says he is doing his job, so why does he not take that up with NHS Providers, which is warning that because of the underfunding, it will be "mission impossible" in the next 12 months to deliver standards of care. Returning to the NHS mandate, did you notice, Mr Speaker, that in that mandate there is no mention whatsoever of Brexit, even though the NHS relies on 140,000 NHS and care workers? I know that the Secretary of State is not a member of the Cabinet Brexit committee, but will he use his considerable influence with the Prime Minister to ensure that when she triggers article 50 next week, she will finally give an absolute guarantee of the rights of all those EU workers in our NHS?

Mr Hunt: First, let me first reassure you, Mr Speaker, that I will be attending the Brexit committee when it is relevant to the NHS; in fact, I shall attend it this week, because issues relating to the NHS are coming up in it. What we are not going to do in that committee, however, is to take steps that would risk the welfare of British citizens living in countries such as Spain, Ireland and France. That is why, although it is a top priority for us to negotiate the rights of EU citizens living in Britain, including those working in the NHS, it has to be part of an agreement that protects the rights of British citizens abroad.

T4. [909347] **Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con):** Last Friday, Laurel Bank surgery in my constituency attended a careers fair at Bishop Heber High School.

Does the Secretary of State agree that that kind of outreach work by GPs among young people encourages them to study medicine and work in our great NHS?

Mr Hunt: I absolutely agree. What I think my hon. Friend should tell her constituents—I am sure she will—is that general practice is going to be the most exciting, fastest-growing part of the NHS, where care is going to be transformed, making this the right thing to do.

T2. [909345] **Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op):** Is the Secretary of State aware that my constituents are deeply disappointed with what he got out of the Budget? That poor deal for the NHS means that they face the closure of A&E in Huddersfield and the closure of Huddersfield hospital, and they no longer have a dentist who will take on an NHS patient in the whole of my constituency.

Mr Hunt: With great respect to the hon. Gentleman, what was secured in the Budget was £2 billion for social care, which is £2 billion more than his party was promising at the last election.

T6. [909349] **Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con):** Following the publication of the report of the all-party parliamentary group on rare, genetic and undiagnosed conditions on the UK rare diseases strategy, what plans does the Minister have to introduce an implementation plan for NHS England?

Nicola Blackwood: First, let me pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his leadership of the APPG on rare diseases. I am sure he will join me in feeling proud that the UK is a recognised leader in research, treatment and care for rare diseases in particular. We are at the forefront of the genomics revolution. He is right that the UK strategy for rare diseases needs to be translated into an implementation plan, and that is one of my personal commitments.

T5. [909348] **Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab):** Will the Secretary of State explain why my area of Hull, with its in-built health inequalities and poorer health outcomes, is getting just £13 million out of the additional money for social care set out in the Budget, while the local authority area that the Secretary of State represents in Surrey is getting £21 million-worth of additional support?

Mr Hunt: The formula is based on the better care fund formula, which is based on the spending power of local authorities. Let me tell the hon. Lady that, over the next year, that improved better care fund is going up by 35%, and Surrey's allocation is going up by only 5%.

T8. [909351] **Oliver Colvile (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con):** As the Secretary of State knows, I am the vice-chairman of the all-party group on pharmacy. Will he update the House on the progress of the decriminalisation of dispensing errors by pharmacists? What is the hitch?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (David Mowat): There is no hitch. The Government remain committed to putting this into place, and the legislation will be brought forward shortly.

T7. [909350] **Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Last week, leading trauma surgeon, Dr Duncan Bew, said his surgical team sees more young patients with serious stab injuries than people with appendicitis. This is a societal problem. Will the Minister inform us of his Department's public health approach to tackling this issue?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to say that this is a serious issue. I commend the brilliant work done by NHS trauma centres throughout the country, which are world-beating, but, as well as setting up those centres, we have established much closer co-operation with local police forces so that we can work out where the crime hotspots are and help the police to prevent such things from happening.

T9. [909352] **Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): As the Secretary of State knows, we have a crisis in GP recruitment in rural north Lincolnshire. Does he agree that the best way to enable doctors to get to know our glorious county would be to establish a medical school at Lincoln University, and will he join our campaign to make that possibility come true?

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): As my hon. Friend will have heard from the Secretary of State earlier, a number of areas are competing to secure a new medical facility. One of our criteria will involve encouraging doctors to be trained in areas where there are shortages, and I am sure that Lincoln University will take that factor into consideration.

Michael Dugher (Barnsley East) (Lab): The British Medical Association said recently that the funds for sustainability and transformation plans that were announced in the Budget would be completely inadequate for the task. Health trusts throughout the country are being forced to consider rationing treatment and ending or downgrading local services such as A&E, which will result in even longer waits and journey times to access care. Why do the Government not call STPs what they really are—secret Tory plans to decimate the national health service further?

Mr Hunt: This is a year in which funding for the NHS has risen by £3.8 billion in real terms. I do not know how the hon. Gentleman can say what he has said, given that in 2015 he stood on a platform to give the NHS £1.3 billion less this year than it is receiving under the Conservatives.

T10. [909353] **Mr Peter Bone** (Wellingborough) (Con): As the House heard earlier from my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove), there is an excellent urgent care centre in that part of north Northamptonshire. There are plans to create a replica in Wellingborough. I understand that the Secretary of State may visit the centre in Corby; if he does, will he drive half an hour down the road and visit the site in Wellingborough where that proposed excellent urgent care centre will be built?

Mr Hunt: I feel the onset of a happy visit to Northamptonshire. What might clinch it for me would be the promise of a potential meeting with the famous Mrs Bone.

Mr Speaker: What a magnificently enjoyable life the Secretary of State has—not to mention Mrs Bone.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): Last week, to the distress of its vulnerable residents, Aldingham House care home in Blackheath became the latest care home in south-east London to close. Do the Government accept that the care home industry is at breaking point, and, if so, what are they doing about it?

David Mowat: The number of care home beds in the country has remained broadly constant at just over half a million over the last 10 years. There is variation and churn between areas, but I believe that the 17% cash-terms increase that we have injected into the social care market in the Budget, and the better care fund that is to come, will make a difference.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Portsmouth South) (Con): I welcome the new nursing associates role that is currently being piloted. Will other areas, such as Portsmouth, be able to offer the same opportunities in the future, and will the new role be open to older people wishing to return to the workplace?

Mr Dunne: As my hon. Friend knows, we are launching a second wave of nursing associates at the beginning of April. I am pleased to be able to confirm that Southern Health NHS Foundation Trust, which manages Portsmouth Hospitals NHS Trust, is one of the trusts that will receive nursing associates, and that the system is partly designed to give social care workers opportunities to upskill.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): The Secretary of State will be aware of a recent High Court case concerning a surrogacy issue that has led to legal limbo. Does he agree that the existing legislation has let children down, and that reform is urgently needed?

Nicola Blackwood: I can confirm that the High Court has made a judgment, that the current orders for parental orders are discriminatory, and that the Government will act within a reasonable timescale. We intend to lay an order before the summer recess in an attempt to address some of the challenges.

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): One of my constituents, Harriet North, has been diagnosed with TRAPS—tumour necrosis factor receptor-associated periodic syndrome. Her consultants say that the drug Anakinra will not only transform her life, but will save her life. Will my hon. Friend meet me to discuss how we can get the best treatment for Harriet, and if it is possible for NHS England to review the decision on this?

Nicola Blackwood: My hon. Friend has raised this case with the Department and has been making a number of pleas on behalf of his constituent. It is a very difficult case and I would like to pass on my sympathies to his constituent. Obviously, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence is independent and this drug is not recommended for TRAPS. I do not

know the details of the case because it is confidential, but I will be very happy to meet my hon. Friend and his constituent to see if anything can be done.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I do not know if you spotted the rather topical news story about children's dentistry this morning, Mr Speaker: there were 1,464 hospital admissions for children for teeth extractions across one clinical commissioning area of Birmingham last year, the highest figure since 2010-11. How does the Minister account for this, and what is he going to do about it?

David Mowat: The figures for child extractions are clearly disappointing and two key actions need to take place: less sugar, which we expect the soft drinks levy to help with; and getting more fluoride on to teeth, particularly through fluoride varnishing. That has increased across the NHS over the last year, and by 12% in Birmingham. We hope that that will make a difference.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): The NHS mandate was published yesterday, just days before coming into force. Can the Secretary of State set out the reason for the delay, because it allows very little time for scrutiny of this important document by this House? Will he also set out how he is going to prevent money being leached from mental health services and primary care to prop up provider deficits, so that we can meet objective 6 on improving community services?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend makes very important points. The reason for the delay was because about a month ago we had wind that we might be successful in securing extra money for social care in the Budget, and we needed to wait until the Budget was completed before we concluded discussions on the mandate. Our confidence as a result of what is in the Budget has enabled us to make the commitments we have made in the mandate, including making sure that we continue to invest in the transformation of out-of-hospital care.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. We are out of time, but I want to get in two more questions.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): The Secretary of State will be aware that many migrants in the UK are not registered with GPs, yet now when they come to Britain they have to pay an NHS fine. What is he doing, with the Home Office, to ensure that migrants are registered with a GP and are aware of community health facilities?

Mr Hunt: I am not quite sure whether I understand the right hon. Lady's question, but there is not a fining system for migrants; what we say is that people who come to the UK as visitors should pay for their healthcare, or pay the visa surcharge if they are coming for a longer period. There is an exemption for public health, because it is important for everyone that we make sure that we treat people for things like tuberculosis.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): The Secretary of State is aware of the concern that I and the people of Witney have about the future of Deer Park medical centre, which is a vital local resource. I am grateful to him for meeting me and for our correspondence. Please will he confirm that he will press the Independent Review Panel for a response at the earliest opportunity, given that the clinical commissioning group is determined to close this vital practice in three days' time, and that he will consider the views of the patients of Witney very carefully indeed?

Mr Hunt: I am very happy to relay that concern to the IRP, and I thank my hon. Friend: we had a highly constructive meeting, and, as a new MP, he understands just how important this is to the constituents of Witney. He made the case very powerfully.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry to disappoint remaining colleagues, but we must move on.

Money Laundering: British Banks

12.34 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on allegations of money laundering against British banks.

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Simon Kirby): We want our financial institutions to lead the way in the global fight against money laundering. This is not only a question of financial crime, with illicit finance used to fund serious organised crime groups, as well as terrorist organisations; this is about keeping our citizens safe. That is why the Government are going to do what it takes to prevent the practice and pursue anyone who might seek to abuse our financial system.

The Financial Conduct Authority and the National Crime Agency take any such allegations seriously and will investigate closely whether recent information from *The Guardian* newspaper—or, indeed, any other media source—regarding money laundering from Russia would allow the progression of an investigation. Beyond that, we need to ensure that sophisticated criminal networks cannot exploit our financial services industry.

This Government already do more than any other to tackle the global threat of money laundering. Since 2010, we have seized £1.4 billion in illegal funds and put hundreds of millions more beyond the reach of criminals. We have set up the Panama papers taskforce and we hosted the global anti-corruption summit last year. Now, we are preparing the most significant changes to our anti-money-laundering and terrorist finance regime in over a decade. We are strengthening the rules to put the UK at the forefront of international efforts to crack down on money laundering, with new regulations coming into force by the end of June. We are also bringing in a landmark piece of legislation in the form of the Criminal Finances Bill. That will allow banks to share more information than ever to help to uncover money laundering. It will also give law enforcement agencies new powers to bring criminals to justice.

However, domestic changes alone are not enough in a world of global criminal networks, which is why we are working closely with our international partners to stand up to this threat together. Work continues apace in groups such as the G20 and the Financial Action Task Force, whose membership includes all the world's leading financial centres. We have led the way in getting more than 90 countries to exchange data on offshore accounts and to uphold the global standard of tax transparency. We are determined to make the UK the most difficult place in the world for international crime networks to channel their finances through, and we will not relent in our efforts to do that.

John McDonnell: I hope that the Minister recognises the immense gravity of the situation that we are facing, because I believe that his statement reflects complacency on the part of the Government. Let me go through the allegations, which are of the deepest concern. First, it is alleged that, via an operation referred to as the “global laundromat”, banks based in Britain have been used to launder immense sums of money obtained from criminal activity in Russia linked to the FSB spy agency there.

This appears to point to an overwhelming failure of basic management on the part of the banks. One of those banks, HSBC, is an institution that has previously faced money laundering charges in the US and across the globe. The direct intervention of this Government helped to block a 2012 US investigation on the purported grounds of its potential risk to financial stability. Money laundering through London and elsewhere threatens the stability of our financial sector and our economy.

In the case of another bank, RBS, the Government directly own a 72% stake. A third bank, Barclays, has been under investigation for its role in LIBOR rigging. Will the Minister give us specific details of what steps are being taken to address this scandal? Can we have an assurance that there is the potential to open criminal proceedings to break up what is effectively a criminal network? Will the Government also undertake that they will not—as they have in the past with HSBC—attempt to intervene in criminal or other investigations taking place elsewhere in the world? The major risk to financial stability is not from investigations intended to clear out criminal activity from our banking system; it is from inactivity on the part of the Government and others, and from failing to act to ensure that our major banks are clean and fit for purpose.

Secondly, all those banks claim to have strict internal policies to deal with money laundering. The Financial Conduct Authority places great stress on the need for banks to self-police and create appropriate internal procedures to prevent money laundering. It is obvious from today's revelations, however, that the current arrangements are not working to prevent widespread, organised and sophisticated criminal activity. Will the Government tell the House what steps they will be taking to address this matter with the FCA? Will the Government today commit to opening an inquiry with a view to reporting rapidly on measures to be taken that will strengthen the regulations, including introducing tighter controls on and closer monitoring of the banks themselves?

Finally, when the Government own major stakes in the banks involved—RBS in particular, since they are no longer able to sell off that stake—there is an immediate need for them to reassure taxpayers that publicly owned banks are not indirectly involved in criminal activity. What steps will the Government, as a major shareholder in RBS, take to investigate the allegations against it and to reassure taxpayers? Our banks have been found wanting yet again. Urgent action is needed from the Government to protect the standing of our finance sector and to protect our economy. Complacency and inaction are not good enough.

Simon Kirby: I assure the right hon. Gentleman that the Government are far from complacent. As I outlined earlier, we have been updating the UK's money laundering regulations, and I hope that the Criminal Finances Bill, which is currently in the other place, will receive Royal Assent in the near future, creating new powers for enforcement agencies. The FCA takes misconduct seriously and fined Deutsche Bank £163 million only last month. As for whether we should be telling the independent FCA or the NCA what to do, it is worth saying that if the information reveals new findings, the FCA will be able to investigate accordingly. It would not be appropriate for me to comment on potential legal proceedings.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Does the commitment expressed in our hosting of the anti-corruption summit not a year ago still exist to drive forward its agenda?

Simon Kirby: Absolutely. This Government are fully committed to ensuring that taxpayers are fully protected and that we do all we can to stamp out illegal money laundering activity.

Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): This revelation is shocking, but it is not in the least bit surprising. For over a year, I have been campaigning in this House on associated areas. After the story was released yesterday evening, I undertook research that indicates that at the heart of the issue is the banks' use of limited partnerships—not only Scottish limited partnerships, but many other forms—that allow the criminals to hide their ownership of companies. It is through that mechanism that these things are happening.

I have several questions for the Minister. First, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy closed its review of limited partnerships on Friday. Will the Government allow me and other interested Members to resubmit to the review, although it is formally closed, so that we can raise this important matter and have it considered in the review?

Secondly, when one looks at the outcome and the extent of the situation, it is too much to believe that we are the world leader in money laundering regulation in general, so it is time for another look at that. Thirdly, a key concern of many in the House is that the banks have not had a supportive whistleblowing regime in recent years. We need to encourage, not inhibit, whistleblowing.

Simon Kirby: In this alleged case, my understanding is that the bodies used were limited companies, not limited partnerships. Last year, BEIS introduced the register of people with significant control, and we will be consulting shortly on UK property-owning foreign companies. That is a step forward.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the limited partnership consultation; I am sure that any right hon. or hon. Member who wants to write to the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy can do so. It is also appropriate to say that we are world leaders in financial regulation. The FCA does a good job, is held in high regard by the rest of the world and strikes the right balance between consumer protection and fairness.

David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): My hon. Friend takes this issue seriously. Will he tell the House how unexplained wealth orders will prevent criminals from using the proceeds of crime in the UK?

Simon Kirby: My hon. Friend raises an important part of the Criminal Finances Bill, which is going through the other place as we speak. I look forward to its receiving Royal Assent and becoming law, giving new law enforcement powers to stop any of this activity.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): The Economic Secretary has shown real complacency about the huge and building scandal that has been revealed by *The Guardian* today. Given that our banking sector is very large and that the consequences of its being destabilised

by such criminal behaviour are very serious for our economy, does he not realise that his complacent, process-driven answers today are simply not good enough?

Simon Kirby: I do not recognise that at all. The FCA and the NCA are well placed to investigate this, if appropriate. We have not only world-leading financial regulation but world-leading financial services. More than 1 million people across the country are employed in financial services in all our constituencies, and the vast majority of them work hard, do a good job and represent customers as well as they can. We have outlined the measures that the Government are undertaking—*[Interruption.]* I have addressed everything that the hon. Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) mentioned. This Government are doing more than at any time in the past 10 years to tackle this issue.

Rishi Sunak (Richmond (Yorks)) (Con): Given the overlap between money laundering networks and terrorist financing networks, does my hon. Friend agree that this is also an issue of national security and that, furthermore, the only way we can tackle it is with greater information sharing between the private sector, regulatory bodies and enforcement agencies?

Simon Kirby: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Greater information sharing and transparency are the way forward. The register of people with significant control is an important step forward, and I look forward to additional transparency in the future. Ultimately, people with nothing to hide have nothing to fear.

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): To counter the impression that he has been promoted beyond his competence, can the Minister tell us which British banks have been convicted of money laundering over the past five years? What specific, individual thing has he learned from reading those judgments? *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The question was discourteous, but it was not disorderly—there is a distinction. The hon. Gentleman has been practising that technique in all sorts of different forums in all the 30 years that I have known him. The question was not one of the more extreme variants on the theme.

Simon Kirby: I can tell the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) that the FCA has carried out a number of enforcement actions, both large and small, over a large number of different financial services. It is right and proper that a balance between fairness and responsible behaviour is struck at all times.

Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): If these allegations are proven, particularly against a bank in which the Government own a majority stake, will my hon. Friend commit to using the full powers of the Criminal Finances Bill to clamp down on this type of money laundering, which, if proven, will be a national disgrace and scandal?

Simon Kirby: It is worth saying that our shareholding in a number of banks is at arm's length. We are not operationally in control, as is right and proper. The important thing is that we learn lessons from the past and make sure that the past is not repeated.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Has the Minister discussed the matter with the former Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne), who the US House of Representatives found intervened with the American authorities to prevent HSBC from being prosecuted in 2012? What has the FCA specifically done since the “global laundromat” was discovered in 2013?

Simon Kirby: I have not had that conversation with my right hon. Friend. It is fair to say that the FCA has carried out a number of investigations, and it is right and proper that it does so. The FCA is an independent operational body that we set up as asked, and it would not be appropriate for me to comment.

Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): It seems to me, and to many others, that there is an unwritten deal here: that Russians and others of dubious or illegal means can essentially come to this country, send their kids to our schools, buy our real estate or our sports clubs and get involved in this country on the basis—this is the other side of the deal—that they do no wrong while they are here. That is not an acceptable way forward, if it ever was. Is it not now time to rethink this issue?

Simon Kirby: My hon. Friend raises an interesting point. This Government are doing more than ever before to tackle this important issue. When it comes to money laundering, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has called for evidence on the use of limited partnerships, which were raised by the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Roger Mullin), and will in due course consider any action needed to address those concerns.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): To a long list of misdemeanours committed by the banks for which directors have not been held responsible, we now have this allegation of extensive laundering of funds that were either stolen or of criminal origin. One of the explanations that has been given is that directors of banks see compliance as an expense with no return. Can the Minister assure us that the allegations will be properly investigated by criminal investigators and that, if it is found that directors have encouraged slack compliance for the profit of their bank, they will feel the full weight of the law and realise that slack compliance has a cost in their personal lives?

Simon Kirby: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that in this country we have not only a world-regarded financial regulation system but a rule of law that is both fair and effective. If there is any wrongdoing or impropriety, it is right and proper that those people face the full weight of the law.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): How many money launderers have been sent to prison in the past five years?

Simon Kirby: I am not aware of the exact answer to that question, but I will write to my hon. Friend with all the information I have. I am convinced that, across the world and in this country, money laundering is taken very seriously.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Are the Government or any other public agency in Britain investigating whether laundered Russian money was channelled to any individuals in either the leave campaign or the Trump presidential campaign? Is the Minister aware of any other investigations?

Simon Kirby: I make it clear that I am not aware of any connection. It is right and proper that the FCA and the NCA have been watching that issue for some time. It is a confidential matter; if there is new information, I am sure they will consider it.

Mr Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): Compliance officers across the banking sector play a key role in stamping out some of the behaviour that has been reported. Will the Minister assure the House that the FCA and other regulators are making sure that compliance officers are properly trained and are proactive on the ground?

Simon Kirby: I reassure my hon. Friend that that is the case. It is right and proper that the issue of money laundering is addressed from top to bottom. Everyone has a responsible part to play.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): Having previously claimed that

“there is little evidence of corporate economic wrongdoing going unpunished”,

the Ministry of Justice is now considering whether it should extend the criminal liability offences to money laundering. Does the Minister now agree that the “global laundromat” allegations clearly highlight that the law needs to be toughened up in this area?

Simon Kirby: I am sure that the MOJ will listen carefully to the hon. Lady’s point.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): The report indicates that many of the laundered funds went into shell companies. Can the Minister explain how the world’s first open register of equitable ownership will help prosecuting authorities to bring to justice those who benefit from such funds?

Simon Kirby: The people with significant control register is open for everyone to see. Thousands, if not millions, of people are able to see it. Transparency is absolutely the best thing to make people aware of wrongdoing and to make sure that nothing is hidden.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): It is clear that the current measures, though welcome, are simply not sufficient to tackle this sort of money laundering. Considering that dirty money is channelled through our British banks, how much worse would it be if the Chancellor achieved his vision of this country becoming a corporate tax haven—another Panama—post-Brexit?

Simon Kirby: That is not the Chancellor’s vision. The Government are currently consulting on the fourth money laundering directive. I have mentioned the Criminal Finances Bill, which is in the other place. The FCA is also vigilant in enforcing measures, and it takes misconduct very seriously.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Having witnessed at first hand the anti-money laundering procedures of UK banks, when I tried to keep open an existing bank account, I wonder how any organisation has managed to launder ill-gotten gains through our banks, and I can only conclude that it is because complying with the regulations is seen as no more than a tick-box exercise. Does my hon. Friend agree that banks should adopt a more proportionate and common-sense approach when dealing with members of the public?

Simon Kirby: My hon. Friend will be pleased that the fourth money laundering directive, which the Government are consulting on as we speak, includes provision for a more proportionate approach to that very issue, and I hope he takes part in the consultation. I also hope that the banks, with FCA guidance and a Government steer, will have to take a proportionate approach in the very near future.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): The Home Affairs Committee estimates that £100 billion is laundered through London every year, but only 0.17% of that has been frozen, so the Minister might as well go to Heathrow and put up a welcome sign for Russian murderers and money launderers. Five criminal complaints have been submitted to UK law enforcement agencies about money laundering connected to the Magnitsky case. Not a single one has resulted in the opening of a criminal case, whereas 12 other countries have opened investigations on the same evidence. So the question is this: what is necessary to get UK law enforcement agencies to do their jobs and prosecute money launderers? Why has that not been working, and what is the Minister going to do about it?

Simon Kirby: I hope the NCA and the FCA would, if appropriate, do a considerable amount about it. They are independently operational bodies. It is right and proper that I cannot comment at the Dispatch Box about what may or may not happen. However, if there is wrongdoing, it is right and proper that it is addressed.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): As we have heard, HSBC has been a serial offender on money laundering all around the world. It has had fines in the US and in Switzerland, and it has been mentioned again. There were calls for an investigation into other banks in 2012. The “laundromat” scheme was first reported in *The Independent* in 2014, so yesterday’s news is not actually new news; it just shows the scale of the problem with people using British banks and shell companies registered in the UK. If the UK really is a world leader in money laundering and other financial regulation, how bad are things in the rest of the world, and what is the UK doing to help stamp out the problem elsewhere?

Simon Kirby: The hon. Gentleman raises an interesting point. It is important to co-operate with countries around the world. We have been very clear that we will work with the Financial Action Task Force and other regulators around the world, and that is important. This is not something we can solve domestically on our own.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): Investigators at the National Crime Agency are saying that Russian officials have been hampering their investigations by refusing to co-operate. What discussions has the Minister had, or will he have, with his Foreign Office counterparts to see whether they can broker a better relationship with those Russian officials?

Simon Kirby: I would imagine that the FCA is in contact with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and, if appropriate, they will have conversations about this issue. What is important is that, if these allegations are correct, and any new information is presented, the NCA and the FCA act on it appropriately.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): May I ask why the Chancellor is not here, because, frankly, the Minister’s answers today have been appalling? Some £80 billion could have been laundered, according to this story. Should we not think again about the powers the FCA and other regulators have to prevent these things from happening? Can he please answer some questions?

Simon Kirby: I am very sorry, but I have been doing my very best to answer the questions that have been asked. Sadly, I cannot be held responsible for the quality or the content of the questions. What I would say is that I am the Minister responsible for financial services, and the Government are responsible for legislating in this place and in the other place. To answer the hon. Lady’s question, the Criminal Finances Bill is an example of what we are doing now, as we speak, to improve things. The FCA is in constant dialogue with not only the banks but the Government to make sure it moves with the times.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): If it is found during the investigation that terrorism has been facilitated, what personal responsibility will the Minister take for that dreadful finding?

Simon Kirby: It is important to say that these schemes operated from 2010 to 2014. The hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) mentioned that *The Independent* first raised the story in 2014. However, if there is new evidence, it is important that the NCA and the FCA look at it and act accordingly. We set up those bodies to act operationally and independently from Government, and that is right and proper.

Rectification Procedure

1.6 pm

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Ian Lavery on a point of rectification.

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. On Thursday 16 March, the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards published her report on a complaint about my declarations in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, which concluded that I had breached the rules relating to how I registered information and, in a subsequent and inadvertent omission, had failed to draw the House's attention to these interests while asking a question about the future of deep coal mining in the UK on 13 March 2013. Mr Speaker, I wish to apologise to the House fully and unreservedly for what was a genuinely inadvertent breach of the rules, with which I have at all times sought to comply.

Mr Speaker: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for what he has said, and I think it will have been heard and appreciated by the House.

Point of Order

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek your advice concerning the emergency personal independence payments regulations, which came into force last Thursday. Over 160 Members of this House have signed a prayer against the regulations, for which the praying-against period comes to an end on 3 April. A debate has been arranged for next week in the other place, but to date the Government have refused to arrange a debate and vote on the Floor of this House.

There is a huge democratic deficit, with the regulations enforced by negative statutory instrument. That is a sad reflection of the Government's attitude to this House. On top of that, over 180,000 people have signed a petition against the regulations. Some 81,000 disabled people will have been through a PIP assessment that will deny people in psychological distress access to additional support. Please can you advise me how I can press the Government to hold a debate on these regulations before we rise for the Easter recess?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady has raised her point with very considerable force, and she has underlined the reasons for its urgency. I have noted the number of Members, to which she referred, who have prayed against the regulations. Her point of order is not, sadly, a matter for the Chair, but it will have been heard on the Treasury Bench, and it is not an unreasonable hope and expectation on her part and that of those Members who prayed against the regulations that a debate will be arranged in a timely fashion.

In so far as she seeks advice, I would say to her that she and her colleagues could use the opportunity of business questions on Thursday to press their claims in respect of the schedule for next week's business, for it is with next week that the hon. Lady is concerned. Whether group activity—that is to say, significant numbers raising the matter—will be effective, I do not know, but it seems a reasonable supposition that, if anything will, it might. I think we will leave it there for now.

Short and Holiday-let Accommodation (Notification of Local Authorities)

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

1.10 pm

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require householders to notify local authorities of an intention to register accommodation for short or holiday lets; and for connected purposes.

Good ideas can be undermined when a minority abuse or exploit them, causing harm to others and undermining the wellbeing of the wider community. The “sharing” economy is fizzing with good ideas and opportunities. We are in an era where the potential use of resources—from labour to transport to homes—can be made more of by the speed and flexibility of digital communications, and we should not be putting unnecessary barriers in the way. Yet, that is not the same as saying there should be no rules. Individuals and communities need to be protected, and the rules we agree on must be enforced.

We now have an emerging consensus, including London councils of different political complexions, the Mayor of London and London Assembly members, on the need for further action. So today I am putting forward a proposal that will make it possible to effectively enforce the rules preventing the abuse of short and holiday let accommodation. Although I welcome the freedom for homeowners to let their properties for such purposes without excessive bureaucratic interference, it is difficult and expensive for cash-strapped councils to police the rules. With no requirement to seek permission for a short let, the only way to identify where such lettings are taking place—and, more importantly, where they are in breach of the rules—is by having staff comb the various websites to find them.

As some of us flagged up during the passage of the Deregulation Bill, which set the 90-day annual maximum for short lets, proving a property is let at all can be tough when there is no notification, and proving a property is let for more than three months in any one year is labour-intensive, expensive and cumbersome. Officers of my own local authority, Westminster, have been of great help in preparing this short Bill, and they have told me:

“It is difficult to determine the addresses as there is no prior notification system. My officers spend an inordinate amount of time trying to identify properties from website photographs where addresses are not provided like Airbnb. We also rely heavily on members of the public notifying us of people short-letting properties.

We are up against it but remain vigilant and continue to do all that we can to deal with the commercial lets (i.e. Those let in excess of 90 nights).”

People who are using Airbnb and others of the various platforms for short and holiday lets sometimes say to me, “Why does it matter? Why shouldn’t we, as homeowners, do what we want with our properties?” For many of them, it should not matter at all, as they are the occasional hosts—they are the sharing economy—earning a bit of extra cash from a spare room or when they are away. They are aware of their own legal responsibilities and are considerate of neighbours—let them flourish. The problem is that they are not alone.

Alongside the responsible owner-occupiers are irresponsible ones, illegal sub-letters and an increasingly significant commercial operation seeking to take advantage of potentially higher yields.

Across all London boroughs, in the year following the Deregulation Act 2015 there was a city-wide 126% increase in the number of short lettings advertised on Airbnb alone. Westminster had an 80% increase, but some boroughs saw even bigger rises, with Camden’s figure going up by 124%, Southwark’s by 139% and Brent’s by a staggering 762%. There is now evidence to suggest that the short let phenomenon is spreading across the UK, with Edinburgh and Manchester following London—Brighton and Bristol are among the other authorities experiencing this. The latest data on InsideAirbnb.com confirms that, with nearly 50,000 listings across Edinburgh and Manchester alone. In terms of potential breaches of the law, my borough is currently investigating more than 1,100 properties believed to have breached the 90-night limit.

Also in the early part of last year, the number of whole properties—as opposed to rooms—in London listed on Airbnb increased by a quarter, from 17,625 to 21,861. Research by the Residential Landlords Association shows that 41% of all Airbnb listings in London last June were multi-listings, meaning that the property owners had more than one property advertised; this increase, to some 17,590 properties, is also a sign that the website is increasingly becoming commercialised. Meanwhile, 54% of entire home and entire apartment listings in Manchester, and 43% of those in Edinburgh, were identified as multi-listing properties, again indicating that the trend is going well beyond the image of the sharing economy.

Two concerning issues arise from that, the first of which is the loss of residential accommodation. Short lets can bring in up to three times the income of more traditional flat rentals: £1,800 a week, on average, for a two-bedroom flat, as opposed to £620 a week for a traditional assured shorthold tenancy, according to Westminster City Council. Even before the Deregulation Act, evidence suggested that flats were being, in effect, converted into semi-permanent holiday lets, but now the pressure is even more intense. The potential to earn more from short lets is a key selling point on some of the sites. People are told:

“The rents you can achieve during weekend stays or overnight stays can easily match or beat what you could achieve for a monthly rental income from a normal tenancy—plus you can enjoy the flexibility of choosing when to put your property up for rent, and when not to.”

Another company states:

“A short term let normally generates 50-100% more income than a long term let.”

So, alongside the genuine sharing economy lettings by homeowners, that leads to a longer-term loss of residential homes, even those available for traditional assured shorthold lettings. Westminster City Council alone estimates there to be 3,000 whole properties on listings sites, with about 1,000 each in a number of other individual boroughs.

One constituent wrote to me to say:

“This style of letting has nothing to do with people make a bit of extra money on the side from their homes, by renting out the odd room, (which was the original premise of Airbnb) and has now become a licence for people to make big (non-tax-declared money) at the expense of local residents who are subjected to its considerable downsides”.

Where this all began for me was the number of constituents coming to raise concerns about the impact of their communities becoming an unofficial part of the hospitality industry. Their questions were about issues including: the impact of transience; their security; antisocial behaviour arising from noise; waste issues; overcrowding; and a range of other sources of disturbance. Those disturbances place a cost on the local authority, too. Enforcement costs, and the costs of dealing with noise and other breaches of regulations have to be met by cash-strapped local authorities.

One constituent wrote to me to say:

“We are a single house in Bayswater (six flats) and we manage ourselves. All the flats but one (ours) are now non-owner-occupied. A few weeks ago it became obvious that one flat was renting on Airbnb, and I’m fairly sure had broken the 90 day limit. This is technically in breach of the terms of our leases, which have that ‘single private use’ clause in them, but more than that I really hate the idea of our house turning into a hotel, our front door key in strangers’ hands. And I’m fairly sure it breaches the terms of our buildings insurance which is a bit scary.”

That whole area of downsides from short lettings—insurance and other lease requirements regularly being breached as a consequence of short lets—is beginning to come to the public’s attention.

Meanwhile, tax revenues are, if anything, going down—that is certainly what other cities are finding. One article looking at the American experience found:

“First up on the list of grievances big cities have with vacation rental sites is lost tax revenue. The number of missing tax dollars is truly astounding. A study from AllTheRooms.com, a vacation rental and hotel search engine, found that the total 2016 tax revenue from room rentals brokered through Airbnb would amount to almost \$440 million if they were taxed at the same rate as traditional hotels.”

That is the American experience. We do not have a local UK experience, but that is where we are going.

Unlike before the 2015 Act, councils now have to prove not merely that a property is being short let, but that it has been short let for more than 90 days in a year,

which is a far harder and more resource-intensive task. What can be done to resolve this? Local authorities are looking for the Government and the Department for Communities and Local Government to be more prepared to intervene to exempt neighbourhoods from the current set of regulations—they have the powers to do that. Westminster City Council applied for such an exemption but was turned down, although I know it is considering making a fresh application. The platforms can also do more. I welcome the fact that Airbnb has said it will enforce the 90-day maximum rule, but not all other letting platforms are taking the same approach—in some cases they are making it clear that they believe it is for the host to uphold the law, not for themselves, as letting platforms, to do so.

What I believe is now necessary, and what this short Bill aims to do, is to introduce a light-touch online notification system that is mandatory for homeowners to complete, where they merely confirm the dates their property is to be used for short letting. This is not about seeking permission, but is merely about allowing local authorities to know where short and holiday lets are taking place so that they are able to enforce effectively. By all means encourage people to make good use of their homes and earn extra cash, but let us make sure that this does not intensify the housing crisis, land costs on others—while sharing none of the rewards—and inflict misery on long-term residents who, to their shock, can find themselves waking up in a hotel annexe, but after all the caretakers have gone home.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Ms Karen Buck, Mark Field, Tulip Siddiq, Jim Fitzpatrick, Andy Slaughter, Victoria Borwick, Kate Green, Peter Kyle, Rushanara Ali, Kerry McCarthy and Ruth Cadbury present the Bill.

Ms Karen Buck accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 24 March, and to be printed (Bill 159).

Intellectual Property (Unjustified Threats) Bill [Lords]

Consideration of Bill, not amended in the Public Bill Committee

New Clause 1

REVIEW OF THE IMPACT OF EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION ON PROVISIONS WITHIN THIS ACT

“() Within 12 months of this Act coming into force, the Secretary of State must prepare and publish a report on the impact of the Government’s plans for exiting the European Union on the provisions within this Act, and must lay a copy of the report before Parliament.”—(*Bill Esterson.*)

This is a probing new clause to assess the impact of exiting the European Union on the provisions within this Act.

Brought up, and read the First time.

1.21 pm

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Intellectual property makes a significant contribution to the UK economy each year. In 2014, UK firms invested an estimated £133 billion in knowledge assets, compared with £121 billion in tangible assets. As the Intellectual Property Office notes, UK investment in intangible assets that are protected by intellectual property rose from £47 billion in 2000 to £70 billion in 2014, and is estimated to represent 4.2% of total GDP. What is more, the UK system of regulating intellectual property is considered to be one of the best: it was rated No. 3 by business in the 2016 Taylor Wessing global IP index in respect of obtaining, exploiting and enforcing the main types of intellectual property rights. It is clear that intellectual property is of great importance to the UK economy, so the impact of leaving the European Union on IP and the provisions in the Bill is vital to the economy. It is of great interest to businesses, which value certainty, and it is crucial to potential investors in businesses in the United Kingdom.

The Bill will apply to patents, trademarks and designs. The Minister stated in Committee, and in a written answer on 20 October last year, that the European Patent Office was established by international treaty and that our participation in its work will be unaffected by our leaving the EU. The suggestion is that patents will be relatively untouched by Brexit; it is to be hoped that the Minister’s confidence is not misplaced. Several IP rights that derive from EU regulations will no longer apply to the UK, and the impact of Brexit is far from clear at this stage. As the Chartered Institute of Patent Attorneys recently commented:

“The continued validity of these rights in the UK is uncertain. Transitional agreements may be negotiated to allow time for rights holders to convert these into national rights or to file separate national rights... The government has remained silent on whether or not it intends to implement the new Trade Mark Directive into UK domestic law.”

The Minister signalled in Committee the Government’s intention to ratify the unified patent court agreement by the end of April. The court will deal with disputes relating to European patents and help the business that the Bill seeks to assist by removing the threat of unjustified litigation—a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) in Committee.

Will we still be members of the court after we leave the EU? The court is part of the effort to reduce costs across jurisdictions and make it easier to do business. As we prepare to leave the EU, the last thing we need is additional costs on businesses, so clarity is needed about our membership of the court. The Minister said in Committee that decisions had not yet been taken, so will he provide an update and confirm that he understands just how important it is that we minimise costs across jurisdictions, including those relating to intellectual property rights? What is his view on our potential membership of the patent court after we leave the EU?

The CIPA said:

“For the UK to continue participating after Brexit, there would need to be a new international agreement with the participating Member States and the UK to provide compatibility with EU law... If the UK does not remain a member of the UPC...there will be a need for further transitional provisions to protect any rights acquired or cases in progress at the time the UK leaves. It is still unclear whether UK European Patent Attorneys will be able to represent parties in the different Divisions of the UPC after Brexit.”

It went on to say:

“CIPA has a strong preference for the UK to participate in the UP and UPC system, if a solid legal basis for this can be agreed.”

Given the UK’s leading position in patents and patent law, it makes sense to do all we can to maintain our position and to ensure that confidence in our position remains as high as possible. It is important that we avoid taking a step backwards on IP law and losing the potential benefits that the development of single European patent protection will bring. The economic and competitive advantages of such protection are clear enough. The alternative of having a separate UK system, with the likely need for rights holders to apply for UK and EU protection separately, will mean additional burdens for UK businesses and for our economy, compared with the UK remaining a central part of the European-wide patent system.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) said in Committee, it is vital that the Minister takes all steps to ensure that patent law and IP law more generally do not take a retrograde step following Brexit. IP is how innovation is rewarded; it is fundamental to ensure our ability to deliver a high-pay economy and prosperity, and to Britain’s promise that the next generation is better off than the previous one. Since 2010, we have seen living standards fall while the economy as a whole has grown. The people of this country cannot afford to miss opportunities, including this one. The alternative of a race to the bottom, a low-wage economy and our competing as some kind of tax dodger’s paradise off the coast of continental Europe will not deliver better living standards.

Intellectual property is one of many ways in which we must build on our success as a country and not allow decline. How intellectual property rights are protected, and how they are seen to be protected during the Brexit negotiations, will be crucial to delivering and enhancing business and investor confidence and to getting the best possible outcome from the negotiations. The Prime Minister may not wish to give a running commentary, but she and her Ministers need to reassure businesses, their staff and the whole country that everything is being done to secure our future. That is why I tabled the new clause to call for the Government to review the impact of Brexit on the IP provisions in the Bill.

A report after a year would not only help to bring sovereignty back to Parliament—something we heard a great deal about during the referendum debates—but help UK businesses and foreign investors to understand the post-Brexit intellectual property world with respect to the provisions in the Bill. The protections being harmonised in the Bill are important to help to protect our businesses, ensure a fair market and encourage entrepreneurs and inventors, and especially to ensure opportunity for smaller businesses. Nevertheless, those businesses, entrepreneurs and inventors all want to know, as far as possible, what the arrangements and relationships with the EU will be like post-Brexit.

The law firm Charles Russell Speechlys says:

“Discussions are taking place regarding the post-Brexit options for IP. National IP rights are unlikely to be affected post-Brexit. Pan-European IP rights will be affected. Trade marks and designs are likely to be the IP rights most affected but it will impact on other IP rights as well.

On leaving the EU, the UK will no longer automatically be covered by EU trade marks. An orderly transitional period is expected with the potential to split existing EUTMs into UK national and EUTMs post-Brexit (subject to negotiation and relevant supporting legislation). Trade mark owners will need to reinstate lapsed UK marks which have been subsumed into EUTMs by seniority but it is not yet clear how that will work.”

1.30 pm

The firm goes on to say:

“New EUTM filings post-Brexit will not extend to the UK (they will be limited to the EU). Trade mark owners will need to seek national protection in the UK for their trade marks. Application through the Madrid Protocol will still be available for IRs designating the UK.

The UK court system will no longer have EU trade mark courts post-Brexit. EUTM holders will not be able to enforce them in the UK and obtain pan-EU injunctions under the EUTM Regulation. The effect on pan-EU injunctions already granted is unknown. Brexit will also impact on the general jurisdiction of the UK Courts and enforcement of their judgments. Infringement proceedings may need to be brought separately in the UK and EU.

UK trade mark laws may develop independently over time and diverge from EU trade mark laws. CJEU decisions will not be binding but are likely to be persuasive.”

The firm ends by saying:

“There will be no obligation to implement the new Trade Marks Directive (in line with the already in force new CTMR”—Community trade mark regulation—“if Brexit takes place before January 2019.”

The uncertainty that is set out by that legal opinion shows the need for proper analysis and for confidence to be built in during negotiations, rather than after we have left the EU. Clearly, there is a considerable amount of uncertainty. We are unlikely to be able to remain in the new European unified patent court after Brexit. The Government have not said whether we will implement the trademarks directive.

To provide the certainty that business needs, perhaps the Minister could use this opportunity to confirm which IP rights not currently on the UK statute books will be enshrined in UK law once we leave the EU. Does he understand from the detailed analysis that I read out from Charles Russell Speechlys just how much of a concern this is, just how complex it is, and just why businesses want and need that certainty for the good of themselves and the wider economy?

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Joseph Johnson): This new clause would require the Secretary of State to issue a report on the impact of the Government’s plans for exiting the European Union on the provisions in the Bill within 12 months of it coming into force.

The Bill does not take forward any EU obligations. The IP unjustified threats provisions do not derive from EU law. They are “home grown” provisions that were first enacted for patents back in the 19th century. The important protections provided by the Bill will not in themselves be changed by Brexit. Businesses pushed for clarity and certainty about how they can contact others over IP disputes, and the Bill will deliver that. Our leaving the EU does not alter that. Of course some IP rights are EU-wide, and the Bill will apply properly to those rights. The threats regime will be consistent across all relevant rights that have effect in the UK.

Furthermore, the Bill will ensure that our UK threats regime works appropriately with the proposed unitary patent and unified patent court when they come into effect. The hon. Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) asked about the UPC following our exit from the EU. The options for the UK’s intellectual property regime after our exit, including our relationship with the unified patent court, will be the subject of negotiation, and it would be wrong to set out unilateral positions in advance. None the less, our efforts will be focused on seeking the best deal possible in negotiations with our European partners, and we want that deal to reflect the kind of mature co-operative relationship that close friends and allies enjoy.

As long as we are members of the EU, the UK will continue to play a full and active role, and making sure the IP regime continues to function properly for EU-wide rights is an example. The UK’s involvement in the EU IP framework after exit is not a matter for the Bill; it will be part of the EU exit negotiations, which of course have not yet begun. It is likely that those negotiations will still be in progress at the point at which the new clause would require us to report. Publishing the suggested report would be unnecessary and could well undermine our ability to negotiate the best deal for Britain in this area.

The hon. Gentleman asked about EU-wide IP rights on Brexit. Of course we are already talking to businesses and to other stakeholders about this important issue. There will be time to address it fully and properly during exit negotiations. Naturally, we will want to see the best outcome and one that supports our innovative businesses. He asked also about EU trade marks and designs. We recognise that users will want clarity over the long-term coverage of those rights. We acknowledge the importance of involving users in the consideration of these issues, and we are working with stakeholders at the moment to gather views on how to address their concerns.

The hon. Gentleman asked on a number of occasions about the EU trademark reform package and the directive. On balance, we think that the reform package is a good one, with modernisations that will make the overall system easier and cheaper for businesses to use.

We are committed to getting the right deal for the UK and we will work with Parliament to ensure a smooth and successful exit. The new clause would not

[Joseph Johnson]

help us in any of this work; it is unnecessary and potentially harmful to the UK's interests. For that reason, I ask the hon. Gentleman to withdraw the new clause.

Bill Esterson: I am glad that the Minister said that he was already having discussions with businesses; that is incredibly important. I urge him to make it clear very publicly, sooner rather than later, exactly what the nature of those discussions are. Businesses are already exceedingly worried about the consequences for intellectual property. I thank him for picking up the points that I made about the relationship between EU patent law and UK patent law. I think that he understands that a great deal of reassurance is needed. I do not agree that we would make life more difficult by having this requirement on Government. In fact, it is a sensible move. I would be surprised and very concerned if we did not see a degree of reporting back during negotiations on these and many other matters. None the less, he has put forward the Government's view in response to the points that I have raised, so I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Clause, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 1

PATENTS

Bill Esterson: I beg to move amendment 1, page 2, line 15, after "do," insert "or claims to do,".

This amendment deals with people or companies who hold themselves out as the primary infringer: ie, they claim to be the manufacturer or importer of a product (and therefore can be written to freely) when, in fact, they are not. A definition is provided in amendment 3.

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

Amendment 2, page 2, line 19, at end insert—

"(4A) A threat of infringement proceedings is not actionable if the threat—

- (a) is made to a person mentioned in subsection (4), and
- (b) relates to—
 - (i) potential future acts of infringement, or
 - (ii) other acts of infringement

which are fundamentally similar to the current alleged act of infringement."

This amendment would allow communications from the rights holder to the primary infringer to also refer to secondary infringing acts (by the primary infringer), without it constituting a threat.

Amendment 3, page 2, line 24, at end insert—

"(7) In subsection (4)(a) "claims to do an act" means the person makes an explicit claim in public that they are the manufacturer or importer of the product or process."

This amendment provides a definition of "claims to do" in amendment 1.

Bill Esterson: Amendments 1 and 3 are related to primary infringers and those who claim "to do". Amendment 1 addresses the concern about the impact on those who claim to make a product and the potential for action to be taken against them. Amendment 3 defines "claims to do".

We are dealing here with communication and threats. As the Bill stands, the onus is on a rights holder not to communicate with a party that claims to be a primary

infringer of rights. The example that springs to mind is that of an own-label brand in a supermarket. Under the Bill, a manufacturer who believes that a product contravenes their rights may not communicate with the supermarket unless they are confident that there is no other way of finding out who the manufacturer really is. The problem is that smaller manufacturers wanting to challenge the bigger players may not have the expertise or access to expertise needed to comply with the provisions of the Bill. They do not have the staff, time or money to engage legal services or to search for the true identity of the manufacturer. The Minister said in Committee that if action were taken against a rights holder, they would be able to defend themselves in court. Now, that is entirely accurate in legal terms, but the problem is that smaller organisations lack the resources to be able to do so.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): As I think I said.

Bill Esterson: As my hon. Friend may well have said in Committee.

The problem is one of imbalance. Our court system necessarily favours those who have the deepest pockets and the greatest resources, and that does not mean smaller businesses. Will smaller businesses risk winning or losing in court? Will they have the money to defend themselves against an action, or will they think it is worth defending their intellectual property in the first place? It will be for the courts to decide whether a rights holder could have found out who the primary infringer was. For smaller businesses, it could well be a tough choice as to whether they believe the court will back them when they say in court that they did not realise that they should not have contacted the apparent infringer.

If not through what I am proposing, and what my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) proposed in Committee, how does the Minister propose to ensure that there is a level playing field between protecting the rights holder, especially the smaller rights holder, and preventing unjustified threats, especially where the rights holder is the smaller party? How does he propose to guarantee smaller businesses the ability to operate on a level playing field? To be entirely fair to the Minister, I completely understand that that is the purpose of the whole Bill. My thanks go to the Law Commission for its work in delivering to such an objective. The Bill very much has in mind the need to balance protection and encouragement for innovators, entrepreneurs and investors with the need to ensure a fair market and to prevent unfair and exploitative competition. However, there appears to be a degree of ongoing potential for imbalance in the legislation regarding those who claim to be the manufacturer or the primary infringer, and the Minister's answers in Committee did not go far enough to guarantee that smaller businesses will be protected.

Amendment 2 would address some further concerns of smaller businesses that lack the resources for legal advice and that may fall foul of the Bill's narrow remit. The amendment addresses the problems where a rights holder challenges not just the primary infringement but secondary acts of infringement. The rights holder may wish to prevent future infringement or to comment on related infringements of a similar nature. The amendment

would minimise the fallout from inadvertent infringements. The amendment would not penalise a rights holder for mentioning secondary infringements when such communication was about potential future infringements or similar current infringements. The Chartered Institute of Patent Attorneys raised the concern that future infringements are excluded as the Bill is now drafted.

It seems reasonable to ask an infringer to stop now and in the future, and not to carry out similar infringements, so amendment 2 also deals with the concern of smaller businesses that lack the resources or expertise to ensure that all their communications are strictly compliant with the Bill's provisions. I agree with the Minister that rights holders ideally should get their communications right, and that is a large part of the thrust of the Bill, but my concern is that the lack of access to legal expertise for smaller businesses could be a real problem.

1.45 pm

I am afraid that I did not follow some of the Minister's counter-arguments to the amendment in Committee—for example, that the amendment would make it harder for rights holders to approach alleged primary infringers with confidence. In fact, our intention is precisely to increase confidence, especially among smaller businesses as they attempt to protect their intellectual property. Again, if the Minister will not do this through amendment 2, how will he? If CIPA is wrong, in what way is it wrong? If the language is vague—a point that the Minister made in Committee—why has his Department not suggested clearer language? With all the expertise here today and in the Department, it should be possible for the Minister to obtain the clarity of language to address the concerns we have raised. Did he actually ask for that kind of advice, clarification and language that would have addressed the problems, provided the additional assurance to smaller businesses and helped to alleviate some of these concerns? If not, why not?

Joseph Johnson: One of the key purposes of the Bill is to simplify an important but complex area of intellectual property law, making it more accessible and easier to use. One way in which it does this is by setting out a clear statement of those acts that a rights holder can safely refer to in a communication, and that will not trigger an unjustified threats action. This helps to encourage rights holders to communicate with the trade source of an alleged infringement. It would include those who manufacture or import patented products or use patented processes, for example. Such acts are known as primary infringements.

Amendments 1 and 3 seek to make it allowable to approach someone who explicitly claims to be a primary infringer. I am not convinced that there is problem that needs to be solved, but, in any event, there are two key points. First, under the reforms as they stand, a rights holder can already communicate with potential infringers of all types, including those identified by amendments 1 and 3. The Bill provides clear guidance on how this can be done. The provisions therefore make it easier for parties, including small and medium-sized enterprises, to communicate and resolve issues without the need for litigation. Secondly, it is perfectly allowable to make a threat to anyone so long as that threat refers only to manufacturing and importing, or other primary acts. Someone making such a threat would not be at risk of

being sued, even if the recipient was falsely claiming to do those acts. For these reasons, as well as the additional complexity introduced, I do not accept that amendments 1 and 3 are appropriate.

Moving on to amendment 2, I agree it is important that issues of infringement can be raised early, before real commercial damage is done. For that reason, the Bill already allows threats to be made in relation to future or intended acts of primary infringement, so amendment 2 adds nothing in that regard. Furthermore, the Bill already allows the rights holder to refer to certain secondary acts when communicating with an alleged primary infringer. When someone is manufacturing an allegedly infringing product, the rights holder can also discuss the retailing of that same product. Users wanted this, as it is pragmatic and helps to save time and money, but it would not be right to extend this further and allow threats to be made to that same manufacturer about the retail or stocking of other products that they did not make themselves. That could damage businesses that retail products acquired from a legitimate manufacturer, and would disrupt the ability of that legitimate manufacturer to operate in the marketplace—an outcome that the threats provisions exist to prevent.

Finally, it is highly uncertain for businesses what would be considered to be “fundamentally similar” acts of infringement, as set out in the amendment, and litigation on the meaning would no doubt ensue. If the intention is to capture only similar products, I do not think that is achieved.

These amendments would introduce additional and unwelcome complexity. They would blur the line between who is protected from threats and who can safely be approached. Rather than benefiting rights holders, this could instead make getting legal advice more difficult and costly. For those reasons, I ask the hon. Gentleman to withdraw his amendments.

Bill Esterson: We appear to have rehearsed, more or less word for word, what happened in Committee. I am disappointed by the Minister's responses, because he does not appear to have picked up on the concern about the imbalance between larger and smaller businesses—a fundamental element of what we think is missing from the Bill as drafted. I would like greater clarity from him, but perhaps that will come as the Bill is implemented. I urge the Government to consider the impact on smaller businesses. On own label, apparently once the rights holder has found out that an own label product is not made by a supermarket, such action would have to cease or it would be covered by the legislation. That was certainly our intention in the amendment.

I hope that our points about the need to protect smaller businesses have been well made. I thank the Minister for his responses, and beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Third Reading

1.52 pm

Joseph Johnson: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

Intellectual property is crucial to supporting economic growth and a key part of our industrial strategy. I am therefore pleased that this small but important Bill is

[Joseph Johnson]

completing its passage today. The Bill will ensure that businesses, especially SMEs, are best able to make use of the IP regime. In doing so, it will help to deliver the Government's manifesto commitment to make the UK the best place in Europe to innovate, patent new ideas, and set up and expand a business. The Bill brings clarity and consistency, making it easier and cheaper to solve infringement issues quickly and without litigation. It clearly defines how information can be exchanged to resolve disputes over IP infringement. It also means that legal advisers will now be better able to help to settle disputes without becoming embroiled themselves.

The reforms contained in the Bill are widely supported by stakeholders, not least because of careful research and consultation by the Law Commission. I thank the Law Commission and the Scottish Law Commission for their hard work and expertise in developing these reforms, and for the excellent support they have given the Bill during its passage. I would like briefly to highlight the value of the Law Commission special parliamentary procedure used in the passage of this Bill. The Bill has been strengthened by, in particular, the detailed scrutiny in the other place afforded by that procedure. I am grateful to hon. Members in this House, particularly those who served on the Committee, for their interest and for giving this Bill due consideration. My thanks also go to the hard-working Bill team and to Intellectual Property Office officials for their exceptional work.

The unjustified threats provisions are a valuable part of the wider IP regime and provide much needed protection. These reforms will ensure that those provisions are fit for purpose and make a real difference to our innovators, designers and businesses. I commend the Bill to the House.

1.54 pm

Bill Esterson: I join the Minister in saying that the provisions of this Bill are, overall, exactly what is needed to create a level playing field and support and encouragement for innovation and creativity. Those who develop ideas need to have their ideas protected and supported, and bringing together the different elements

of intellectual property legislation in the way that this Bill does is very much the right way to go. I mentioned on Report some of the figures and the benefits derived from the fact that the UK has one of the finest IP systems in the world. We must do all in our power to ensure that that continues because it is one of the reasons that this country is an attractive place for investment, and that is one of the reasons we must be optimistic about our future, despite the many challenges that we currently face, particularly the uncertainty around Brexit.

However, we have raised concerns throughout this process. It is a shame that there was not more in the Bill about alternative dispute resolution. The opportunity to tighten things up in relation to smaller businesses would have been welcome, but that has not happened. We need to reward innovation and entrepreneurs, and to balance that against the creation of a fair market and a successful economy. The Minister mentioned the industrial strategy Green Paper. It is critical to the success of the industrial strategy that our intellectual property system functions as well as possible. I hesitate to say that I look forward to how this will develop during the Brexit negotiations, but we certainly need to work extremely hard to make sure that the success of our IP system is retained during those negotiations because of the very close linkage between IP in this country and across the European Union. The Minister mentioned the protection for legal advisers. That is a welcome step forward, as is the clarity and consistency achieved by this Bill. We certainly support its core principles and the overall aims and objectives that have been achieved.

I add my thanks to the Law Commission, to those who have worked on the Bill, and to those who served on the Bill Committee. I hope that the Bill will achieve what is intended for it.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed, without amendment.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I must say that that is the most efficient debate on a Bill I have ever seen in this House, and I think that somebody somewhere ought to be commended for it.

Fuel Poverty

1.58 pm

The Minister for Climate Change and Industry (Mr Nick Hurd): I beg to move,

That this House has considered fuel poverty.

I am delighted to open the first annual debate on the important issue of fuel poverty. The fact remains that far too many of our fellow citizens and constituents struggle to afford to keep their homes at reasonable, comfortable temperatures. As I will argue, we are making progress, with some 780,000 fewer fuel-poor homes in 2014 than in 2010, but there is a lot more to do to meet the demanding targets we have rightly set ourselves, as a country, for 2030. It is quite right that the Government of the day are regularly held to account for what they are doing, and encouraging others to do, in the face of this stubborn and complex social challenge.

The debate is important because it is an opportunity for Government and Parliament to hear directly from MPs from across the nation about their experience and insights. In our day-to-day work, we, as MPs, come across the consequences of fuel poverty, not least its impact on the wellbeing and health of our constituents.

Before we get into the discussion, I want to set out the context. Over the past five years, Government have taken action to overhaul the framework for tackling fuel poverty in England. At long last, we have a long-term strategic framework for action on fuel poverty, which is rooted in the 2015 fuel poverty strategy and the long-term statutory target. The journey began in 2012 with the independent review of fuel poverty led by Professor Sir John Hills. The review found that fuel poverty is a distinct issue, separate from income poverty.

However, the debate clearly links to other areas of policy, such as the action the Government are taking to improve living standards by means of the national living wage and by increasing tax thresholds for the lowest-paid. Likewise, we could not have made clearer our determination to make sure that the energy market works for all. Ofgem's introduction of a prepayment meter tariff cap is a welcome first step. As the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), indicated last week, a consumer Green Paper will be out shortly.

Today, I want to focus on the policy framework that is specific to fuel poverty. The journey to this point started with Professor Hills's review, which reflected on previous activity and measures to tackle fuel poverty. The review highlighted the fact that although the 10% indicator that had, until that point, been used to measure fuel poverty was well-meaning, it was fundamentally flawed. In 2013, the Government confirmed that the findings of the Hills review of fuel poverty would be adopted, including the low income, high costs indicator. That measure finds a household to be living in fuel poverty if its income is below the poverty line and it has higher-than-typical energy costs.

In 2014 the Government introduced the fuel poverty target for England. The target is to ensure that, so far as is reasonably practicable, fuel-poor households are improved to a band C energy efficiency rating by 2030. In 2015 we saw the publication of "Cutting the cost of keeping warm: a fuel poverty strategy for England", which set

out the principles that the Government would apply and the approaches to be taken when making progress towards the fuel poverty target. The strategy set out the importance of effective levels of public accountability and the role that the Committee on Fuel Poverty, a non-departmental public body formerly known as the Fuel Poverty Advisory Group, will play in that. I welcome the insight and challenge that the committee brings as we look to tackle the serious and long-term societal issue of fuel poverty.

Recognising that 2030 is some way off, the strategy includes interim milestones to guide activity in the shorter term, helping to focus our attention on making progress as we move forward. The milestones are to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, that fuel-poor households are improved to a band E rating by 2020 and to a band D rating by 2025. That is the framework.

The fuel poverty target is certainly ambitious, and I have not heard anyone argue to the contrary. The band C target is set at a level that only 7% of fuel-poor households currently enjoy. We are aiming high, and it is right for us to do so. As the Committee on Climate Change reiterated in its report last week, the target is extremely challenging. However, we must be clear that meeting that challenge may provide huge benefits for households that need support. Improving those E, F or G-rated homes to band D can reduce energy costs by an average of £400. I am pleased to be able to say that although the challenge is significant, progress is being made.

Looking to our 2020 milestone, the percentage of fuel-poor households living in homes rated band E or higher has already improved from 79% in 2010 to 88% in 2014—the latest year for which statistics are available. Looking at the 2025 milestone, we see that the percentage of homes rated band D or higher has improved from 29% in 2010 to 59% in 2014.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC) *rose*—

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind) *rose*—

Mr Hurd: I would be delighted to give way to the hon. Lady.

Lady Hermon: There is a competition going on here over who will intervene. It is kind of the Minister to give way. I am sure he is aware that fuel poverty is particularly acute in Northern Ireland. Many households are still dependent on heating oil, the cost of which is increasing. Will the Minister pledge that if, as I optimistically forecast, a devolved Administration is restored in Northern Ireland next week, he will liaise very closely indeed with his counterpart in Northern Ireland to develop a strategy that benefits all households across the United Kingdom—not just those in England—rather than leaving Northern Ireland to fend for itself? That is an optimistic forecast, but we have to live in hope.

Mr Hurd: We do indeed. The hon. Lady is entirely right; the fuel poverty statistics for Northern Ireland are particularly striking and stubbornly high. As she indicates, she hopes for better times. Although this is, as she well knows, a devolved matter, the Government are ready and happy to co-operate with the Administration when it is formed.

Jonathan Edwards: What consideration have the Government given to developments in currency levels? We live in an age in which sterling is devaluing. The harder the Brexit, the more sterling will have to devalue. The US dollar, on the other hand, is likely to strengthen as a result of Trump's expansionary fiscal policy, and the Fed has increased interest rates. Oil is traded in dollars, and the gas price is pegged to oil, so those two developments inevitably mean that energy prices in the UK will increase significantly. What are the Government going to do to mitigate that?

Mr Hurd: As I said earlier, I do not think that anyone can be under any illusions; the Government are very serious in their intention to make the energy market work more effectively for all. We are all clear that it does not work effectively for all, and the steps that the Government will take will be set out in a consumer Green Paper very shortly.

I was talking about the Government's performance against the 2025 milestone that we have set, and I stated that the percentage of homes rated band D or higher has improved from 29% in 2010 to 59% in 2014. That represents approximately 780,000 fewer fuel-poor homes rated E, F or G in 2014 compared with the position in 2010. I hope that the House will welcome that. In terms of the trajectory of improvement, there were 174,000 fewer E, F or G-rated homes in 2014 than there were in 2013, which shows that existing policies are making a difference. As an example, since the scheme started in 2013, approximately 700,000 measures have been installed in 500,000 low-income households as a result of the energy company obligation. That is part of a total of 1.6 million homes that have been improved under ECO.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): My constituents in South Leicestershire want to know that the Government are doing everything they can to ensure that the energy market works for all of us, whether we are in South Leicestershire or across the United Kingdom. Does my hon. Friend share my view that energy companies should be expected to treat all their customers fairly, not just those who decide to switch?

Mr Hurd: I agree with my hon. Friend. We all know from our constituents about the stress that is caused by anxiety about fuel. I represent a relatively affluent constituency in London, but the statistics show that 8% of my constituents qualify as fuel-poor. This issue affects constituencies across the country. I certainly give my hon. Friend that assurance, and I hope that he will be very satisfied by the material in the consumer Green Paper that will be published imminently.

Recognising that improving household energy efficiency is the most sustainable long-term solution to tackling fuel poverty, we are not complacent, and we are going further to take action. Today, the Electricity and Gas (Energy Company Obligation) (Amendment) Order is being debated in the House of Lords. It will extend the scheme from 1 April 2017 to 30 September 2018. Should the scheme proceed as planned, we expect more than 500,000 homes to be improved over the coming 18 months. The order will also reform the energy company obligation so that 70% of the support available under it will be directed at low-income homes. That represents a real-terms

increase from £310 million to £450 million per year, which will be invested in improving the energy efficiency of homes that most need support.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I have no doubt about the Minister's personal commitment to this agenda, but I wonder why the Government will not make energy efficiency into a national infrastructure priority. Why is energy efficiency not part of the national infrastructure assessment? That would be the way to scale up and meet the ambition he claims the Government have.

Mr Hurd: It is not a claim about ambition; the ambition is set out in long-term statutory targets. The figures I have given show that these are substantial investments. As I will come on to clarify, there is some £770 million of support for low-income and vulnerable consumers in the financial year 2017-18, so there is no shortage of ambition or of investment. The hon. Lady and I share a strong belief in the importance of energy efficiency. I am trying to stress that what we are doing will increasingly focus on the most vulnerable, and, with public finances constrained, that must be the right priority.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): May I welcome the efforts that the Government have made and their clear success in improving energy efficiency? My hon. Friend is so right to highlight the fact that making the obvious saving of getting people to spend less on energy through using less is much more important than the amount we give people to subsidise their energy costs or any intervention we make in the market to cap energy costs.

Mr Hurd: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. As I have said, previously, he is one of the most thoughtful Members of the House on this subject. He will know that we are on the cusp of something very interesting in our relationship with energy and our ability to manage it more intelligently. Such an opportunity must be just as much available to well-to-do people as it is to those struggling with their bills, and that must be a priority for us. That is partly why I stressed the point that the reforms we are making to the existing policy instruments will increasingly focus on the most vulnerable and the poorest in our communities.

However important it is to improve the energy efficiency of people's homes, it will inevitably take time, and Government recognise that people also need immediate support with energy bills. We therefore have in place the second pillar of the strategy, the warm home discount. This scheme now provides over 2 million low-income and vulnerable households with a £140 rebate off their energy bill each winter, when temperatures are lowest and bills are highest.

Together the schemes mean that, as I have said, there will be at least £770 million of support for low-income and vulnerable consumers during the financial year 2017-18. This is a significant level of support for households across the country. Other policies will also make a contribution, such as the prepayment safeguard tariff, which I hope the House welcomes, and the roll-out of smart meters. Smart meters are regularly debated in this place, and the evidence is already showing the consumer

popularity of this technology and its ability to help people save money and manage their energy use in a smarter way.

Making progress cannot be just about subsidy; regulation will play an important role as we take action to ensure that tenants can live in a home that keeps them comfortably warm. The private rented sector regulations will target the least efficient F and G-rated properties from 2018 by requiring landlords to improve those properties to at least a band E, unless a valid exemption applies. The Department is currently considering options for the implementation of the regulations, with a view to ensuring that they can be implemented effectively by April 2018.

Of course, there is more work to be done. One key area will be to improve targeting on the households most in need. The Digital Economy Bill, which is currently going through Parliament, will be important in that regard, as it will make available better data on householders and properties. We believe that that will in turn reduce the costs that energy suppliers face in identifying the households most in need, and allow more measures to be installed for the same cost.

The actions I have described are all led by the Government. However, fuel poverty is a problem for all of society, and the Government cannot tackle it alone. That is why partnership is a key theme of the fuel poverty strategy. It is important for the Government to play a leadership role, but also to work in partnership with local government, businesses and the charitable sector. Only by making the most of the varied skills and resources of each of those partners will we, collaboratively, be able to tackle fuel poverty.

Caroline Lucas: According to the Government's own statistics, the EU ecodesign directive has helped households, small businesses and industry to save thousands on the cost of energy. Indeed, the average annual saving from ecodesign policies for homes is expected to be £153 by 2020, which is 20% of the average annual energy bill. Will the Minister assure us that such rules on energy efficiency will continue to be implemented and updated both during and after our renegotiation with the EU?

Mr Hurd: I certainly agree with the hon. Lady about the importance of good design. In fact, some of the most important progress we have made as a country on energy efficiency has been through building regulations and standards for the quality of our homes and offices. The Government remain ambitious in that respect, and she will know how important that is. She will know that I obviously cannot at this stage clarify our intentions post-Brexit, because that is tied up in a series of wider issues, but I hope I can reassure her that we understand completely the importance of continued ambition in this area. We are very clear that there remains considerable scope for harnessing creativity and innovation in using design to improve standards, which will in turn reduce costs.

Lady Hermon: The Minister is commenting on the need to work in partnership, and I absolutely agree. May I just point out that the warm home discount scheme does not apply in Northern Ireland, which makes fuel poverty there even worse? In partnership with the incoming Administration in Northern Ireland, will the Minister pledge to prioritise the need to introduce

the warm home discount scheme in Northern Ireland, even if that means that the Government in Westminster have to provide additional funding to the Northern Ireland Executive?

Mr Hurd: I listened very carefully to the hon. Lady, but the bottom line is that this is a devolved matter. I am more than happy to discuss the fuel poverty strategy with counterparts in Northern Ireland, but it is categorically a devolved matter.

I was talking about partnerships, and I am glad that the House has filled up a little—when we started it was a little bare—because I am looking forward to hearing from hon. Members about their experience of what is happening with partnerships in their constituencies, including what is and is not working, and more widely about what is going on in their constituencies to help bring about change to support households that need support.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): The Minister is talking about partnership at the local level. A huge variety of organisations in Greenwich and Woolwich are working on this very issue, not least South East London Community Energy. Is the Department giving any thought to how such organisations can link up with local authorities to avoid the fragmentation that can exist at the local level, and ensure they work in partnership to target people who need their help the most?

Mr Hurd: I am very sincere in what I say about partnerships—when I was the Minister for Civil Society, it was absolutely core to our approach—so we are very keen to get good information about what is working and what is not working with partnerships, because they are easy to talk about, but they are actually quite hard to implement in practice. We are doing some work with local authorities, but the hon. Gentleman has made an important point about the sharing of knowledge and information so that we can get a better understanding of what works. Some of this stuff is quite complex in relation to breaking down the social barriers to people accepting help when it is offered.

James Heappey: The hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) quite rightly said that we must be ambitious in the way we design buildings, and I could not agree more, although I am not sure that this is really connected to Brexit. The fact is that it is not merely the affordability of purchasing or renting a building that is so important, but the affordability of the operation of that building thereafter. By having good design principles for energy efficiency and insulation in its design process, we can make a building more affordable to live or work in, rather than simply making it more affordable to buy in the first place.

On co-operation and partnerships, what are the Minister's plans for using the data owned by the Data Communications Company from smart meters not only to nudge people to switch tariffs, but to make the data available to other organisations that could advise people on emerging technologies, such as demand management, so that they can load shift to minimise their bills in that way?

Mr Hurd: My hon. Friend makes important points not only about the importance of good design and the opportunities attached to it, but about the potential for data to make us more efficient in targeting support and to help us develop the smarter system that he talks about so eloquently. He will know that there are tremendous sensitivities around the sharing of data, towards which the Government have to take an extremely responsible attitude, but he is right about the opportunities. What he talks about is under active consideration, as he knows.

I ought to bring my remarks to a close so that colleagues can contribute to the debate, but I want to bring us back to why we are here today. Fuel poverty affects households in all our constituencies and it is a problem that we should work together to solve collectively. The fuel poverty strategy made it clear that the Government are committed to ensuring that there is sufficient parliamentary scrutiny of fuel poverty through the means of this annual debate, so I welcome the views of the hon. Members who are in the Chamber.

As I have suggested in my opening remarks, it is clear that we have made progress, not least in setting up, after too long, the much-needed strategic framework and statutory targets that will drive progress and ambition through successive Governments. The numbers show that since 2010 this Government and the previous Government have made progress, but the social challenge we face is very stubborn indeed. I reassure the House that the Government remain extremely committed not just to delivering on our manifesto commitment, but to keeping the country on track to meeting the 2030 target, however challenging.

2.21 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): I am delighted to be debating such an important issue with the Minister in this, our first debate together in this Chamber. I welcome the comments he has made thus far.

As Members are aware, this debate is a statutory requirement. As such, it is a prime opportunity to examine the efficacy of the Government's actions to date in tackling fuel poverty. As the Minister has said, it is an opportunity for Members to share experiences from their own constituencies on this matter.

My local authority has been championing its own fuel poverty strategy. "A Fair Energy Deal for Salford" is one campaign that it is working on with partners such as National Energy Action, energy companies, registered social landlords and landlords in the private rented sector to obtain a pledge to reduce the number of prepayment meters and replace them with standard meters. A shocking 22% of households in Salford have prepayment meters, whereas the national average is 15.1%, as the Minister knows.

In addition, the ability of my local authority to assist vulnerable households has been extended. It launched the "Warm Salford" campaign in 2015, which provides additional grants to give vulnerable households better access to energy company obligation products or to assist those who are vulnerable, but who do not meet the criteria of the national schemes.

We also launched the Warm Salford Referral Network in October 2014, which brings together a partnership of local authorities, the NHS and third-sector partners.

It aims to reach those who are most vulnerable to fuel poverty. The good news is that from 2015 to December 2016, more than 310 vulnerable households were referred to it, given advice and referred on for the help they needed to access local, regional and national schemes.

Despite that positive news, 11,333 homes—that is 10.8% of Salford's households—are still living in fuel poverty. Nationally, despite similar action by other local authorities, more than 4 million families and households are living in fuel poverty in the UK. That is 15 homes in every 100. Members from all parts of the House will no doubt have been contacted by their constituents about fuel poverty. If not, I suggest that they watch the film "I, Daniel Blake", which shows in painful detail the desperation of one family trying to warm themselves on tea lights in a plant pot because they cannot afford to top up the prepayment meter.

I met one such constituent in Salford—a mother who was living in poorly maintained private sector accommodation, with small children sleeping beside walls covered in black mould. There was not enough money for that mother to pay the bills or even turn the heating on to alleviate the damp conditions. The desperation in that mother's eyes when she told me she just could not cope any more, as I tried to find help out there, will haunt me forever.

Sadly, that is not a stand-alone case. A cold, poorly insulated home does not just mean that lots of heat is wasted, resulting in a high bill; it means people getting ill, repeated visits to the doctor, a much longer recovery time and, ultimately, greater pressure on the NHS.

Jonathan Edwards: If I heard the hon. Lady correctly, she said that 15% of households in the UK live in fuel poverty. In Wales, the figure is considerably worse at well over a third. The Welsh Government have failed to make any inroads into that over the past 20 years or so, despite Wales being an energy-rich nation and a substantial exporter of electricity. Does she agree that for the people of Wales, at least part of the answer should be Welsh communities getting control over their own energy resources?

Rebecca Long Bailey: The hon. Gentleman makes a very interesting point. There is scope for communities to regain control of their energy supplies in the longer term. That is certainly something the Government should look at. There are a number of other important points that I would like the Minister to address today, so I will continue with my submission.

The health impacts of fuel poverty are worst for those who are most vulnerable—for example, disabled people who find it difficult to move around and do not get the chance to warm up; young people, who run twice the risk of developing a respiratory condition such as asthma; and adolescents, who face a fivefold increase in the likelihood of mental illness. Evidence also highlights that infants living in cold conditions have a 30% greater risk of admission to hospital or primary care facilities. Older people also face a significantly high risk, as the Marmot review team highlighted, stating that they are almost three times more likely to suffer from coughing, wheezing and respiratory illness.

Sir John Hills, professor of social policy at the London School of Economics, states that there is a body of persuasive evidence that links low temperatures with a

number of health impacts, ranging from minor infections to serious medical conditions that can ultimately prove fatal. Sadly, that has proven to be the case, with the NEA finding that an average of over 8,000 people in England and Wales die each winter because they cannot keep their homes warm at a reasonable cost. That estimate includes eight attributable deaths in my constituency of Salford and Eccles—eight deaths.

James Heappey: The shadow Secretary of State makes an important and compelling point on the importance of heat to providing a healthy home. Does she agree that one solution is to give more encouragement to heat networks, particularly those that take waste heat from industry or business and use it to heat homes in the immediate vicinity, as I believe happens at MediaCity in Salford in her own constituency?

Rebecca Long Bailey: The hon. Gentleman makes another important point. That is certainly something that the Government should be giving due consideration to.

James Heappey: They are. They are encouraging it.

Rebecca Long Bailey: They need to give greater consideration to it and provide greater investment. I will move on.

Fuel poverty has a greater social impact. Children who live in cold homes see an impact on their ability to achieve, whether because of illness or simply because of a poor quality home environment. The financial and emotional stress it can place on families can damage relationships and lead to long-term stress-related mental health issues.

I am concerned that, although some work has been done in this area, the fact remains that the number of homes in fuel poverty has slowly been creeping up. The fuel poverty gap, which is a measure of the difference between a household's energy bill and what it can afford to pay, increased from £235 in 2003 to £371 in 2014. At the same time, we have seen stagnating wages, or a lost decade in earnings as the Bank of England has termed it. What is more worrying is that after the recent Budget, the Institute for Fiscal Studies stated that, on the Government's current economic trajectory, average wages in 2022 will be worse in real terms than before the financial crash. The Minister will appreciate that as inflation pushes up, the differential between price increases and wage growth will continue to close. Even if energy prices are capped, which I know is an option being considered by the Government, the amount that families have to spend on bills will still get smaller and smaller.

It is not enough, therefore, simply to tackle fuel poverty as a stand-alone issue. The Government must tackle the causes of fuel poverty. Without investing in the tools that businesses need to drive up wages and productivity, wages will continue to stagnate in the long term. Sadly, in the Budget we did not see the investment required from the Government that would in any way go towards bringing us in line with other industrial countries. It is therefore no shock that Britain is the only large developed country where wages fell even as economic growth returned after the crash. I digress slightly, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Caroline Lucas: I will gently move the hon. Lady back to energy efficiency. She is making a very compelling public health case for the need to tackle energy efficiency and fuel poverty. Does she share my frustration that the national infrastructure assessment is a golden opportunity with respect to putting energy efficiency front and centre in the Government's low carbon green strategy and industrial strategy? They should do that, because it could help to sort out not only the health crisis, but the climate crisis.

Rebecca Long Bailey: I completely agree with the hon. Lady. I share her frustrations and I will come on to that point shortly.

Looking at the efficacy of the Government's fuel poverty initiatives thus far, they made a manifesto commitment to install one low-cost insulation measure in 1 million homes over the five years of the parliamentary term. That is welcome, but I suggest the Government need to be far more ambitious. Labour, for example, delivered 2.5 million insulation measures installed in homes in just one single year.

Turning to the funding through the warm home discount, whereby money is given as relief to bill payers, this is commendable and it should certainly continue, but it is physically insulating homes themselves that will provide the long-term solution. On the energy company obligation, the main mechanism by which the Government take action on fuel poverty, it has a clear pathway only to next year. There is currently no clear indication of what will happen to the obligation after 2018 and the Government's consultation on its future has not been forthcoming. I would be grateful if the Minister provided in this debate an update on progress on that area.

The Minister will be absolutely distraught to hear that the UK ranked 14 out of 16 western European countries for fuel poverty, and ranked bottom for the proportion of people who cannot afford to adequately heat their home. I think he would probably agree that this is not a brilliant record for the country with the fifth-largest economy in the world. A helpful comparison to draw is Sweden, where incomes are similar to the UK's but winters are much colder and gas is more expensive. One might think that Sweden would have a significant fuel poverty problem that far outstripped that of the UK, which by comparison has mild winters, but levels of fuel poverty in Sweden are approximately half those found in the UK. The major difference is that Swedish homes are properly insulated. A typical Swedish wall is three times more energy efficient. A commitment to that kind of innovation, along with providing the necessary funding, will truly tackle fuel poverty.

The Labour party is keen to make that commitment as part of its industrial strategy to end social injustice and to build a world-leading UK-based renewables and energy efficiency sector with UK-based supply chains. Labour agrees with the NEA, and the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), which states that the National Infrastructure Commission and the UK Government must act on the strong case for domestic energy efficiency to be regarded as a hugely important infrastructure priority. The Minister might wish to outline the Government's position on that and whether he agrees with Labour.

[Rebecca Long Bailey]

Economic analysis by the well-regarded Frontier Economics suggests that the net present value of investing in insulating homes could be as valuable as the HS2 project. Cambridge Econometrics found that for each pound spent on insulating homes £1.12 is generated for the Treasury and £3 for the economy in GDP, and 42 pence is saved by the NHS. It is clear that investing in insulation has a positive effect not just for those in fuel poverty or for climate change, but for the wider economy. Unfortunately, however, the fact is that if we compare major insulation measures being installed today to 10 years ago under the previous Labour Government, there has been a huge 88% fall. Put another way, the long-term solution to fuel poverty gets 12% of the support that it originally received.

The fuel poor, by definition, are not in a place to insulate their own homes. It is therefore incumbent on the Government to step in. It is also important for the Government to recognise the wider benefits a real fuel efficiency infrastructure plan would have for all income groups, industry and the wider economy. A little more support from the Government, both to those affected by fuel poverty and to industries waiting to blossom in the renewables sector, could unleash untold economic and social benefits.

To conclude, the Government's intentions, and those of Ministers, might be good, but there is still a mountain of work to be done. The Labour party is open to working across the House to end fuel poverty for all our constituents. I do hope the Minister has listened to my concerns and will respond accordingly.

2.35 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I welcome this debate. I hope the Minister, in summing up, will reflect on the impact of high energy costs and high energy demand on the highlands and islands of Scotland in particular. As a highlands MP, I know that fuel poverty is a massive issue.

We need the Government to listen to our story, appreciate our particular situation and work with all of us to deliver fairness in energy charging that can offer hope that, working together, we can drive consumers out of fuel poverty. According to Scottish Government statistics, 34% of Scottish households are in fuel poverty, while for the highlands the figure is 56%; for the western isles, it is 59% and for Orkney it is 65%. Those are shocking statistics. More than half of households in much of the highlands and about two thirds of households in Orkney are in fuel poverty. Can we in this House accept those statistics?

I have to say that there have been times in the past when the House listened to the legitimate grievances of highlanders and islanders, and took action to improve our situation. Just over 100 years ago, in 1886, the House passed an Act that for the first time gave security of tenure to crofters. The clearances and the removal of people, often in a brutal way, was stopped by the crofting Act's coming into force. In 1965, the Government established the Highlands and Islands development board, now known as Highlands and Islands Enterprise—a venture instrumental in reversing decades of economic decline in the highlands and islands.

I ask the House today to recognise the unfairness in the market for electricity costs that penalise highlanders and islanders. I am asking for the same consideration that was shown when the highlands required Government intervention in the past. We need it now to create fairness in electricity pricing. I accept that those of us from these areas live in some of the most beautiful parts of not just Scotland and the UK, but the world. But we cannot heat our homes with the breath-taking scenery. It is perhaps an enchanting landscape, but often there are biting winds, driving rain and long dark cold winter nights. The aesthetic beauty of the highlands can gladden the heart, but it will not deliver warmth to a pensioner at an affordable cost over a long winter.

We hear repeatedly that the Government want to help those who are just about managing. In many cases in the highlands, the cost of heating means that too many of our people are having to make the choice between putting food on the table and heating their homes. I mentioned that 56% of highland households are in fuel poverty, but 74% of our elderly population are in fuel poverty, of whom 34% are in extreme fuel poverty. I ask the House to dwell on these statistics and then consider what we can do to challenge this situation.

On the island of Skye, electricity came with the construction of the Storr Lochs hydro scheme in the early 1950s. The facility, apart from a small upgrade over the last few years, will now be virtually fully depreciated. It will be producing very cheap, almost free electricity on to the grid: cheap electricity that islanders then have to pay a premium to get back. It is simply an injustice that in an area of the highest levels of fuel poverty, where we produce cheap electricity, we are being overcharged. That is the reality.

There is the broader point that Scotland is an energy-rich country, whether from fossil fuels or our ability to deliver renewable energy today and in the future. Our unique characteristics as an energy producer should not be trapping our people in fuel poverty. Let us not forget that Westminster has extracted a bounty of £360 billion in taxation receipts from North sea oil since the 1970s. Where is the long-run benefit of this dividend? Why is it that the citizens of an energy-rich country such as Scotland, which has produced a bonanza for the Government, suffer fuel poverty to such an extent? We need to take into account the human cost of this failure to tackle head on the root cause of fuel poverty—high and unfair pricing through the lack of a universal market as one issue.

The charity Turn2us has found that one in two low-income households are struggling to afford their energy costs, despite being in work. Among the hardest hit are people with disabilities, with more than two in three of them, 67%, reporting their struggles. Families are also hard hit: almost two thirds of working parents, 65%, are unable to meet these costs. Worryingly, of the households that are struggling with energy costs, nearly half have done so for more than a year.

The knock-on effect is severe, with a third forced to skip meals and over a fifth experiencing stress and other mental health problems. Some of the comments made to Turn2us included these:

“The bills are killing me, sometimes I have to contemplate paying all the rent or heating my home... There are many pensioners like myself that don't qualify for any help but still have to decide whether to heat or eat... Starve or freeze? Either way you get ill,

can't work, eat or pay any bills... No lights only candles, only Hoover once a week, only use washing machine once a week, no heating, meals that cook quickly."

This is not an abstract discussion. These are comments from real people who are struggling on a daily basis. I remind Members that 70% of elderly highlanders are in fuel poverty. That is why people get angry when they see a lack of action. When we hear hon. Members questioning the retention of the triple lock on future rises for the state pension, many of us proclaim that this will not happen in our name. I became an MP to stand up for my constituents and I cannot accept that so many highlanders are in fuel poverty. There is a debate on Scotland's constitutional future, and we will have a vote on our independence. Let me say that in an independent Scotland, we would recognise our responsibilities to those in fuel poverty and would take action to eradicate it.

The UK has a universal market for postal delivery, as for many other services. People pay the same price whether they live in Skye or Somerset, in Ardnamurchan or Avon, in Gairloch or Gloucester. Why is that not the case for electricity distribution charges? Why are highlanders and islanders facing a premium in electricity distribution charges just because of where they live?

The right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) said in her capacity as energy Minister in 2015:

"It is not right that people face higher electricity costs just because of where they live."

I commend the right hon. Lady for those remarks, but if they are to mean anything they have to be matched by actions from this Government. The issue is not just about the highlands and islands; there are 14 regional markets throughout the UK with different levels of network charges. It is not about price competition either, but about a regulated charge varying from region to region through a price control framework. The reality is that if people live in the highlands and islands, they will pay for the privilege—courtesy of the UK Government.

Electricity distribution charges for the north of Scotland are 84% higher than they are for London. Fuel poverty is exacerbated by the lack of a universal market. Westminster calls the tune; highlanders and islanders pay the price. We pay a high price for transmission charges, but we also have a high rate of energy consumption. The highlands and islands are noted for windy and wet conditions. It is not unusual for people in the highlands to have their heating on all year round. Ofgem noted in a study on the matter that households in the north of Scotland would benefit from a cost reduction of about £60 a year if there was a universal network charge. Sixty pounds would make a significant impact on someone on a low income or a pensioner.

In the highlands and islands, not only are people faced with high transmission charges, but many consumers suffer from a lack of choice in energy provision. Most households cannot benefit from a gas grid connection; the choice is often between electricity and domestic heating oil. The hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards), who is no longer in his place, noted that prices will go up substantially because of currency movements in the recent past. With such limitations, the last thing we need is price discrimination—for that is what it is—being foisted on us.

Where people live should not result in their being penalised by having to pay higher network charges. Where is the "one nation" that the UK Government speak of so fondly? *[Interruption.]* I notice that the Under-Secretary of State is laughing. I will happily give way to him if he wants to explain why he thinks this is a laughing matter; it is no laughing matter to people in the highlands and islands.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Jesse Norman): I am delighted to intervene on the hon. Gentleman to ask how he can seriously invoke the principle of "one nation", to which my party has been an adherent for 100 years, when he is a Scottish National party Member who is campaigning to remove his country from this nation.

Ian Blackford: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman has risen to explain that, but he cannot get away from the fact that he sat there and smugly laughed when I made my point about the one nation. The point I am making is that it is your Government—I apologise for using the word "your", Madam Deputy Speaker. It is the Government who are responsible for over-charging highlanders, because they will not recognise that we should have a universal market. It is the Government of the United Kingdom who should address that. Laughing, which is what the hon. Gentleman did, at highlanders and islanders is not acceptable. I hope people in Scotland were watching what happened on the Government Front Bench just now.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): As ever, the hon. Gentleman is standing up to make an impassioned, eloquent and compassionate speech, but may I pick him up on one point? He mentioned "one nation", and my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary intervened. Earlier in the hon. Gentleman's speech, he mentioned the triple lock. Is that not something for which to thank the Government, rather than castigate them? Will he acknowledge when the Government get things right, as well as challenge them when he perceives there are errors?

Ian Blackford: I will happily do so, and I have spoken about the triple lock on many occasions, but we have had debates here in the recent past in which many Members have questioned continuing with the triple lock. I am asking the Government to commit to retaining that triple lock in order to drive pensioners out of poverty. I commend the Government because they did the right thing in that particular case, but I hope that their commitment to the triple lock will be sustained so that it continues to drive pensioners out of poverty.

When they are right, I happily give credit to the Government, but I do not take kindly to Front-Bench Members laughing when I am standing up for my constituents in pointing out that the definition of "one nation" that the Government talk about is inappropriate when highlanders and islanders are not being treated fairly. There should be equity and fairness, but they do not exist in the UK today.

The highlands and islands of Scotland experience the harshest climatic conditions in the UK and record levels of fuel poverty. There is far greater, area-wide dependence

[*Ian Blackford*]

on the use of electricity for heating as well as lighting, but the standard unit price charged is 2p per kilowatt-hour more than in most other parts of the UK, and 6p or more for the various “economy” tariffs on offer. Perhaps 2p per kilowatt-hour does not sound much, but it is a price premium of 15%. That is what this Government are doing to people in the highlands and islands. They are punishing people there on the basis of where they live, despite the fact that, in many cases, we produce the cheapest electricity, as we do in Skye. The Government are culpable over that, which is why I am asking the Minister to address the point when he sums up later this afternoon. That price for living in the highlands and islands is set by the Government, and it is not acceptable.

On top of all this, there is far greater reliance in off-gas areas on using domestic heating oil and solid fuel, which pushes up household heating costs further still. As a result, domestic energy bills in off-gas areas are, on average, £1,000 more per annum than the £1,369 dual fuel national average for 2014. Figures from the Lochalsh & Skye Energy Advice Service in my constituency suggest that the average total heating bills in Skye and Lochalsh amount to an eye-watering £2,218 per annum; for those whose primary heating is from oil, the average is as high as £2,519. To cap it all, electricity customers with prepayment meters, often the least well off, not only have to pay additional standing charges, but are discovering that their notional right to change to a cheaper supplier has become impracticable.

The Government must also accept that having 14 regional markets in the UK, with consumers in the highlands and islands paying a premium, is discriminatory. Many Members claim that responsibility for fuel poverty is devolved, which of course it is, but we have no control over the pricing or the regulatory environment; we can deal only with the consequences of fuel poverty that are symptoms of a market that is wholly under the jurisdiction of Westminster.

Our Government in Edinburgh have taken a range of actions to mitigate the effects of fuel poverty, but we need the tools that would come with having greater powers—notably through independence—to be able to deal fully with the circumstances that lead to fuel poverty. We are having to clear up the effects of the lack of a universal market and the pricing regime. Tackling fuel poverty has been a priority for the SNP Government, and by 2021 we will have committed over £1 billion to making Scottish homes warmer and cheaper to heat.

The financial support to tackle fuel poverty is increasing. The Scottish Government’s budget for fuel poverty and energy efficiency measures in 2017-18 will be £114 million, an increase of more than 11% on the previous year. An independent review of the way in which fuel poverty is defined has been undertaken by a panel of four academic experts in the light of concerns that current definitions may be impeding efforts to target those most in need. In the meantime, there is a new pilot programme in rural areas offering targeted support to cut energy bills.

Although fuel prices are beyond our control and fuel price moves can militate against our efforts to reduce fuel poverty, it is welcome that, owing to relatively stable market conditions, the number of people in fuel poverty in Scotland has fallen by 100,000. That reduction was heavily influenced by the measures that we have

introduced. However, it is worth noting that fuel poverty in Scotland would be at only 8% if fuel prices had only risen in line with inflation between 2002 and 2015. High and rising pricing is our biggest enemy—and I use that word advisedly.

Scottish Government action has been commended by, among others, the Scottish Fuel Poverty Strategic Working Group in a recent report, but more needs to be done in a holistic manner to tackle the scourge of fuel poverty. New affordable homes are part of that mix, and this year the Scottish Government will invest £590 million to increase the supply of affordable homes in Scotland. Targeted financial support of £1,900 for low-income families through the Best Start grant also helps—support, incidentally, that is £1,400 higher than what is on offer from the UK Government.

We are taking our responsibilities seriously. Through those measures, through such initiatives as supporting a real living wage and through the recently published Child Poverty (Scotland) Bill, we will use our powers to improve the conditions of many of those who are suffering fuel poverty in Scotland.

Finally, I want to reflect on the recently announced 14.9% increase in electricity pricing by SSE and on the fact that a 5% increase in prices pushes an additional 46,000 people in Scotland into fuel poverty. In the past, I have commended SSE for its customer service and the astonishing way in which its staff respond when bad weather leads to power interruptions, as it sometimes does during the winter months in the highlands. The speed of the response of the company and its customer service have been exemplary. Notwithstanding that commendation, however, it should be recognised that being effectively a near-monopoly supplier in the highlands and islands also brings a duty to act in a spirit of social responsibility. After all, in many respects SSE is a public utility in all but name. A price rise of this magnitude is simply not justified; the company has let itself down.

We await SSE’s financial results for the year to March 2017, but its interim statement forecast a year of growth and dividend increases. In the year to March 2016, its dividends to shareholders increased by 18.3% to £708 million. I would caution the company to ensure that it behaves in a socially responsible manner at all times. Increasing rewards to shareholders so generously does not sit well with the reality of so many of its customers being in fuel poverty, and now being pushed further into fuel poverty by this price increase. I am not against the company’s making a reasonable return on its investments—it must generate sufficient cash to invest in future electricity generation—but it must also balance the needs of all its stakeholders. In particular, affordability and the ability to pay bills must be at the heart of its thinking when it is addressing executive pay and shareholder rewards.

I welcome today’s debate, but we need action from the UK Government, most notably on the creation of a universal market. People should not be penalised because of where they live. Equity and fairness must be introduced, and it is time for the Government to take appropriate action.

2.55 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I want to approach today’s debate from the perspective of older people and those who are particularly vulnerable

as a result of fuel poverty. I want to be a voice for the people in Scotland who are disproportionately affected by fuel poverty, as others are across the United Kingdom. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) for talking about the difficulties faced by those in his constituency and throughout the highlands.

In Scotland, 58% of single pensioner households are in fuel poverty, as are 44% of pensioner couples. The UK as a whole has one of the highest rates of fuel poverty and one of the most inefficient housing stocks in Europe. Fuel poverty rates are higher in Scotland. It is an indisputable fact that more often than not it is colder in Braemar than in Bournemouth, and that means that houses must be heated from a lower ambient temperature and for longer periods throughout the year.

Today in London the sun is shining, and although it is cold, older and vulnerable people could probably venture outside. This morning I received two picture messages showing snow lying on the ground outside my Wishaw home. Not many older or vulnerable people will be venturing outside there until it thaws. They will need to heat their homes in the meantime, and the cost of heating those homes is a burden that many of them simply cannot afford. That is shameful. When people are old, infirm or immobile, the cost of heating can be excessive, especially for those on low fixed incomes.

Many in fuel poverty will be using prepayment meters to pay for the cost of heating their homes. Consumers who are in arrears with gas or electricity bills can be switched to prepayment meters. According to Ofgem, more than 90% of those consumers are currently not repaying a debt, and are therefore unable to switch to different tariffs that could cut their fuel costs. Switching is absolutely impossible for them.

There are two main ways of tackling fuel poverty. One is to make homes more energy-efficient, and, as housing is a devolved competence, the Scottish Government have poured significant resources into making homes more affordable to heat.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Is the hon. Lady aware that electricity prices have risen by about 125% overall, and gas prices have risen by about 75%? More important from the point of view of older people, the Government have withdrawn their green deal. Houses could have been insulated against cold weather. I hope that the Minister will respond to that point when he winds up the debate.

Marion Fellows: I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that point. Thank goodness I live in Scotland, because the Scottish Government are pouring even more money into making homes more energy-efficient. I myself have benefited from a deal whereby my loft was insulated at no cost, because by that time both my husband and I were of pensionable age. In fact, I think that it was only my husband who was of pensionable age. May I make a plea for that?

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): Yeah, yeah.

Marion Fellows: The hon. Gentleman is cheering me on from the Benches behind me.

By 2021, the Scottish Government will have spent more than £1 billion to ensure that Scottish homes and other buildings are warmer. Since 2008, more than 1 million energy efficiency measures have been installed in nearly 1 million households across Scotland, and the proportion of homes with the three highest energy ratings has increased by 71 per cent since 2010.

Scottish local authorities have also had an additional £10 million this winter to ensure that homes are energy efficient. The Scottish Government do not do that because it is a nice thing to do; they do it because it is absolutely necessary and imperative, to protect the most vulnerable people living in Scotland. Also, rather than simply throwing money at the problem, the Scottish Government have taken a consultative approach, working with many independent stakeholders and acting on their recommendations. My hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber mentioned the independent Scottish Fuel Poverty Strategic Working Group, and it has commended the Scottish Government; I will come back to that later.

Progress has been made. In 2015 almost 100,000 fewer households were in fuel poverty than in 2014. Energy to heat our home is a basic human right that no one should go without. That is especially true for older and vulnerable people in our society. Action has been, and will continue to be, taken in Scotland during the course of this Parliament, and a warm homes Bill will be introduced to set a new target for tackling fuel poverty so that it may be challenged head on.

I received an email from Age Scotland this morning. It welcomes the fact that the Scottish Government have designated energy efficiency as a national infrastructure priority. They have also given a commitment to invest half a billion pounds over the lifetime of this Parliament to tackle fuel poverty and promote energy efficiency. That is crucial, and it is what the UK Government need to do for homes in England and Wales, and to help in Northern Ireland. I know this does not come under the competency, but the Westminster Government is the largest Government in the UK and they must set an example.

As has been said, rural communities have particular issues with fuel poverty. In Scotland, the fuel poverty rate is 50% in rural areas compared with 32% in towns and cities, and a staggering 71% of homes in the Western Isles are in fuel poverty. Due to the demographics of these islands, pensioners are largely affected. Only this month, on 8 March, the Scottish Government announced a pilot scheme that will see 220 rural households offered support specific to the needs of older people in these islands to cut their energy bills. The pilot and its review will be used to develop the Scottish Government's new fuel poverty strategy, due to be published later this year.

The Scottish Government have made huge efforts to minimise the number of older people affected by fuel poverty but are hampered by realities such as many rural homes being off the mains or off-grid, which means they cannot access gas supplies as the majority of us do—something most of us in this Chamber take for granted.

New powers to the Scottish Parliament will maintain winter fuel payments for pensioners in Scotland. Furthermore, early payments to almost 80,000 pensioners who live off-grid will also be made available so that they can take advantage of lower energy prices available during the summer months. That is a common sense

[*Marion Fellows*]

idea that will help improve the lives of many older people. In addition, the winter fuel payment will be extended to families with children in receipt of the highest care component of disability living allowance.

As I have shown, the Scottish Government are already taking great steps to address fuel poverty. However, only so many powers to do so are located north of the border; the rest lie here at Westminster, and it is therefore here that the responsibility must lie. As has been mentioned, the fuel poverty rate for 2015 would have been 8.4% instead of 31% if fuel prices had only risen with inflation. Instead, the UK Government have allowed corporations to hike up energy prices, to the detriment of vulnerable groups who are in greater need of a warm home—a basic necessity which, let us be honest, can make the difference between life and death. The current cost of fuel poverty to NHS Scotland is calculated at £80 million per annum, and that must be much higher in the rest of the UK.

Increases in prices can outweigh everything that the Scottish Government are trying to do on fuel efficiency. No matter how much the Scottish Government spend, they can still have little impact on fuel prices across the UK. However, a Scottish Government Minister chaired a summit on 14 December last year urging energy companies to make a difference to low-income households living in fuel poverty and facing a poverty premium tax.

James Heapey: The hon. Lady is right that there are ways of insulating people from the volatile cost of energy, the most obvious of which is the electrification of heat. Will she share what the Scottish Government's plans are for delivering that?

Marion Fellows: No, I cannot, because I am not here representing the Scottish Government. The electrification of heat is a joke in some of the far-flung places in the highlands and islands. If we electrify heat, we are then causing more carbon emissions in many regards, depending on what fuel we use. We in Scotland already have huge power resources run by water power, and the Scottish Government only recently opened a new dam that would produce—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Member for Wells (James Heapey) is chuntering from a sedentary position; I beg his pardon, but I can only answer what I have been asked. Recently the Scottish Government opened a new dam, producing power, but we have the real difficulties of getting power from Scotland on to the grid at a reasonable cost.

James Heapey: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Marion Fellows: No, I am sorry, but I will continue my speech.

There are of course other ways that the UK Government can take action. They can increase household incomes, but instead they have allowed wages to stagnate, adopted a false living wage for select age groups, and pushed people further into poverty through their welfare cuts. The truth is that this Government do not do enough to help our most vulnerable people.

The Scottish Government have now taken over control of some of the new welfare powers. They have hit the ground running by doing what they can to support vulnerable groups, and please be assured that the new

Scottish Government welfare powers will be built on a foundation of respect and dignity—things that are severely lacking in the UK welfare regime. For older people, the Scottish Government have launched a campaign to ensure that all groups are able to access the public funds they are entitled to; for example, one third of pensioners are entitled to pension credit but do not claim it. The new best start grant has already been referred to, and the Scottish Government have spent almost £58 million mitigating the impact of Tory austerity cuts to welfare on homes across Scotland. A £7.7 million increase in funding for discretionary housing payments will be made as the Scottish Parliament takes over more welfare powers. Between April 2013 and March 2016, local authorities will have made 321,000 discretionary housing payment awards totalling £129 million.

I can tell the House from personal experience how important these discretionary housing payments and the Scottish welfare fund set up by the Scottish Government to mitigate these cuts were to people when I was a local councillor. Since becoming an MP, I can also tell of the numbers of people attending my surgeries in real poverty, and that impacts especially on their ability to keep their houses warm; they are in real fuel poverty as a direct result of some of the actions taken by this Government.

The Scottish Government have also taken steps to mitigate the impact of the bedroom tax. All of this has helped the most vulnerable groups in Scotland. However—this will come as no surprise to the House—I agree with the First Minister that the Scottish Parliament's finances and powers should be used to tackle poverty at its core, rather than being a plaster over Tory neglect. Given the powers that they currently have, the Scottish Government are doing what they can to alleviate fuel poverty in Scotland. Much of what they have done has helped with energy efficiency, thus reducing bills. The World Health Organisation attributes 30% of preventable deaths to cold and poorly insulated housing. Inroads have been made in Scotland to improve housing. In fact, some new houses were built and allocated recently in my constituency and they have been built to the highest specifications. This will enable the people living in them to spend far less on fuel than is currently the case in most houses across Scotland.

It is imperative that the UK Government urgently address the cost of energy across the UK. The large energy firms must be made to fulfil their social responsibilities. It is shameful that so many folk across the UK have to juggle heating and eating. Rolling out smart meters is not enough when people have no means of keeping warm. The fact that the Minister refers to an annual debate on fuel poverty should give us all pause for thought.

3.10 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I had not intended to speak today because I thought this was going to be a packed debate; that was my misjudgment. This is a crucial debate, however, and I want to add a few words. One of the frustrations that many of us feel is that tackling fuel poverty by investing in energy efficiency can really be a win-win situation in getting people's fuel bills down, tackling climate change and creating jobs. The creation of those jobs has led to the conclusion that by investing in tackling energy efficiency problems we can actually raise more money than we

need to invest. That was rightly mentioned by the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey).

Evidence shows that £3 can be returned to the economy for every £1 invested by central Government, so when the Government say that they cannot afford to invest more in this agenda, it is only right for us to point out that, if the agenda were tackled properly, it could save them money as well as having very real impacts such as reducing the serious harm being done to so many in our communities and preventing premature deaths. So, given that there are so few win-wins in politics, it seems particularly perverse that the Government are turning their back on this one. Taking action in this way would help to ensure that the 2.3 million families living in fuel poverty across the UK had some kind of hope for the future.

We have heard from several hon. Members that fuel poverty is not just an inconvenience; it is nothing less than a national crisis. Forgive me for referencing this for, I think, a third time, but this is so frustrating because we know that we need to scale up investment in energy efficiency, and the national infrastructure process would have been an obvious way to do that. It would be a way to channel funding into this incredibly important area, which otherwise risks being overlooked in many ways.

I want to mention the Committee on Climate Change, whose report last week made it clear that improving energy efficiency through better insulating our homes is key to meeting our climate targets. In that respect, will the Minister give us an indication of when the severely delayed clean growth plan will be published and whether it will include a comprehensive energy efficiency plan, including a statutory commitment to ensuring that all fuel-poor homes have an energy performance rating of at least C by 2030 at the latest?

With one in 10 households living in fuel poverty, it is also a matter of concern that the Government have no scheme for comprehensively insulating fuel-poor homes in England. Meanwhile, the changes being made to the energy company obligation are likely to decrease the support available to fuel-poor households, with those on low incomes unable to replace inefficient gas boilers, for example. We know that 9,000 excess deaths were linked to fuel poverty last winter, and if we are to take seriously the claims being made about the Government's commitment to this issue, we need to know when they will put in place the kind of actions that are needed.

Finally, I want to say a little bit about how people can, to coin a phrase, take back control. That phrase has been used a lot in recent months, and if there is one area of our lives where we should be taking back control, it is in relation to energy. Right now, our energy system is in the hands of the big six, and for ordinary consumers, it can feel very hard to have any kind of leverage. We are always told that we simply have to switch our power supplier, but again, that puts responsibility on the consumer and we are still at the mercy of whatever the different energy companies come up with.

Instead of having the big six, we should have 60,000. We should do what Germany is doing and have real community energy, not just as a nice-to-have extra bit of luxury but as the bread and butter of our energy system. If we were to do that, we could really give people more control over energy. We could ensure that the huge energy companies were not siphoning off big

profits and that investment was going back into the community. We would need to ensure priority access to the grid for community renewables, and a community right of first use—at wholesale, not retail, prices—of the energy generated. We would also need a planning framework that was able to determine locally the degree of community ownership required as a precondition of permitted development, and a right to acquire or own the local distribution network and to sell long consumption—in other words, demand reduction—alongside demand management and renewable energy. I can also imagine a role for the Green Investment Bank, if it was still properly in our hands rather than being flogged off to Macquarie, as seems likely to happen.

We have heard a lot today about the importance of tackling fuel poverty, and that is exactly right. We have also heard a lot about the impact of fuel poverty on our constituents. If we were to take a slightly bolder view, we could solve fuel poverty at the same time as bringing energy properly back into community hands—into the hands of us all—and that is a vision worth fighting for.

3.16 pm

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): We are in a cold homes crisis, with more than 4 million households in fuel poverty across the UK. Across the UK in 2014-2015, there were 43,900 excess winter deaths. According to the World Health Organisation, a minimum of 30% of those deaths resulted from cold homes. In my constituency, there are 7,241 households struggling in fuel poverty. Life in fuel poverty is miserable. No one should be choosing between heating their home and eating. Children should not be growing up in cold, damp rooms. Old people should not have to stay in bed or live in just one room because they cannot warm their house.

This debate is happening because the last Administration's fuel poverty strategy, published in 2015, mandated it to happen. The current statutory target is to lift as many fuel-poor households up to band C energy efficiency standard "as is reasonably practicable" by 2030. This Government's record on fuel poverty and their performance against that target are abysmal and going nowhere fast. The charity National Energy Action estimates that at this rate we will miss the target by 80 years. Yes, 80 years. A baby born today will not see the end of fuel poverty in the UK in her lifetime. That is a scandal. That is approximately calculated by noting that around 30,000 fuel-poor houses per year are being brought up to band C. That is so far from what is needed that I do not know how the Government can defend it.

What response to this striking lack of progress have we had from the Government? They say that they will spend less on energy efficiency measures—measures that are recognised in their own fuel poverty strategy as the most sustainable way to make permanent progress on fuel poverty. Under a Labour Government in 2007, we saw 2.5 million energy efficiency measures implemented in a single year. That number has now fallen off a cliff. Under this Government's policies, we will see 12% of that. Total investment fell by 53% between 2010 and 2015, and England is now the only UK nation without a Government-funded energy efficiency programme. That has not been the case for 30 years.

[Gill Furniss]

The Government lack the necessary political will and determination to address this injustice. It is so frustrating, not just because it condemns thousands of households to continued misery, indignity and ill health, and not just because the youngest, the oldest and the poorest in our society are hit hardest by fuel poverty, but because the solutions are so clearly and obviously sensible.

Properly addressing fuel poverty would ease the burden on the NHS. National Energy Action estimates that £1.6 billion is spent each year on treating the impacts of cold homes. Labour's commitment to insulate 4 million homes would create over 100,000 jobs and apprenticeships, as well as training programmes across every region of the country. Those homes would have reduced energy bills, which is another key driver of fuel poverty. A report by Cambridge Econometrics and Verco found that every £1 invested in an ambitious energy efficiency programme such as Labour's would return £3. The plan would reduce natural gas imports by 26% by 2030 due to reduced demand, save £8 billion a year on energy bills, increase relative GDP by 0.6% by 2030 and reduce carbon emissions.

One of the ways to bring energy efficiency measures to fuel-poor households is through the energy company obligation or ECO. The newly costed ECO will cost £640 million a year—a 42% reduction compared with the previous phase of the programme. While the Government may say that that is more tightly focused on fuel poverty, the reality is a massive funding cut. This Government are betraying those in fuel poverty and snubbing their own legal targets.

A key risk factor for those in fuel poverty is living in a household that is off the gas grid. Non-gas households rely on more expensive fuels, such as electricity and oil, to heat their homes and often live in harder-to-treat, energy-inefficient properties with no central heating or solid walls. Some 20% of fuel-poor households are off the gas grid, yet they have received only 1.4% of the measures under the affordable warmth element of ECO since 2013.

James Heappey: That ties in with the earlier point made by the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows). We could encourage the electrification of heat as a solution for those who are off the gas grid. Heat pumps can operate efficiently and reduce heating costs for those who would otherwise be at the mercy of the oil market. Does the shadow Minister agree that that should be a priority for such customers?

Gill Furniss: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. We must be bold in these areas and consider everything that we possibly can. I thank him for that intervention.

Gas distribution networks, which manage the network infrastructure that transports gas to homes and businesses across GB, should deliver 14,864 new connections to fuel-poor households, but funding for new central heating systems available through the ECO is limited to 4,000 systems, so funding is lacking for over 10,000 households. In the spring Budget, the Chancellor completely failed to act on that and provided no extra funding to ensure that the most affected fuel-poor households are given the support to stay warm. Regrettably, that seems

to be a running theme in the Government's approach to tackling fuel poverty. Given the shortage of funds, I hope the Minister can explain how exactly the Government intend to tackle the off-gas homes that are most at risk of severe fuel poverty.

The warm homes discount is an annual payment of £140 to around 2.1 million households to relieve pressure on their energy bills, but it was revealed last year that only 15% of those in receipt of the discount were actually in fuel poverty. The Treasury, then under the new editor of the *Evening Standard*, said that the system was working, but the scheme's targeting is a total failure. The Minister for Climate Change and Industry said in a Delegated Legislation Committee last year that the Government would address that through better data-sharing in the Digital Economy Bill, but the Government are yet to explain how they will improve targeting.

A co-ordinated, comprehensive approach to fuel poverty at a local level can be key to tackling the cold homes crisis. In its 2015 cold weather plan, Public Health England made it clear that fuel poverty and reducing excess winter illness and death should be deemed core business by health and wellbeing boards and should be included in their strategy plans. However, research has found that 40% of the 152 health and wellbeing boards in England failed to address fuel poverty in their strategies. I have written to my local health and wellbeing board to ask them about its progress on implementing the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines. It replied that the savage cuts to local funding and the lack of Government funding to address fuel poverty directly have made it difficult to implement the NICE guidelines fully. This Government have been standing still on fuel poverty and going backwards on energy efficiency measures to address it.

Mr Jim Cunningham: We debated this matter in the previous Parliament, but we never seem to resolve it. The Prime Minister has hinted that she may put a cap on prices, but if she is going to do that, she should really tackle the big six cartel, which was raised in the House last week. It is not good enough to tell people that they should shop around and get a different supplier—that does not work. It is about time that this Government put their money where their mouth is and tackled the big cartel.

Gill Furniss: My hon. Friend's intervention is timely in that several hon. Members have put that case well. The Labour party's last manifesto proposed to freeze the energy prices of the big six.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): My hon. Friend made an important point about the contribution made by local authorities in drawing together the work that happens at a local level. Does she agree that, to reduce the number of excess winter deaths, it is important at a national level that the Government co-ordinate across Whitehall and that meaningful conversations happen between Departments?

Gill Furniss: That is absolutely the way forward. We should be looking at new build homes that contain all the necessary measures, and many Departments have a part to play in that. Sheffield Heat and Power is good example of how to take waste and turn it into energy.

That is what I mean when I said that we must be bold. We have to take every opportunity and learn lessons from other countries.

James Heapey: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Gill Furniss: No, I must move on.

The Government's flagship green deal policy is universally recognised as a failure. It was well intentioned, but we warned at the time that implementation was going very badly. By the end, the green deal improved only 15,000 homes at a cost of £17,000 per home. No replacement policy is in sight so far as I am aware.

The Government have cancelled the zero-carbon homes initiative. By contrast, Labour would build 1 million new carbon-neutral homes and insulate 4 million more. Labour would roll out a £90 million "homes for heroes" programme that offers free home insulation to disabled veterans. The Labour party has committed to making energy efficiency a key infrastructure priority. That makes economic sense and is the right thing for the future of the UK.

3.28 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Jesse Norman) *rose—*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): It is good to see the Minister again.

Jesse Norman: Mr Deputy Speaker, I had until recently hoped to be greeting your female colleague—Madam Deputy Speaker—as you and I have spent so much time in the Chamber over the past few days. In her absence, it is a delight to welcome you to the Chair.

I thank colleagues on both sides of the House for their contributions to this debate. I will respond to some of their many points but, first, I will recap the situation. The most recent statistics, as highlighted by my hon. Friend the Minister for Climate Change and Industry in his opening remarks, show that there were approximately 780,000 fewer homes in the lowest energy efficiency rating bands—E, F and G—in 2014 compared with 2010, which demonstrates real, sustainable progress towards the 2020 and 2025 milestones. It is clear from the statistics that the fuel poverty milestones and target are backloaded and that the scale of improvements required to reach each of the target dates increases over time.

Today, the energy company obligation regulations are being debated in the House of Lords. They seek to increase the proportion of support directed at low-income homes. Although the ECO policy has reduced in size compared with the scale of recent years, support for low-income households has been protected. In fact, the regulations for the new scheme to launch on 1 April 2017 represent an increase from £310 million to £450 million a year.

Combined with immediate support on the cost of energy bills provided via the warm home discount, there will be at least £770 million of support for low-income and vulnerable consumers over 2017-18. That is a significant commitment towards some of the households that are faced with the challenge of keeping their home warm. It is therefore far from true that, as the hon. Member for

Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) said, the Government are turning their back on the situation. Quite the opposite.

The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss), criticised what she described as the Government's "quite abysmal" record. I can do no better than to point out that, in the years from 2003 to 2010, the last Labour Government succeeded in increasing the number of fuel-poor households from 2.41 million to 2.49 million. The result of what she regards as an effective energy policy was to increase the number of people in fuel poverty.

Regulation, particularly for landlords, will also play an important role in making progress towards the milestones, as will other actions such as the safeguard tariff for pre-payment meters and the roll out of smart meters. In the longer term, the Government will be assessing the resources and policy mix required to meet the 2030 fuel poverty target. However, flexibility is important given the long-term, structural nature of fuel poverty. We should not, in 2017, seek to say precisely how best we can meet the target or commit future Governments to 13 years of spending in a particular way given that so much could change in the energy sector and in applicable technologies.

Caroline Lucas: On the Government's commitment to this agenda, can the Minister answer the fact that the notional annual spend on the overall ECO programme has reduced from an original £1.3 billion to £640 million? The new cap on heating measures with the ECO leaves a big gap in provision for low-income or vulnerable consumers who cannot now afford to repair or replace existing gas boilers. What is his answer to that?

Jesse Norman: If the hon. Lady had attended closely to my opening remarks, she would have heard me acknowledge that the scheme has been reduced in size but that funding for more vulnerable groups has been increased. If we combine that with the wider support through the warm home discount, let alone the national living wage and other applicable measures, we see that the Government are doing a great deal in that area.

Mr Jim Cunningham: The Minister just said that funding for vulnerable groups has actually increased. By what does he measure that? What is the actual figure?

Jesse Norman: I have just covered that. I am embarrassed that my remarks should be so ill-attended. The regulations for the new scheme, which launches on 1 April 2017, represent an increase from £310 million to £450 million a year. Combined with the warm home discount, that gives £770 million of support for low-income and vulnerable customers in 2017-18.

We have also taken steps to improve targeting. The eligibility criteria for the ECO scheme, which is proposed to run from April 2017 to the end of September 2018, will improve the targeting rate to 34%. We do not believe that is enough. The targeting rate can go higher, and the Digital Economy Bill, which the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough mentioned, is currently going through Parliament and will enable greater data sharing and give the Government the

[*Jesse Norman*]

opportunity to improve the targeting of the next generation of fuel poverty schemes, including the warm home discount.

When the regulations were made last summer, the Government stated that there is more to be done to target the schemes at those who most need them. That is still true, with the current targeting rate of fuel poor households at around 15%. However, Members should note that increasing that proportion in the current scheme, which is committed to 2021, would be at a cost to other low-income households. We will be mindful of that factor when making decisions on the future direction of the scheme.

The hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) criticised the Government, whom she regarded as presiding over stagnant real incomes. All I can do is direct her to the fact that, last year, full-time pay grew by 0.7% in Scotland, whereas it grew by 1.9% in the UK as a whole. According to Scottish Parliament numbers, it fell for the three years following 2012.

I yield to no one in my admiration for the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), and I was grateful for his support in being elected Chair of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee. He also comes from a nation I deeply revere and whose history I greatly respect, but I am afraid that he has embarrassed himself in this debate with an unworthy attempt to personalise a very serious set of issues. Mine was a response to the gap, which the stricture on unparliamentary language prevents me from describing as anything more than disingenuous, between his words and his deeds. The fact of the matter is that these matters are devolved. Even so, the Government have offered support, as I described, through the ECO, the warm home discount and a hydro benefit replacement scheme of £58 million to reduce energy distribution charges. Were network charges made universal across the country, as he desired, 1.8 million people in Scotland would face higher bills, and only 0.7% would see reductions. Does he really wish to add to the bills of 1.1 million Scotsmen and women?

Ian Blackford: It was the predecessor Minister who made the point that people should not be penalised because of where they live—nobody should pay more. It is a matter of fairness that there should be a universal market, as exists in many other European countries. We have such things in other areas in the UK. Why do we not have a universal market for electricity distribution?

Jesse Norman: I am grateful for the respectful nature of the hon. Gentleman's question. The answer is simple: it would increase charges to an additional 1.1 million people in his country, and no responsible Government should look on that with favour.

Finally, the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough referred rightly to the health effects of fuel poverty, and we, correctly, recognise that issue. She suggested that fuel poverty in homes had risen; I have explained how, in fact, it has fallen broadly since 2010—from roughly 2.49 million to 2.38 million homes. She invites the Government to tackle the root causes of fuel poverty, but that is exactly what we are doing.

Further to my comments about the last Labour Government, it should never be forgotten that the real wages of the bottom third of the population of this country stopped growing in 2003, not in 2008—it was a function not of the financial crash but of a whole series of factors and of bad government, and we should recognise that.

The hon. Lady said the Government need to be more ambitious, and we are being extremely ambitious. We have a transitional arrangement that runs through until September 2018. We then expect a further supplier obligation, on which we will consult later this year, to take us through to 2022.

We know that households living on low incomes are all too often left to live in the coldest and least efficient homes. We know that living in a cold home can have negative implications, to say the least, for health and wellbeing. The official 2016 fuel poverty statistics showed that, despite progress towards the 2020 milestone, with 88% of homes rated E or above in 2014, there remains a significant challenge if we are to make progress to the 2030 fuel poverty target.

The statistics show that only 7% of fuel-poor households were rated B, C or higher in 2014, which clearly shows that the fuel poverty target we have adopted, which was set in 2014, is ambitious, and rightly so. That legal target makes it clear that the Government do not accept the situation. [*Interruption.*] If I may respond to the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead), who is chuntering from a sedentary position, it also shows that we are committed to providing support to those households that need it most. Undeniably, that means there is a lot of work to do to ensure that the energy-efficiency of low-income homes is improved. We cannot now, in 2017, prescribe exactly which policies, regulations and innovation will be required to meet the 2030 target—we will consult next year on work to a target until 2022—but we can ensure that we continue as a nation, as a country, together to move forward and take action.

Parliament will, of course, continue to play an invaluable role in holding Government to account against this objective over the next decade, and I thank the hon. Members who have spoken today for their contributions to this worthwhile and useful debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered fuel poverty.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 4 to 7 together.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)).

RATING AND VALUATION

That the draft Non-Domestic Rating (Rates Retention) and (Levy and Safety Net) (Amendment) Regulations 2017, which were laid before this House on 20 February, be approved.

CONSTITUTIONAL LAW

That the draft Crown Estate Transfer Scheme 2017, which was laid before this House on 1 March, be approved.

INCOME TAX

That the draft Scotland Act 2016 (Income Tax Consequential Amendments) Regulations 2017, which were laid before this House on 30 January, be approved.

ELECTRICITY

That the draft Electricity Supplier Payments (Amendment) Regulations 2017, which were laid before this House on 20 February, be approved.—(*Steve Brine.*)

Question agreed to.

Baby Loss (Public Health Guidelines)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Steve Brine.*)

3.41 pm

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): As my wife will testify, I am rarely early for things, so to be more than three hours early for something is a rare treat indeed. I know that both you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and the Minister will be pleased to know that I intend to take only about two and a half hours of the just over three hours available to me.

As the House knows, I am a passionate campaigner in the area of baby loss. Having unfortunately experienced it myself, I have always been clear that I want to use my position in the House to bring about change so that as few people as possible have to go through this absolute personal tragedy. In the latest year for which figures are available, there were 3,254 stillbirths in England and Wales, with a further 1,762 neonatal deaths shortly after birth. Every single one of those is a personal tragedy, yet perhaps the most galling aspect is that so many of these deaths—reportedly about half—are actually preventable.

I strongly welcome the Government's plans to cut the stillbirth and neonatal death rate by 20% by 2020 and, furthermore, to reduce it by 50% over the next 15 years, but those are just numbers unless we put in the resources necessary to deliver on this. Trusts have received £4 million to buy better equipment and boost training to cut stillbirth and neonatal death. More than £1 million is also being provided to help develop training packages so that more maternity unit staff have the confidence to deliver safe care. It is hugely positive that the Department of Health has recognised the scale of the challenge and set aside this funding, but we need to focus as much on reducing the risks of stillbirth.

One significant risk factor remains one of the toughest to eliminate and, as a result, carries the greatest reward if we can address it: smoking in pregnancy. Let me be clear that this debate is absolutely not about criticising or demonising women and their partners who smoke during pregnancy. We all know that tobacco is highly addictive and it can be difficult to stop smoking. However, smoking while pregnant is the No. 1 modifiable risk factor for stillbirth. If I may, I will run through a few statistics: one in five stillbirths is associated with smoking; women who smoke are 27% more likely to have a miscarriage; their risk of having a stillbirth is a third higher than that of non-smokers; and mothers who smoke are more likely to have pre-term births and babies are who are small for their gestational age.

Maternal exposure to second-hand smoke during pregnancy is an independent risk factor for premature birth and low birth weight, yet only one man in four makes any change to his smoking habits when his partner is expecting a baby. If, tomorrow, every pregnancy was smoke-free, we would see 5,000 fewer miscarriages, 300 fewer perinatal deaths, and 2,200 fewer premature births every year. Were children not exposed to second-hand smoke, the number of sudden infant deaths could be reduced by 30%.

The previous tobacco control plan set targets for reducing rates of smoking in pregnancy. In 2015-16, the number of women smoking at the time of delivery had fallen to 10.6%—below the Government's target of

[*Will Quince*]

11%—yet the fact that the Government’s target has been met nationally masks geographical variations. Yes, we are seeing rates of 2% in Richmond, 2.2% in Wokingham and 2.4 % in Hammersmith and Fulham, but rates of smoking in pregnancy are 26.6% in Blackpool, 24.4% in South Tyneside and 24.1% in North East Lincolnshire.

Of the 209 clinical commissioning groups, 108 met the national ambition of 11% or less, but that means that 101 did not. It is even more worrying if we look for improvements in the rates of smoking in pregnancy in CCG areas. Yes, 14 CCGs have improved significantly over the past year, but 182 have rates that are about the same and, even more worryingly, 13 have significantly worse maternal smoking rates.

The Government have committed to renewing targets to reduce smoking in pregnancy. Reducing regional variation in smoking during pregnancy and among other population groups is a high priority for the Minister, and I know the Government are focusing on it as they finalise the tobacco control plan. I was pleased to see the recent news that NHS England granted £75,000 of funding to the 26 CCGs that are most challenged on maternal smoking.

How do we achieve the Government ambition for a 50% reduction in stillbirth and neonatal deaths by 2030? First, we need to publish a new tobacco control plan. The previous tobacco control plan for England expired at the end of 2015. The Government have promised that a new one will be published shortly. The publication of the strategy is now a matter of urgency, so will the Minister kindly advise on how shortly “shortly” is?

The strategy needs to include ambitious targets for reducing smoking in pregnancy. The Smoking in Pregnancy Challenge Group—a partnership of charities, royal colleges and academics—has called for a new national ambition to reduce the rate of smoking in pregnancy to less than 6% by 2020. I know the Department of Health is sympathetic to that aim and hope it will be included in the new tobacco control plan.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing a three hour and 53 minute debate on this important subject and thank him for all the work he does on baby loss. He may well address this issue later in his speech, but does he agree that the alarming figures for regional differentials also apply to stillbirth rates more generally? Another issue is cultural differences between different sections of our populations with very different outcomes. That, too, must be a priority for the Government, because wherever in the country someone is, surely they are entitled to the same level of support and the same health outcomes.

Will Quince: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. He, too, has done a huge amount of work in this area and is hugely supportive of the work of the all-party group on baby loss. He is quite right to highlight the regional variation that exists, and to which the Department is very much alive. I had not intended to focus on the specific demographics, in terms of race, but the figures do show that certain demographics have a higher propensity towards stillbirth. The honest answer is that we do not really know why, so there is a huge need for research in this area. I am not going to discuss that issue, but only because I want to focus specifically on smoking.

My hon. Friend is quite right about that particular demographic, and the reasons behind higher stillbirth and neonatal death rates may well be a public health issue. I hope that the Minister and the Department will look into that independently of this debate.

Secondly, communication to pregnant women must be sensitive and non-judgmental. Qualitative findings from the babyClear programme found that pregnant smokers found the interventions unsettling, but they were receptive to the messages if they were delivered sympathetically. To do that, healthcare professionals must feel able to have conversations about harm and have clear evidence-based resources and support for pregnant women.

Thirdly, the Government should ensure the implementation of guidance from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. NICE guidelines recommend that referral for help to stop smoking should be opt-out rather than opt-in. Research published by Nottingham University in April 2016 on opt-out and opt-in referral systems found that adding CO monitoring with opt-out referrals doubled the number of pregnant smokers setting quit dates and reporting smoking cessation.

Further, a recent evaluation of the babyClear programme in the north-east of England found that it delivered impressive results. BabyClear is an intervention to support implementing NICE guidance on reducing smoking in pregnancy. Let me give some background. BabyClear began in late 2012. Since then, smoking at the time of delivery has fallen by 4.0% in the north-east compared with 2.5% nationally. That equates to about 1,500 fewer women smoking during pregnancy in the north-east than in 2012. The cost of implementing the core babyClear package over five years is estimated at £30 per delivery.

Fourthly, we should embed smoking cessation across the maternity transformation plan. There are nine workstreams altogether and smoking cessation is central to achieving success in most of those. As an example, the workstream, “training the workforce”, should include training midwives on CO monitoring and referral, but there is a risk that smoking cessation is siloed into the workstream focused on improving prevention. It is vital that that does not happen.

Finally, the Nursing and Midwifery Council is updating its standards in relation to nurses and midwives. This training must be mandated and have smoking in pregnancy as a key part. These are all steps that can and should be taken by the Department of Health to help maintain the momentum on reducing smoking during pregnancy rates. However, there is one other suggestion that I would like the Minister to take away and discuss with his colleagues in other Departments. All alcohol bought in the UK carries a warning sign making it clear that pregnant women should not consume this product, yet only one packet of cigarettes in six carries a warning about the danger of smoking while pregnant. It is not unreasonable or unrealistic for all tobacco products to carry a similar warning to that seen on alcohol. I would be grateful to the Minister if he looked into the feasibility of introducing such a scheme. I understand that it falls under European law and European regulation, but that may, in the very near future, not be a problem.

This debate is absolutely not about criticising or demonising women and their partners who smoke during pregnancy. I fully appreciate that tobacco is highly addictive and that it is difficult to stop smoking. We also know that all parents want to give their baby

the best possible start in life. We want a message to go out loudly and clearly that no matter what stage a woman is in her pregnancy, it is never too late to stop smoking. Yes, that can be difficult, but smoking is much more harmful to a baby than any stress that quitting may bring. Most importantly, we and the Department of Health will give parents all the support and tools to help them to quit.

3.53 pm

Sir Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): May I congratulate the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince) on securing the debate? As an officer of the all-party group on smoking and health, I must congratulate him on the length of time that he has for this debate. Never in my wildest dreams did I ever think that we would get more than a one-and-a-half hour debate in Westminster Hall for such a matter.

The hon. Gentleman rightly pointed out the dangers of smoking in pregnancy. I do not plan to fill up these three and a half hours—I can see some smiles of relief—but I will pick up one or two issues that he raised. The Minister knows that I and many other Members have been calling for the new tobacco control plan for quite a while, since the last one finished at the end of 2015. The word I would add to that, because things do move on, is “comprehensive”; it ought to be a comprehensive tobacco smoking control plan. There are areas where that could help very much indeed.

Smoking in pregnancy is a massive issue that is obviously caused by nicotine addiction. For many years, the only way that people could meet that addiction, other than with chewing gum and patches, was by using cigarettes. Hon. Members will know that Public Health England published a report on e-cigarettes in August 2015, saying that they were 95% safer than the tobacco in cigarettes as a means of taking in nicotine. It is pretty obvious to me that consumers are moving to e-cigarettes on a vast scale, and the Government are also moving towards e-cigarettes to look into how they can help in certain situations.

I recently tabled the following written question:

“To ask the Secretary of State for Health, what steps are being taken by (a) his Department, (b) the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency and (c) Public Health England to encourage research into the use of e-cigarettes.”

Although the Minister may not have direct responsibility for this, I would like to tell him that I am very pleased with the answer, which I received today and which says that his Department is “working closely” with all the organisations

“to encourage research into the use of electronic cigarettes...and monitor the emerging evidence. PHE’s next updated evidence report on e-cigarettes is expected to be published before the end of the 2017. In addition to the publication...PHE have partnered with Cancer Research UK and the UK Centre for Tobacco and Alcohol Studies to develop a forum that brings together policy makers, researchers, practitioners and the non-governmental organisation representatives to discuss the emerging evidence, identify research priorities and generate ideas for new research projects, thereby enhancing collaboration between forum participants.”

I am sorry for going on about that, but it is a comprehensive answer that talks about identifying research priorities. We could not have a better advocate for such a priority than the statistics on the effects of smoking tobacco in pregnancy read out by the hon. Member for Colchester.

The people involved, including PHE, which is doing a magnificent job, ought to be looking at whether smoking in pregnancy could be one area for comprehensive research. Perhaps we could replace the cigarette—a mechanism for satisfying nicotine addiction that we all know is very bad for us—and use something like e-cigarettes to satisfy the addiction in pregnant women without the risk to the individual woman and her child.

I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing this up, and I congratulate the Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Nicola Blackwood), on the answer I received today. We should be ensuring that we look into these areas in some detail to ensure that we can avoid the awful statistics that the hon. Gentleman read out.

3.59 pm

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I had not intended to speak in this debate—I just wanted to be part of it and perhaps to question the Minister—but you have tempted me, Mr Deputy Speaker, to add my three penn’orth. I, too, will not take up the remainder of the three hours and 50 minutes in making a few comments. I again congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) on securing the debate.

The Government have made good progress on the smoking front, and that needs to be recognised, but 10.6% of people still smoke through pregnancy. That figure needs to be brought well down into single figures. My hon. Friend made a good point about the use of advertising messages with regard to alcohol. Of course, unlike alcohol, this issue affects only half the population. The graphic images on cigarette packets of diseased lungs, and those grisly television adverts with pus coming out of lungs and so on, really send home the message about the harm that any smoking can do. Making that clear to women who still take the risk of smoking during pregnancy would help to get the figure down further.

We still have a major problem in this country with high levels of baby loss through stillbirth as well as through the rather less quantifiable form of miscarriage, the true extent of which we do not really know. As I said earlier, it must be a priority for Government to work out why we have regional and cultural differences, and to extend and learn from best practice rather better than we do at the moment. Some of the pilots and experiments that have happened in Scotland are something for the rest of the country to look at and learn from.

Given the title of this debate, we could, strictly speaking, extend it well beyond just smoking, and I am going to take advantage of that. On drinking, there has been a very confused message for some time. I am an officer of the all-party foetal alcohol syndrome group. We produced a report that urged complete abstinence as the only safe way, and that must be the default position. For women who do choose to continue to drink in some form during pregnancy, there need to be very clear health messages, and perhaps lower-alcohol alternatives. If someone has to drink, there are ways of potentially doing less damage to their baby. The Government can be part of that through the differential pricing tax mechanism. We are rather bad at that in this area.

[Tim Loughton]

I remember going to Denmark some years ago and visiting a children's home just outside Copenhagen that specialised in treating children who were the victims of foetal alcohol syndrome—particularly children of mothers from Greenland, where there is a particular problem with heavy drinking. Those children were born with all sorts of disabilities, some of which manifested themselves as the symptoms that we know of in ongoing conditions such as autism.

There may be an understating of the effects of foetal alcohol syndrome because it can appear somewhere on the autistic spectrum as well. We need to do more research into that. There is no more stark example than we see in Denmark of a direct correlation between excessive drinking and giving birth to a child who will bear the effects of that for his or her whole life, with the learning disabilities and other things that go with it. We have lessons to learn from that. We still need stronger messages to go out to women during pregnancy about the potential, and potentially lifelong, harm that can be done by inappropriate drinking.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): Although a strong message is important, the delivery of that message is crucial. There is a good argument for saying that the shock-and-awe messaging used in advertisements about driver safety or alcohol, and on cigarette packets, does not have the impact that we believe it should. Many mothers might take cavalier decisions about themselves, as many of us do. I certainly do when it comes to food and its health benefits; I do not follow the guidance. Does the hon. Gentleman agree, however, that a mother would never want to damage the future prospects of her child? The sensitivity of the message, however strong it is, is the most important element.

Tim Loughton: The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point. We, as grown-ups, can make a conscious decision to be gluttonous or to over-imbibe. That does damage to our bodies and our bodies alone, although there may be a cost to the taxpayer through the national health service. If anyone should be more sensitive and sensible about the damage that could be done to another individual, it is a pregnant woman. A pregnant woman, or a woman considering pregnancy, should be more amenable to good health messages.

It is a question of horses for courses, and I take the point that the hon. Gentleman makes about shock-and-awe tactics. The AIDS adverts in the '80s could be described as shock and awe, and they were exceedingly effective at the time. We still remember those tombstones. One can go too far, however; members of the public are smart, and they recognise over-emphasis for effect. It hits them in the face, and they say, "I do not need to take any notice of that." We need smart messaging, which is credible and honed appropriately for its target audience.

That is why when we in the all-party group on foetal alcohol syndrome produced our report, we had a big debate about whether we should recommend complete abstinence or whether that was just not realistic for some people, who were still going to drink. I take the view that the default position must be that drinking harms a woman's baby, but if someone absolutely has to drink, for whatever reason, there are less harmful—but

always harmful—ways of doing so. We need to nuance that message appropriately for different audiences. Of course, different cultures have different attitudes to drinking, foods and so on.

I move on to a subject that is completely different, but still within the scope of this Adjournment debate: perinatal mental health. I declare an interest as the chair of the all-party group for the 1,001 critical days, and as the chairman of Parent Infant Partnership UK, a charity that is all about promoting good attachment among parents and their children in the period between conception and age two. One of the biggest, most powerful and most effective public health messages that we can give is that effecting a strong attachment with one's child, right from the earliest days, will have lifelong benefits for that child. That includes the time that the child is in the womb. A mother who is happy, settled and in a good place is much more likely to pass on those positive messages to a child than a mother who is stressed and suffering from perinatal mental illness or various other pressures.

At least one in six women in this country will suffer some form of perinatal illness. We know from the science, which is producing considerable data, that a child who is not securely attached—preferably to both parents but certainly to the mother, to start with—is much less likely to thrive at school and to be settled and sociable, and more likely to fall into drink and drug problems and to have difficulties with housing and employment. The first 1,001 days are absolutely critical, and we should be doing more. It is a false economy not to do so, and not to invest money early on.

The Government have quite rightly flagged up the importance of mental health. The Prime Minister absolutely gets the importance of mental health, and particularly of perinatal mental health. The additional money allocated is good, but it is still not enough. The problem, as we all know, is that that money is not making it through to the sharp end, so opportunities are still being missed to identify women who have some form of mental health problem—typically depression around the time of pregnancy—signpost them to the appropriate services and deliver quality and appropriate services in a timely fashion. That is why the charity I chair, PIP UK, has seven PIPs around the country, operating out of children's centres, to which women can be referred, often with their partners, to get the support and confidence they need to effect the strong bond and attachment with their child.

The Maternal Mental Health Alliance has costed the problem of not forming such bonds at £8.1 billion each and every year. I repeat that, each year, the cost of getting it wrong is over £8 billion. The cost of getting it right is substantially less, yet too many clinical commissioning groups around the country still do not even have a plan for delivering perinatal mental health for women where and when they actually need it. On top of that, in our report "Building Great Britons", the all-party group calculated that the cost of child neglect is over £15 billion a year in this country. By not getting it right for really young children and for babies, we are therefore wasting £23 billion financially, but far more importantly we are not giving those children the very best start in life socially, which we could do with a bit more, smarter and better targeted up-front investment.

I reiterate to the Minister and his colleague, the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Nicola Blackwood)—she very kindly saw a delegation from the all-party group on the 1,001 critical days recently, and I know she takes this subject very seriously and has convened a roundtable—that we absolutely must come up with such public health messages and talk in this place about the importance of getting it right early on, but what matters at the end of the day is actually delivering the service to those women where it is needed, at the appropriate time and place.

Finally, may I take the liberty of mentioning to the Minister, as I think I did in a previous Adjournment debate, the question of the registration of stillbirths? It is a subject on which I have campaigned for some years in this place, and on which I have had a private Member's Bill. This falls within the remit of baby loss, which is in the title of this Adjournment debate; I know you are scrupulous, Mr Speaker, about our not straying beyond the remit of a debate.

Following some very helpful responses from predecessor Ministers and officials at the Department of Health and having convened various roundtables—with the Royal College of Midwives, the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists and other key players, as well as various stillborn charities—I thought we had got to a place where the law could be changed to emulate what has been done in New South Wales in Australia. However, we still have a iniquitous and highly distressing situation: somebody who has gone through the trauma of carrying a child as far as 23 weeks and six days will find, if the child is, tragically, born prematurely and stillborn, that the child is not recognised in the eyes of the state, although a child born just after the 24-week threshold will be recognised as a stillborn child. I have previously raised the example of a woman who had twins either side of that threshold: sadly, they both died, but one was never recognised, while the other was recognised as a stillborn child, with a certificate being issued by the hospital.

For a woman who has given birth to a stillborn child, such a situation is one of the most sensitive and vulnerable of times. My hon. Friend the Member for Colchester knows this so well, and other hon. Members have given their own very emotional accounts of going through such traumas. The fact is that the state has still, so far, failed to take the straightforward and fairly cost-free step of coming up with a simple registration scheme for those for whom such a scheme would help to provide some form of closure.

For a stillborn child born at under 24 weeks—what I am talking about is different from miscarriage, although I am in no way trying to underplay the trauma caused by having a miscarriage—to be recognised as a human being, rather than as a child who, sadly, was born before an artificial threshold, seems to me to be a sensible but humane thing to do to help the too many women who still give birth to stillborn babies. We need to bring that figure down, and we are doing so. In the meantime, we can at least give some succour and comfort to parents who have to go through this situation by saying that we appreciate and recognise what has happened, and sympathise and empathise with what they have gone through.

May I ask the Minister again whether there is any way that we can get this campaign going again? The issue has featured in one of our national soaps: an actress who went through it in real life re-enacted it in “Coronation Street”. There has also been a lot about it in the press. I ask the Minister to ask his Department to look at this issue again to see whether something can be done, because I think there could be a solution.

Mr Speaker, I have more than abused my privilege in this three hour and 50 minute debate, but these are issues on which there is a good deal of sympathy and empathy in the House. Yet again, we are greatly indebted to my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester for bringing them back to the House, where we have the power to make a difference to our future constituents' lives.

4.15 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) on securing this debate on public health guidance and baby loss. I also congratulate you, Mr Speaker, on scheduling it on a day when the other business, inexplicably, was so curtailed, thereby enabling some very distinguished Members on both sides of the House who chair directly relevant all-party groups to make unusually—I would not say unprecedentedly, Mr Speaker, because you would be better placed than I to say whether it was unprecedented—long contributions in an Adjournment debate, and very welcome they were too.

We know from families who have experienced baby loss that the silence that often surrounds the loss can make the experience much harder. For that reason, I join the tributes from the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Sir Kevin Barron) and my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) to my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester for the work that he does in leading the all-party parliamentary group on baby loss and for bringing the experiences that he has suffered to bear on this issue a number of times.

Before I address the specific points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester—I counted six challenges that he laid down in his speech, and I will try to address each of them—as I have the luxury of a little time, I will set the scene on the work the Government are undertaking to reduce adverse outcomes during pregnancy and the neonatal period.

My hon. Friend referred to the maternity transformation programme in England, which began a year ago. It provides an opportunity to shape services for the future. Improving women's health requires a collaborative approach across the entire health system, including commissioners, primary care, maternity services, public health and local authorities, to meet the needs of women and their partners. The result of all that work is that England is a very safe country in which to have a baby. Sadly, a small number of babies are stillborn or die soon after birth but, according to the latest figures, stillbirths and neonatal deaths occur in 0.5% and 0.3% of births respectively.

We are absolutely committed to improving maternity care and recognise that every loss is a personal tragedy for the family concerned. As a result, it is our national ambition to halve the rate of stillbirths, neonatal deaths, maternal deaths and brain injuries that occur during or soon after birth by 50% by 2030. We are making

[*Mr Philip Dunne*]

considerable progress. The other day, I had the privilege of attending the Royal College of Midwives awards ceremony—one of the more enjoyable parts of my role in the Department of Health—where I was able to confirm that since 2010, the proportion of stillbirths is down by 10%, the proportion of neonatal deaths by 14% and the proportion of maternal deaths by 20%. Our plan is having some effect, which is very pleasing, but there is always more that we can do.

To support the NHS in achieving this ambition, we have a national package of measures with funding attached, including: an £8 million maternity safety training fund to support maternity services in developing and maintaining high standards of leadership, teamwork, communication, clinical skills and a culture of safety; a media campaign, “Our Chance”, comprising 25 animations and videos targeted towards pregnant women and their families to raise awareness of the symptoms that can lead to stillbirth; and a £250,000 maternity safety innovation fund to support local maternity services to create and pilot new ideas.

The fund was allocated in the past couple of weeks. One project that secured funding will develop a one-stop multidisciplinary care clinic for women with diabetes, hypertension, morbid obesity and epilepsy. Another project aims to develop a pathway whereby all women with high carbon monoxide breath test results—this was referred to by my hon. Friend—are referred for serial ultrasound measurements to provide them with more information about the potential impact of smoking on the child they are carrying. We are also investing £500,000 to develop a new tool to enable maternity and neonatal services to systematically review and learn from every stillbirth and neonatal death in a standardised way.

The Government are seeking to put in place infrastructure to improve maternal health, but clearly young mothers, partners and families have a role to play too. The evidence shows that the national maternity ambition cannot be achieved through improvements to NHS maternity services alone and the public health contribution will be crucial. It is vital that women and their families are made aware of and understand the lifestyle risk factors that can impact on the outcomes for them and their babies, and the changes they can make to increase their likelihood of positive outcomes. Hon. Members referred to a number of them.

As soon as a lady knows she is pregnant, she should be encouraged to contact her maternity service for a full assessment of health, risk factors and choices, so that a personalised plan of care can be prepared. Women with complex social factors, in particular teenagers and those from disadvantaged groups, do not always access maternity services early or attend regularly for antenatal care, and poorer outcomes are reported for both mother and baby. Maternity services need to be proactive in engaging all women.

Early in pregnancy, a midwife will provide a woman with information to support a healthy pregnancy. This will include information about nutrition and diet, including supplements such as folic acid and vitamin D as well as lifestyle advice, central to which is smoking cessation—on which my hon. Friend focused his remarks—the risks of recreational drug misuse and alcohol consumption, which

my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham focused on in his remarks.

When starting pregnancy, not all women will have the same risk of something going wrong, and women’s health before and during pregnancy are some of the factors that most influence rates of stillbirth, neonatal death and maternal death. We know that a body mass index of over 40 doubles the risk of stillbirth. A quarter of stillbirths are associated with smoking, and alcohol consumption is associated with an estimated 40% increase to stillbirth risk. In addition, the MBRACE-UK perinatal mortality surveillance report, published in June last year, showed that women living in poverty have a 57% higher risk of having a stillbirth. Women from black and minority ethnic groups have a 50% higher risk, and teenage mothers and mothers over 40 have a 39% higher risk of having a stillbirth.

Those striking facts are why the Department of Health will continue to work closely with Public Health England and voluntary organisations to help women to have a healthy pregnancy and families to have the best start in life. Last year, NHS England published new guidance that aims to reduce the number of stillbirths in England. Building on existing clinical guidance and best practice, the guidance was developed by NHS England working with organisations including the Royal College of Midwives, Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, British Maternal and Fetal Medicine Society and Sands, the stillbirth and neonatal death charity. The Saving Babies’ Lives Care Bundle includes key elements intended to significantly impact on stillbirth rates through reducing smoking in pregnancy, detecting foetal growth restriction, raising awareness of reduced foetal movement and improving effective foetal monitoring during labour.

I now come specifically to the challenges posed by smoking in pregnancy. My hon. Friend the Member for Colchester stole most of my thunder by declaring many of the statistics on the impact of smoking, but I am particularly pleased that he focused on the fact that the plan, as set out in the tobacco control plan for England in 2011, which set a target to reduce the number of women smoking in pregnancy to 11% or fewer, has now been achieved at the national level, with a rate of 10.6% for England as a whole. As my hon. Friend also pointed out, this masks wide geographical variations across the country, ranging from 4.9% across London to 16.9% in Cumbria and the north-east. There was an even greater difference at the level of clinical commissioning groups, from which I believe my hon. Friend collected his statistics. These range from 1.5% at the low end to over 26% at the higher end, which is clearly a totally unacceptable variation.

Although we have made progress in recent years, about 70,000 babies continue to be born each year to mothers who smoke—and more if we include exposure to second-hand smoke. My hon. Friend made an interesting observation about the impact of partners continuing to smoke while their partners are pregnant. My hon. Friend mentioned the figure of 25%, so for one in four pregnant women their partners continue to smoke. That is an area on which we need to focus our attention and seek to raise the awareness of the impact of passive smoking. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that issue.

Smoking during pregnancy is the main modifiable risk factor for a range of poor pregnancy outcomes. It is known to cause up to 2,200 premature births, as my

hon. Friend said, 5,000 miscarriages and 300 perinatal deaths every year across the UK. It also increases the risk of developing a number of respiratory conditions, attention and hyperactivity difficulties, learning difficulties, problems with the ear, nose and throat, obesity and diabetes. Pregnant women under 20 are six times more likely to smoke than those aged 35 or over. Specialist stop smoking support, while available to pregnant women, clearly needs to be targeted on those higher-risk groups. That provides much of the challenge that my hon. Friend set for us in his remarks.

We are looking to take considerable action to advance the cause of reducing smoking. My hon. Friend asked in particular when we intend to publish the next iteration of the tobacco control plan. He asked me to define a well-used parliamentary term—"shortly". I regret to say that it is way beyond my pay grade to provide closer definitions of that term. There are others, including someone who recently arrived in the Chamber, who might have some influence on the speed with which plans emerge from the Government. I very much hope that we will be able to progress with the next iteration of the tobacco control plan in the next few months.

My hon. Friend referred to the babyClear programme, which is about informing pregnant women about the risks they run from continuing to smoke. It is an important programme that has been evaluated by Newcastle University, which published some findings last month. We think that this is closely aligned with the NICE guidance, which is appropriate. It builds on the point made by my hon. Friend and by the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) about the sensitivity involved in giving advice to pregnant women. My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham referred to the mental health challenges that pregnancy can cause for some women. I think there is a sensitivity involved in the delivery of hard-hitting messages to women who find it impossible to shake their addiction to smoking. We must be aware, in conveying the message that persisting in smoking during pregnancy may lead to long-lasting damage to the baby, that there may be mental health implications to which we need to be alert.

My hon. Friend the Member for Colchester mentioned the possibility of introducing an opt-out, rather than an opt-in, for carbon monoxide testing of women who present as pregnant to their maternity services. That is an interesting idea, and I am certainly willing to discuss it with NHS England and the Department. If it is possible for such a test to identify pregnant women who are smoking, it would be foolish of us not to introduce it.

My hon. Friend referred to the maternity transformation plan. I will write to him giving a specific response to his ideas and explaining how they might be used to embed smoking cessation in the nine elements of that plan. I cannot give him a similar reassurance about the training programmes for midwives, because they are determined independently by the Nursing & Midwifery Council and it is not for me to prescribe what should be involved in such training, but the debate will doubtless be heard by the midwife trainers.

My hon. Friend's final request was for a warning on cigarette packets that would specifically alert people to the risks of smoking during pregnancy. Again, I am afraid that that is not in my gift, but it is a very interesting idea. As was pointed out by the right hon. Member for Rother Valley, there are already some stark and shocking images on cigarette packaging. We have just engaged in a major consultation that has led to the introduction of plain packaging. I suggest that my hon. Friend send his proposals to those who are responsible for monitoring the impact of plain packaging across Government.

I hope that I have addressed my hon. Friend's points. Let me now respond to the requests from the right hon. Member for Rother Valley, who is the vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on smoking and health, in relation to e-cigarettes. He suggested that, as a research priority, we should ask Public Health England to consider whether they are helpful or unhelpful in encouraging pregnant women to stop smoking, and also whether the nicotine contained in them could lead to foetal damage in the future. I think that that is potentially an interesting subject for research, and I should be happy to pose the question to Public Health England.

I am pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham was able to contribute to the debate, because he is very knowledgeable about these issues. He welcomed the progress that is being made in reducing smoking, and I am glad he recognised that. However, he focused many of his remarks on another aspect of public health guidance, in his capacity as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for foetal alcohol spectrum disorder.

Tim Loughton: I am not the chair. I am an officer.

Mr Dunne: I stand corrected.

Significant health messages are being sent about the consequences of continuing to drink while pregnant, and, again, progress is being made. I do not have the figures in front of me relating to the level of alcohol that pregnant women continue to consume, but the Government share my hon. Friend's ambition. We must continue to bear down on alcohol consumption, because it has the potential to cause lifelong harm to babies.

My hon. Friend finished with a request that we consider once more the registration date for stillbirths, and his example of the twins falling either side of the 24-week definition puts the points very concisely and starkly. Again, I am not in a position to give him comfort on that issue here and now, but I will write to him, having consulted colleagues in the Department of Health on where we stand on it.

On that basis, I am very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester for securing this debate and giving us the opportunity to spend almost an hour, I think, discussing this subject, which is unusual and welcome.

Question put and agreed to.

4.35 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 21 March 2017

[Ms NADINE DORRIES *in the Chair*]

DVLA and Private Car Parking Companies

9.30 am

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the relationship between the DVLA and private car parking companies.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I thank my colleagues on the Backbench Business Committee for allocating this slot for the debate. I was pleased to be joined in my application by the hon. Member for Hyndburn (Graham Jones), who I can see in his place. I am sure that he will follow my remarks with his usual alacrity.

I want to be clear that this debate is not about what is charged in a car park. Normally when we talk about car parking and parking fees, we talk about local councils and the balance between how much is charged for an hour's parking and the trade that a town centre may receive. This debate is not about that. This is very much about the relationship between a body of the state—the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency—and private companies that seek to enforce parking contracts.

If we own a car, we are all required by law to supply the details of the keeper of the vehicle to the DVLA; it is a criminal offence not to. To be clear—because it certainly is not clear in many of the letters that go out if someone is not a lawyer or conversant with this area—this is not about people committing offences, but about when people are deemed to have breached a parking contract. The contract can be on a sign on a wall with quite a lot of small print. Those of us who are skilled in the legal world may be able to understand it—I am sure you would easily read through it all, Ms Dorries—but for most people it is not an easy or digestible read. When people drive in, they are unlikely to see the sign and to read the terms and conditions before they get in the parking space, but they have already been caught on the camera systems that are used to enforce car park contracts, which is what has brought the issue to my attention.

I hope that over the next hour and a half we will consider what we as Members feel about the current system and its relationship with the DVLA and how we think it should change. We must be clear that, if it were not for that relationship and the DVLA's ability to get hold of the keeper's details, many of the issues brought to me, and I am sure to other right hon. and hon. Members, would not exist, because it would not be possible to enforce this in the way it is being enforced now.

I also want to be clear that the next hour and a half is not about portraying every private car park operator as a rogue operator. Most, but not all, operate good-quality car parks at a reasonable price and use methods of enforcement that are perfectly fair and reasonable. However, some need to be tackled.

What first brought the issue to my attention were two car parks in my constituency: the Crossways shopping centre car park in Paignton and the Marina car park in Torquay. The Crossways car park is managed by Premier Parking Solutions of Newton Abbot and the Marina one is managed by a different company, Premier Park. Since my election as a Member of Parliament, I have received complaints about enforcement practices in both car parks. I accept that people are not happy when they receive a fine if they have not paid or for whatever reason, but what stuck out about those two car parks was that the number of complaints I was receiving about them far exceeded the number of complaints I was receiving about the entirety of Torbay Council's parking enforcement. Given Torbay Council's parking enforcement covers 39 car parks and all on-street car parking violations, it was noticeable that the two car parks were generating far more complaints than I was receiving about the council's entire operation.

Issues raised with me included everything from unclear signs to bad lighting. There was a day when a particular letter or number was not working on the keypad, which meant that everyone with that particular letter or number in their registration found themselves getting a letter a few weeks later. Also, I started to get letters from colleagues complaining about the car parks concerned when their own constituents had visited Paignton or Torquay on holiday, looking to enjoy themselves, and had had a nasty surprise that would encourage them not to come back.

Parliamentary privilege is a great right, but also a responsibility, so we alert individuals or companies when we are thinking of referring to them. I wrote to both the companies concerned. To give Premier Parking Solutions of Newton Abbot, which runs the Crossways car park, its due, last Friday, I had its managing director, general manager and business development manager come to see me to discuss the various issues that had been raised about their car park. They listed a range of things that they feel will deal with the matters raised and complained about. I will obviously look for the proof in the pudding and see whether complaints decline. I accept that there will always be the odd one, but I certainly hope that we will see the back of some of the complaints and issues that I have seen so far.

The other company, Premier Park, decided not to give any form of detailed reply. Given the sheer number of complaints I have had about the Marina car park, which is a car park you drive into without realising exactly what you are entering, suspicions have been raised. Even when told that it was likely to be discussed under parliamentary privilege, the company was not particularly interested in engaging, and also did not engage with BBC Radio Devon this morning, so that creates real suspicions that it is looking to run a business model based on catching people out as much as on what it charges in the car park. That gives rise to suspicions that this is not a genuine parking enforcement operation intended to stop people chancing their arm—I accept people will do that, so there needs to be some enforcement—but that this is an operation looking to enforce and act in a way that no one would see as conscionable. It therefore says a lot that, even when given a chance to offer a final explanation before being named today, the company did not wish to do so.

[Kevin Foster]

If it were just a couple of car parks in Torbay, I would probably view the matter as a constituency campaigning issue and something I could pick up with the local trading standards department. Yet it was interesting to see the number of other issues that started to be raised as I talked to colleagues. I can see colleagues nodding in the Chamber now. I am sure that we will hear more examples during the debate. I looked at the Library and RAC Foundation figures on how many transactions there are between the DVLA and private parking companies. It is estimated that they will exceed 4 million in this financial year, which is a very large increase compared with the position in 2012. When private wheel clamping was banned under the Protection of Freedoms Act 2012, the impact assessment suggested that there would be 500,000 extra requests, which is not a surprise given the change in enforcement techniques, but there has been an increase of nearly 3 million, which highlights the issues.

The DVLA charges companies £2.50, and some information suggests it costs DVLA more than that to process each application. Perhaps the Minister will cover whether the DVLA is losing money in this area, because it would add insult to injury if taxpayers were helping to subsidise the operation.

We have to be clear that these are not fines. However, it is the DVLA's information—something is sent out that looks like a fine, probably for about £100, which is the maximum, but far above what councils charge. There is no suggestion that councils outside of London need to charge such a fine when people do not pay in the car park. However, that supply of information makes people think it is much more official than it is, and of course it makes it look as though the state supports what is being done. Ultimately, the only source of the information could have been the state, the DVLA, given that there is no other way of getting hold of the registered keeper's details.

When I started to look into this issue, many Members wrote to me, and I still get letters today about how the system works. Many of them cover the suspicion that automated number plate recognition systems are used as an opportunity, first, to fine people after they have left and, secondly, to make the process easy. For example, someone who drives in, waits to see if there is a space, drives out and ends up getting a fine would not get that fine if there were manual enforcement, because someone enforcing tickets would see that that person was waiting. Likewise, barrier systems do not let a car in the car park unless there is a space. This system is a kind of invisible barrier that can become a nasty trap that the driver finds out about later.

I am clear that there does need to be enforcement. If someone goes into a privately owned car park and plonks their car in a disabled bay, I have no problem with the idea that they receive a significant fine for such antisocial behaviour. However, there are real issues emerging from the system of enforcement that has grown up over recent years.

I have particular questions for the Minister; I will give him time to note them down. Is he content that the current relationship between the DVLA and private parking enforcement companies is appropriate? Does

he believe that there should be a single standards setting body? In my investigation of the subject, one aspect I found quite interesting is that there are two such bodies, with similar sounding objectives and appeals processes. Is that a sensible system or should there be one single standards-setting body, over which the Government have more oversight? I would suggest, however, that it is probably more sensible that that be based in and funded and organised by the industry, rather than an "Ofpark"-style body set up directly by the Government.

Does the Minister believe that enough action is being taken to deal with rogue actors and offenders in the industry? Many Members will probably give examples of where they think not enough action is being taken. Although some rogue actors and offenders have been removed, the presence of two different bodies as the accredited trade associations that a company needs to be part of to access the DVLA breeds confusion in the public eye.

Is a response to the 2015 consultation likely to be published? Would we be better to conclude that the Government may take the view that, two years on, it may be better to look afresh at how the DVLA works with private parking companies?

There are some good operators out there providing reasonable car parks at a fair price and some operators charge a premium for a slightly better service. That is a matter for them and for their business. What we need to take action on is the growing scandal where more and more people receive these invoices, which look official and which are able to be issued only because of the active co-operation of a body of the state that gives the information for them to do so. There needs to be a change in that relationship. There need to be clearer and stronger standards and much more transparency in how those standards are set, in exchange for information from the Government.

We got rid of the cowboy clampers in the last Parliament. The suspicion is that the cowboy clampers have now become the cowboy finers and cowboy invoicers. Although they may wish to leave their spur marks on car parks across the country, I hope the Minister will be clear what action will be taken to ensure that they have to ride off into the sunset for good.

9.43 am

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I congratulate the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) on securing this debate.

I speak from the perspective of the consumer and the tourist who visits the south-west on a regular basis, rather than as a Member of Parliament dealing with complaints submitted by the public. The car parking in my constituency is run by Sandwell Council. Although I am sure that there are plenty of residents who have had issues over the years, I cannot honestly say that I have received the volume of complaints in my postbag that would justify me taking up the issue. However, I have had personal experience as a tourist in the south-west with a private parking company, which I would like to bring to the hon. Gentleman's notice. That experience raised concerns, and I considered taking exactly the same actions as he has. I will not mention the company concerned because I have not informed it—as he said,

there are issues around parliamentary privilege that should not be exploited—but it is legitimate to mention my experience.

As someone educated at Exeter University, and whose ancestors on my father's side all hail from the Falmouth and Penryn area, I have an enduring affection for the area and love to visit it, which I do on a regular basis. However, as a tourist, I have had two experiences there that were exceedingly off-putting.

The first was when I parked at Falmouth quayside car park and left the car. It was very windy. I went back, picked up a coat and then came back later to find that I had got a parking notice. What had happened in the meantime was that my ticket had blown off the dashboard and was on the floor. I appealed to the company and got a response offering to halve the fine. I was still indignant, but thought, like many people in my position, "Oh, what the heck; I will accept it as a compromise," and paid up. That was a couple of years ago.

Last year, I parked at Perranporth. On that occasion it was pouring with rain, and I decided it was not immediately appropriate to go for a walk on the beach. I joined my wife for a cup of tea in a nearby café, leaving the car window open because we had the dog in the back. We came back and took the dog for a walk, returned to the car and found that, yet again, I had got a parking ticket. I was quite astonished because my ticket was on the dashboard, but then I realised what had happened. I have a Honda Civic and the dashboard is split-level: the ticket had slid under the ledge at the front and was not visible from the front. Well, I took the ticket and very indignantly went to the attendant, who said, "Oh, you can appeal." So I did.

Within four hours, I was appealing online. I got a response and some photos, which basically dismissed everything I said. There were two photos—one taken from the front of the car, in which the ticket was not visible, and the other from the passenger-side window, in which where the ticket was could be seen with difficulty. Had that photo been taken from the driver's side, the ticket would have been perfectly visible and readable. I was furious. I have dug my heels in and not paid the fine. To date, I have received three debt collection notices; I am collecting them and waiting to see what the company does about it.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): My constituent, Steve Mostyn, parked in the Clarkston car park. He paid his 50p and was a bit surprised to receive a penalty charge. It appeared that he had keyed in a digit wrongly; the number he had keyed in did not actually appear in the DVLA database—that registration number did not exist—but the company still fined him. He found that completely unacceptable. He thinks that the model that Smart Parking is operating is corrupt and unethical, and is particularly concerned that those who are more vulnerable and those who can perhaps least afford to pay are those who will not feel able to appeal and will just cave in. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that is simply unacceptable?

Mr Bailey: I have heard similar cases. I have detected a difference in the way in which local authority-run parking systems are reasonably responsive to that. The private car parking operators are not. Again, it points to a culture and philosophy that is designed to catch

people out and make the most money out of perfectly human mistakes, despite the fact that an individual on every other criteria will have demonstrated that they not only accept the principle of paying, but have done their personal best to conform to the conditions that preside over the process.

From my experience in the south-west, there are a number of issues that have to be looked at. First, there is the issue of organisations that employ private car parking companies to exercise this activity. After my experience at Perranporth, I complained to the organisation that employs the private car parking company, but it just dismissed my complaint and said that it had contacted the company concerned and that I could appeal—we were going round in circles.

Any organisation in an area such as the south-west, which is hugely dependent on the tourism industry, has to take a degree of responsibility for the way in which the company it contracts to operate its car parks behaves. Tourism is a highly competitive industry, and if anybody who goes on holiday to those areas has such an experience, their abiding memory will be the injustice that has been inflicted upon them, despite the fact that they tried to be law-abiding, civil citizens and tourists. They not only feel that personally, but recount it to other people, which deters would-be visitors to the area. Those companies do no service to their area or their tourist industry by having such a system.

As the hon. Gentleman highlighted, this raises legal issues, because by and large tourists are not lawyers and do not know about the legal vacuum in which those companies operate, so they assume that the companies have to conform to laws that do not actually exist. There is a wider issue of educating the public, and I think there is a very good case for tightening up the regulation to ensure the companies that operate private car parks are licensed and subject to an agreed set of standards. There should be an appeal process that is totally independent of the industry to adjudicate when there are genuine disputes, as there always will be in such circumstances.

I fear that areas that make the mistake of employing that sort of company could damage themselves and the industry to the detriment of the perception of the area and to the benefit of the most sharp-practiced operators—the hon. Gentleman described them as cowboys. I ask the Minister to look at the issues that the hon. Gentleman and I raised, and those that I am sure other hon. Members will raise, with a view to looking at how the regulation of the industry can be tightened up to the benefit of the affected individuals and the economies of the areas where such practices operate.

9.53 am

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) on securing this important debate on an issue of particular interest to the area I represent.

I am privileged to live in the most beautiful part of our country, and I have the honour of representing the great people of St Austell and Newquay. It is because of our stunning scenery, our beaches, our wonderful heritage and our excellent food that 4 million people a year come to Cornwall on holiday. I am delighted to learn that the

[*Steve Double*]

hon. Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey) is one of those who comes to enjoy all that Cornwall has to offer. An additional 14 million people a year come to Cornwall for a day visit, and the vast majority of them come by car. That is where we start to get into some of the issues.

One of the jewels in Newquay's crown is the very special Fistral beach, which is the surfing capital of Cornwall, and indeed of Europe. The beaches of north Cornwall attract many people to the area. In the summer, we can see more than 10,000 people on our beaches in north Cornwall, many of whom go into the sea to catch the waves on nice days. It has even been known for Prime Ministers to come to catch the odd wave in the Newquay area, which is always very welcome.

People come and park their cars. On their journey home, they battle through the roadworks on the A30 at Temple, which are soon to be completed thanks to the Minister's support. When they eventually get home, they unpack their car with their hearts full of happy memories from their time in Newquay, and open their front door to find the inevitable pile of brown envelopes. In among the envelopes, there is a sinister-looking one, which they open to discover it is a penalty charge notice from a private parking firm that has issued it as a result of their stay in Newquay—it is an invoice masquerading as a fine.

As the hon. Member for West Bromwich West pointed out so well, that becomes people's lasting memory of their time in Newquay. It ruins their memory of that holiday, because they feel they have been unjustly billed. That is very often the case. The reasons why penalty charges are issued are often spurious. It can be for overstaying for very few minutes. It can be, as the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) said, because when they put their car registration number into the machine they got one digit wrong. I have been told that people sometimes go into the car park, find that there are no spaces available, wait a few minutes to see whether one becomes available, and then after some time give up and decide to move elsewhere, only to find that they have overstayed the grace period and that their car has been clocked by the camera. They then receive an invoice as a result.

As has been said, that situation damages the reputation of Newquay and many other holiday areas where such parking firms operate. I believe we need to take action. Many of the hard-working businesses in places such as Newquay are owned by families who go out of their way to welcome tourists. They go the extra mile to look after them well, which is why tourists keep coming back to those places. Those parking firms damage the reputation of those areas and other people's businesses. They do not damage themselves, because they hide behind anonymous PO boxes. They are faceless organisations that do not face the public.

Kirsten Oswald: The hon. Gentleman is making an incredibly important point. Our town centres can ill afford to have their business impacted by parking operators that act against the interests of the people who park there.

Nadine Dorries (in the Chair): Not a speech—an intervention.

Kirsten Oswald: They often act very inappropriately when they deal with people who try, as we do, to put forward the interests of our constituents.

Steve Double: The hon. Lady makes a very good point. Absolutely—the whole point is that those parking firms are not damaging their own reputation. In fact, a cynic might say that their whole business model is built on being able to issue extra charges. Their businesses are profitable because they charge people extra money. It does not damage their businesses; it damages the many other businesses in our coastal areas and town centres that rely on people coming back and being able to park. The action of those firms puts people off.

Some hon. Members have said that they are inclined not to name the parking firms. I am going to name two, and there is a very good reason why I am going to do so. I would like the Minister's help. My office has received many pieces of correspondence, both from local people from Newquay and tourists who have gone to Newquay on holiday, complaining about those companies' actions and the unfair way they believe they have been treated. Despite numerous attempts by my office to contact those firms and open some constructive dialogue with them, not once have they responded. They have not got back to me or even given me the courtesy of sending a letter saying, "Please leave us alone. Go away. We don't want to talk to you." Never, not once, have they responded, despite my many attempts to contact them.

I am therefore more than happy to name ParkingEye and Smart Parking as the firms operating in Newquay in that way. They deserve to be named because of their refusal to respond to me as the local Member of Parliament. I ask the Minister what more the Government could do to make such firms engage—to force them, if necessary—and have a constructive dialogue when issues arise, so that we as Members of Parliament may represent our constituents and the businesses in our constituencies to resolve some cases so that the image of our towns is not tarnished.

We need to look at the relationship the firms have with the DVLA. In my view, they are abusing their privileged relationship and their access to drivers' information in order to issue penalty charges. When we have unfair practices and firms operating in ways that damage other businesses, it is right for the Government to look at the situation carefully and to introduce regulation or, if necessary, legislation in order to stop those unfair practices and protect other businesses, which rely on people being able to park. I am delighted that we have been able to have this debate, and I hope that as a result we will see some positive and constructive action.

10.1 am

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak, having received several heavy mailbags from constituents about private car parking companies in my area. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) for securing the debate and for all his work on the subject. He gave an excellent speech.

For too long, cowboy private car parking companies have operated with impunity. Many have reasonable practices, but a considerable number operate in a way that is not conducive to holiday resorts, as several

hon. Members have said, or to town centres, as the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) mentioned, and that is certainly not in the best interests of motorists or the community in general. Without any substantial legislation or regulation, those companies have been free—to be fair—to rip off car park users and charge bogus fees. In my view and that of the British public, it is time to act. The reality for far too many motorists up and down the country is that people are duped into false charges and harassed by firms that, as has been mentioned, somehow manage to get hold of personal information, whether through the DVLA or other sources.

A considerable number of constituents have written to me asking what can be done to tackle private parking companies, because they have found themselves powerless. Presented with a process that is not transparent but opaque, people have no clear way to resolve problems. I will draw attention to examples from my constituency before suggesting what to do to tackle the scourge. I, too, will name some of the companies involved, but that is because they have been named every week in the *Accrington Observer* and the *Lancashire Telegraph*, so I am not bringing anything new to the public that has not been said previously. I am repeating it for the benefit of the House and the Minister.

Eastgate is a big retail park in Accrington. Back in 2012 much anger and frustration was caused for hundreds—I mean hundreds—of people when its private car park operator, Excel, misled them about its parking charges. I recall having to deal with that as the local MP for week after week. Excel changed the three-hour parking limit to 90 minutes without any clear warnings. The firm announced its new policy on signs hidden behind trees on the edge of the car park. It then issued hundreds of fines to shoppers, with demands for immediate payment or even higher fines once they had understandably failed to spot the notices. Some disabled people were also caught out by the changes, and they threatened court action with the help of the National Motorists Action Group, which was very helpful—I would recommend the group to anyone fighting pernicious private parking companies which operate such voracious policies.

The National Motorists Action Group, the local councillor in charge Clare Pritchard and I had a running battle with Excel about changing its policy. The issue was a difficult one and it bounced around the press for weeks and weeks, before the company finally changed—in fact, Excel was fired by the management company. One of the complications was that the retail park owners had not only let some of the units on the site to businesses, but let the parking contract to a management company which had sublet it to the private car parking company.

After that battle, we ended up with Excel deciding that anyone who had not paid was to be let off—the fines were rescinded, and there was no need for people to pay—but it refused to give refunds to those who had done the right thing and paid the fine, even those who had been threatened multiple times. Excel got away with that. I ask the Minister, how can some people have their fines rescinded because they have not paid and others pay but never receive a refund? What does that say to the British public? That is totally unacceptable.

Another car parking company operates at the Accrington Arndale shopping centre. I receive dozens of complaints about some of its practices, with people being fined for whatever little reason, such as being even an inch over the line or five minutes past the time limit. I draw the Minister's attention to that—surely under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and so on some latitude is allowed to some of our constituents in such a position—and to how the appeals process does and does not work. Going back to Excel, NMAG and a disabled constituent of mine had to go through the courts to seek redress, which is unacceptable.

Another cowboy private company has already been alluded to by Members, and a more recent issue is that of the new buttons on the machines in some car parks. I have had several complaints about a company operating such machines. For example, an elder constituent told me that he had been fined and he had lost his appeal. He is fortunate that he has an appeals process, although he did not win it. He is 81, I think, and he had to bend double to see the buttons. The screens and buttons are at a low height and, on a sunny day, he was unable to bend down sufficiently to enter the information accurately. He tried and, most of the time, succeeded, but on the occasion in question he put the wrong digit in. He explained that he had paid for his time in the car park—he had the ticket—but the company was not interested. He was forced to pay the fine.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that had the car parking operation been a public one, an honest mistake would have been a complete defence? That has been established at the High Court in relation to the congestion charge.

Graham Jones: I appreciate that valid point. We are talking about private car parking companies in private car parks, and not about statutory or public car parks, which are not part of the debate. We are talking about the practices of some companies outside any firm regulations or guidelines. I will address the point about that difference in a minute.

One lady could not buy a ticket from the machine at that car park because it was broken. She still ended up with a fine, even though she left a note on her windscreen to say that the machine was broken. The company has been mentioned already, so I will do so again—I have no shame in naming such companies, because they need to be shamed. ParkingEye was also mentioned by the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), and it operates that particular car park on the edge of my constituency. I find that practice abominable. She put a note on her windscreen, which should be sufficient if the machine is broken. That £1 parking charge quickly became £100 because of the firm's own administrative incompetence and failure to fix the machine.

As I say, other constituents have come to see me about that particular car park. One was an elderly gentleman who could not bend down to see the screen and, on one occasion, entered a wrong digit. Giving a fine for that is totally and utterly unacceptable. Members on both sides of the Chamber who have spoken, and probably all Members of the House, are well aware of such scandals in their constituencies. This issue is not unique to my constituency or coastal constituencies—it seems to happen in all our constituencies all the time, up and down the country.

[*Graham Jones*]

Although private car parking companies were barred from wheel clamping by legislation, they seem, as other Members have intimated, to be in the game of trying to find new ways to extract money from motorists, perhaps to make up for some of their old practices having been barred. One gripe that all Members have mentioned is that, under the Road Vehicles (Registration and Licensing) Regulations 2002, the DVLA provides information to those car parking companies. Actually, I believe that they can purchase it—according to NMAG, the DVLA sells information, which is worrying. That practice should end, and there should be better regulation. Those companies access that information and then pursue motorists. I am deeply concerned about that relationship, and the Minister ought to look at it, because it is not right.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is making some good points. Citizens Advice Scotland highlighted in its briefing on this subject that many companies still issue tickets whose appearance mimics those issued by the police or the local authority, have difficult-to-read signage in their car parks and, at times, charge fees of more than £500. Does he agree that it is time that the British Parking Association and the International Parking Community strengthen and properly enforce their supposedly strict codes of practice, or ensure that rogue companies lose their right to the release of vehicle owner information?

Graham Jones: I was going to come to the two parking organisations that the hon. Lady mentions, which seem to have no transparent processes. One of them—I think it is the BPA—has a very opaque appeals process, if it has one at all. Not every private car parking company is actually affiliated or associated with either of those organisations.

Passing off is a massive issue. People turn up at car parks run by private companies to see a yellow and black zig-zag all the way around a cellophane or plastic envelope stuck to their windscreen that is simply passing off as a statutory notice. It is not a statutory notice, and it is not a fine—it is a charge. There is no clear distinction. The Minister ought to look at that, because those little yellow and black bags that appear on people's cars intimidate them and do not give them the necessary legal information.

Kirsten Oswald: The hon. Gentleman makes a crucial point. Does he agree that the Minister should also tell us when we will see proposals to stop companies continuing to receive personal data from the DVLA when they have a track record of abusing it by sending out legally incompetent frighteners to people and charging inflated fees for overstaying?

Graham Jones: I was going to say that the third point raised by the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) was inflated fines. I said that, in one case, a fine had gone from £1 to £100. I hear that fines go even further in other constituencies. That is totally unacceptable. I return to the point that there is a lack of regulation in this field. There is no transparency—there is opaqueness. It is the wild west, and there are real concerns—first about passing off, secondly about the process when people are fined, and thirdly about the

DVLA's relationship with private parking companies. The Minister ought to reflect on Members' concerns. I am sure that if I asked the 635 or so Members who are not in the Chamber—I do not know how many are here—they would agree. It is time for the Government to act.

Mr Bailey: Does my hon. Friend agree that something else that needs to be looked at—I believe that this is actually illegal, but it is commonly exercised—is the threats that these companies send to people subsequently, either through debt collection agencies or by putting notices on their credit ratings? By so doing, they undermine people's credit ratings and convey to them the belief that they will have financial penalties in the future.

Graham Jones: My hon. Friend makes a good point. When I said that the process is not clear, I meant the process all the way down the line, from passing off and someone picking up a fine to that person opening their fine and then quickly—after a fortnight, not a month—getting a doubled demand or losing their discount. That process is threatening, intimidating and misleading, and the appeals process is not transparent. If someone contests a charge or has been away on holiday for a fortnight or three weeks, before they know it, the charge is higher, and it escalates from there. These are charges and they are contestable, but if people contest them or simply do not pay them, as they are encouraged to do by some organisations because of the issues around some of these ticketing practices, they escalate, which frightens some of our older constituents. They get worried about it. They see some of these charges—£500 has been mentioned, and I mentioned £100 in my constituency—and get very frightened by them.

Nadine Dorries (in the Chair): Order. Mr Jones, may I just say that two other people are waiting to speak, and we will not be able to get them in if you do not wind up soon?

Graham Jones: Okay. In summary, I ask the Minister to look at the three points that I have raised. He must take this issue seriously. The British people want something to be done about it.

10.16 am

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): May I say what a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship in this important debate, Ms Dorries? I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) for bringing it forward, because many of our constituents have complained about what is going on in the parking field. I also thank the Minister and his predecessor for their many courteous replies to the letters that I have written.

The DVLA is at the heart of this issue, not the Department for Communities and Local Government or other bodies. It is the DVLA giving out information that begins this whole unfair process, so the buck stops with the DVLA and the Minister, not with other people or regulations. It is the DVLA that has decided that it will accept accredited trade associations and give out information to them, subject, apparently, to audits that it carries out. It would be useful to hear about what audits have been done.

My hon. Friend the Member for Torbay mentioned Premier Park. I have no qualms about mentioning businesses without telling them in advance. There is no convention that we should be expected to do that, and we should be wary about limiting our right of free speech in this House. Premier Park behaved quite disgracefully to a constituent of mine and has a reputation for doing so at a place called Popham Diner, which local newspapers have written about. Has the DVLA audited that company? Has it looked into it? Has it, in response to complaints from Members of Parliament, gone beyond the accredited trade association to see what is going on?

The Government are at the heart of this matter, because it is about the principles on which our society is founded and what the Government are there to do. One of the great roles of the Government is to ensure justice and make it impossible for the strong and the powerful to bully the weak and the powerless, but the DVLA is party to helping the strong and the powerful to bully the weak and the powerless. It just says that these accredited trade organisations are, broadly, enough, but those organisations have a vested interest in approving the bodies that sign up to them, because that is where their revenue comes from. The last thing that one of those bodies wants to do is to penalise a parking company that is signed up to it, because if it does, other companies will not sign up and its revenue stream will be threatened. There is a clear conflict of interest.

To my mind, that is where the DVLA is not doing its job, because it is not protecting individuals against those who are more powerful. That is where it should change, and that is where the answer to the problem is. The DVLA should do its own approval of organisations and have its own code of conduct. The fee it charges may cover all of that—it is not unreasonable to charge a fee if you are doing the job properly and there is no vested interest. That work should be done properly by a Government body.

The law is there to protect us. This is essentially a system that is outside the law but to which the Government are party. It is not a legal process, but, as other Members have said, it appears as if it is. It appears to be the same as a fine from a local authority, but it is not. In my experience, the local authorities behave much more reasonably than the private companies. Yesterday, I had a letter from Bristol City Council, which is behaving extremely well to a constituent of mine, erring on the side of leniency to someone who made an honest mistake. The private companies do not seem to do that because their business model is otherwise, and the DVLA is party to that.

Steve Double: Does my hon. Friend agree that, where local authorities lease car parks to private operators, the local authority should take a more active role in insisting that those operators work in a way more similar to that of local authorities?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend makes an extremely good point. We want fairness in the process. We must understand that the DVLA has the information in the first place as a legal requirement so that the police may know to whom cars belong. That is why, by law, we are obliged to register our cars. We are not obliged to register them for the benefit of a subsequent private contract, which is a subsequent activity beyond the

initial purpose of the DVLA. It was to be there for public interest, not for private contracts. Because of the way in which parking has developed, the DVLA has got involved in this private parking aspect. It earns fees from that, although apparently it is loss-making, which if true seems extraordinarily silly.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones) *indicated dissent.*

Mr Rees-Mogg: If it is not true, that is very reassuring; I am glad. However, the fact that that is not true is worrying in another direction, because the DVLA ought not to be affected in its judgment by its revenue streams. If we have an accredited parking authority that gets revenue from the car park, and the car park pays money to the DVLA to get information, there is a chain of money going through, which seems to be overriding the chain of justice and the right of the state, the duty of the state and the obligation of the state to protect the individual.

The DVLA has the solution in its hands, as do the Government. The situation requires not changes of legislation but changes by the DVLA in how it gives out information. I will carry on banging on about this until we know that companies have been suspended, that companies have been audited, that companies are not getting the information any longer and that the DVLA is taking proper charge to protect our constituents.

10.23 am

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries, and it is a real pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) and the compelling points he made. I thank my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), for securing the debate. In the short time left, I will touch on unreasonable practices and appeals and make a few further points following on from my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset.

There are highly unreasonable practices going on. We have heard many Members give examples. In my area, Premier Parking Solutions, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay referred, has a particular problem with its machines, which is affecting many individuals, particularly when number plate recognition is used in combination with a requirement to enter the vehicle's number plate manually. In many cases, the machines do not record the first number of that registration plate.

The issue is that, because number plate recognition is being used, individuals do not receive a notification until about 10 days to two weeks later, by which time most reasonable people, having parked legally and paid the correct amount, will have discarded the clutter from their windscreen—I do not take much joy in tidying my car, so that would not affect me. Even if individuals have retained their ticket and can clearly prove that there has been an honest error, they find their appeals are not being upheld.

The other problem we have is the disincentive to appeal, because those who appeal have to pay a higher charge if their appeal fails—and fail it will. I have a series of clear cases from individuals who can demonstrate—I suggest to the Minister it is beyond any

[*Dr Sarah Wollaston*]

reasonable doubt—that they have legally parked, fully paid the correct amount and left within the required time, but who are still being hit. If they carry through the appeal process, they find they get nowhere. If they then refuse to pay, they are hit with a series of harassing letters and ultimately receive letters from debt recovery agents, which has an impact on their credit rating. That practice is wholly unacceptable, and intervention from Members of Parliament does not make any difference, either.

I am afraid that our constituents are being caught, and that has consequences. I will read from part of a letter from one of my constituents, which sums up the problem:

“I am an honest lady in my late 60s and I have never had an experience like this before. I live in rented accommodation on a limited income—I am not financially secure. It will cause me hardship to pay this fine when I fully believed I was doing everything legally and correctly.”

The letters go on. Another pensioner wrote to me:

“I am a pensioner and all this angst really upsets me...I will do as everyone else has done and pay the £60 within the allotted time and try to forget it—but I have to say the injustice really riles me.”

That is the injustice to which my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset referred. He is right that the role of Government is to stand up to help those who are powerless against such practices.

It is not just pensioners—I hear this from across a spectrum of individuals—but we should ensure that particularly those who may have difficulty in entering details via these machines have their interests protected. I agree with hon. Members who have said that at the root of the problem lies the DVLA and its complicity in the process. Will the Minister use every power he has to ensure that it takes its role and responsibility seriously? It has a responsibility to ensure that such practices are not allowed to continue. I hope that in responding he will inform all Members here, and constituents following the debate closely, what the Government will do to ensure that justice is done for all our constituents.

10.27 am

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I congratulate the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) on bringing the debate to the Chamber. It has been one of those pleasant debates where everyone agrees that something needs to be done and it is in the gift of the Minister to do something about it. I look forward to hearing his remarks.

I will come to the hon. Gentleman's remarks in a moment, but I will preface that by saying a few words about how this issue affects all the nations of the UK, despite some small variances in approach to regulation. We only have to look at the amount of times it has been raised in the UK Parliament to see that it is as much of an issue in Ipswich as it is in Inverness and across the rest of the isles. Having already discussed the practices of some private operators with Scottish Government Ministers, I am encouraged by their response in terms of what they can do. I welcome the work of the Business Services Association and others to improve the regulation of parking, and that of those seeking changes at Westminster.

However, the debate is about the relationship between private parking companies and the DVLA. While parking legislation is in the main devolved to the Scottish Government, the ownership and control of DVLA data is not. The current system has been built on the flawed premise of industry self-regulation, enabled by the provision of data from the DVLA. We are sharing DVLA data with companies whose practices, as we have heard from hon. Members today, are simply outrageous. I agree that it is right to call out companies such as Smart Parking, which has been mentioned several times and operates in my constituency too.

People are being charged excessive fines, and the tactics used to collect the debts are intimidation and threat, albeit through the written word. That is still intimidation and it is still unacceptable. I and my hon. Friends believe that access to our data is a privilege. I have asked the UK Government to put regulation on a better statutory footing. I know that operators must pay for access to the data, but I was displeased to hear that the cost of providing data to private parking operators is in fact subsidised. I will be interested to hear what the Minister says about that. The research from the Library says that the cost to the taxpayer of making up the shortfall was £612,000 in 2015—if the Minister is going to take on the might of the House of Commons Library, I will be delighted to hear what the data are. If that information is right, it means enabling what is tantamount to threatening behaviour.

The hon. Member for Torbay spoke in a measured tone; many of us feel more passion on the subject. I could tell that the passion was there, but he was holding back his anger. Certainly people hit by fines and chased for them would be unlikely to use such a measured tone. The hon. Gentleman spoke about the small terms and conditions. There are also machines that are difficult to use for reasons of height, and so forth. Perhaps when it is dark, or because it is necessary to bend down or conditions are not good, people press a zero instead of an “O” or vice versa. The hon. Gentleman talked about what reasonable behaviour would be, and it is certainly not reasonable behaviour to impose unreasonable fines without a real appeal process. I have had a similar experience to other hon. Members of writing to parking companies; Smart Parking was one that refused to acknowledge an MP wanting to act on behalf of a constituent. The hon. Gentleman also made a point about taxpayers subsidising the information, and I reiterate that I look forward to the Minister's response to that.

Kirsten Oswald: The UK Government have undertaken a consultation on the matter. Last year I received written answers that made it clear that they were aware of public concern, but they had not discussed it with the companies or the DVLA. Does my hon. Friend agree that it would be useful to hear from the Minister whether those discussions have happened yet, and if not, why not?

Drew Hendry: My hon. Friend is right. The Minister is a reasonable man, and I look forward to his response. It is clearly something that he can deal with.

The hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) made an important distinction, in a phrase that is worth repeating: he said that people got an invoice masquerading as a fine. That is exactly what people get. He talked about people waiting, to look for

a space, which is a common occurrence, and getting fined. He, too, had had the experience of failing to get a response from Smart Parking and the other company that he mentioned.

The hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) mentioned someone making an honest mistake. Surely there is room in our society for people to be able to say, “Look, I just got it wrong; I didn’t know I was in there,” if it is a reasonable and honest position. The hon. Gentleman also underlined the fact that responsibility lies with the Minister. I was struck by his comment that when the DVLA allows the data to be used by the companies in question, it enables them to bully people. That is something that clearly must be addressed.

The hon. Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey) was right when he spoke about people paying the fine even though they feel it is wrong. Many people just pay because they feel they have to. It is a point of honour for them, even though it is their honour that has been unfairly besmirched by the company that fines them—or, I should say, gives them the invoice. Dismissed appeals are common. Little attention is paid to what is said, and there is no agreed set of standards, or licensing or appeals process. That, too, needs to be addressed.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) rightly mentioned that often it is the most vulnerable people—the ones who cannot afford to pay—who end up paying high fines, which puts them in difficulty. Those people are used to trying to make ends meet, and if they get a bill, they feel a sense of honour about paying it. Also, they rarely have the opportunity to go elsewhere to seek advice.

Kevin Foster: I am enjoying the hon. Gentleman’s comments. Does he agree that the fines are far higher than those that are legislated for in public car park enforcement?

Drew Hendry: That is an important point. It is not just a question of the unreasonable behaviour and bullying—because that is what it is. The fines are also disproportionately large compared with what might be imposed through a public sector car park, for example. As my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire, among others, said, that damages the reputation of our towns and cities, and areas that people visit for enjoyment.

The hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) talked about problems when fines come through late, when people have discarded their tickets. People clear out their cars and get rid of evidence before they receive the letters, and that is a difficulty. If there are set times for the administering of statutory fines imposed through the DVLA, that should be mirrored when fines are imposed by companies—if they are still allowed to do it. Personally, I would not allow them to do it, but in any case, speed should be a consideration.

The hon. Lady also mentioned people being hounded, even though they had paid for a ticket. I thought she was correct when she talked about “harassing” letters, because that is what they are. They are designed to harass people into paying. That is simply wrong and should not be allowed. She raised another point that is a common theme—and the Minister should listen: a message should be sent from this place to the operators that they should not be able to ignore MPs when they seek information on their constituents’ behalf and forward a reasonable case for appeal.

Some of the letters that the hon. Lady received from people were telling, because those people were saying, “Look, I’m an honest person.” That came through in the letter from the “honest lady”. That is important. People are having their honour taken away in such cases. They feel that they have done the right thing. They have tried to make things work and to do everything correctly, but they are stopped at every opportunity, by a company that would be deeply suspected by most people of trying to make money from errors. That is clearly not correct. Another of the hon. Lady’s constituents commented “I’ll pay anyway”—how unjust to have to pay anyway, even though they were not at fault. They should not have to pay those amounts.

I am keen to hear what the Minister will say, including about cost to, or profit made by, the DVLA, and whether that contradicts the information I have had from the House of Commons Library. I hope he will listen to hon. Members and make sure that there is action to hold the DVLA to account for the information it gives to Smart Parking in Inverness and all the other companies we have heard about that indulge in similar practices.

10.38 am

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I congratulate the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) on bringing forward the debate, which has enabled many hon. Members to give accounts of dreadful experiences. My hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey) powerfully explained from his experience how this works, and my hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn (Graham Jones) described how powerless people can feel when they are treated so outrageously.

I want to concentrate my comments largely on what the Government have or have not done. In March 2015 the Department for Communities and Local Government published a consultation, “Parking reform: tackling unfair practices”. That came at a time when the Government chose to move responsibility for off-street parking to DCLG. The then Secretary of State clearly saw regulation as a problem rather than a civilising solution. I note in passing that there is still some confusion about where responsibility for parking policy lies. We will hear from a Transport Minister today, but there is clearly a lot of crossover with the Department for Communities and Local Government.

DCLG’s consultation concluded in May 2015, and the Government have still not responded. In December that year, I asked when we were likely to see the response and was told that it would be in the new year. It was not clear which new year was being referred to; we went through 2016 and are now in 2017. Just last month, I asked what reason the Government had for not publishing their response, and was told:

“We have set out a clear manifesto commitment to tackle aggressive parking enforcement and excessive parking charges, and are taking steps to tackle rogue and unfair practices by private parking operators.”

They also said they were

“considering responses to the discussion paper, and options for reform.”

However, there was no mention of when those considerations might conclude.

[Daniel Zeichner]

The responses to the initial consultation clearly show just how many problems exist, and they are very much along the lines of what we have heard from hon. Members. The summary of responses was published in May 2016, and the consensus was a stark indictment of the current situation. The majority of respondents—78%—indicated that there were problems with either how parking on private or public land is regulated or the behaviour of private parking companies. So 78% think there is a problem, yet the Government show no urgency in dealing with it. The majority of respondents considered there to be significant issues with how parking on private land currently operates, and the majority of organisations concurred. Issues raised by individual respondents included the lack of a private parking regulator to protect the interests of motorists, problems with the current appeals process, unclear signage, which we have heard about, and a general lack of clarity and information.

As the Government fiddle and tarry, a further problem has arisen. Back in 2012, the British Parking Association set up an appeals service, as the Government had requested. One of the Government's key requests was that the service be independent, so the BPA set up the Independent Scrutiny Board for Parking Appeals on Private Land—ISPA. It may be easy for hon. Members to get confused by the acronyms, but please stick with me. More recently, the other major parking organisation, the International Parking Community, established a competing scheme.

As hon. Members have said, both schemes have access to DVLA data, without which neither would work. However, because the BPA feels that the IPC scheme has no independent scrutiny element, BPA members feel that they are being put at a disadvantage because they have to meet the cost of funding ISPA. They feel that the IPC should not have access to DVLA data without that independent scrutiny element. Because the Government have completely failed to sort all this out, the BPA will cease funding ISPA from the end of this month. The voluntary regulation system for the private parking sector is falling apart, so I am bound to ask the Minister what he and his colleagues are doing about that.

Let me say a little bit more about the relationship between the DVLA and private parking companies. On the one hand, individuals who responded to the consultation felt that the DVLA was failing to properly scrutinise private companies before releasing driver data, and many felt that it should not profit from the release of those data, as hon. Members have suggested. In turn, parking organisations said that companies already have to be governed by the code of practice, to which I have already referred, in order to access DVLA data. There are real concerns that the DVLA profits from the sale of the data that it holds on drivers. We have already heard that there are views on whether the DVLA is making or losing money, and the evidence I have seen is contradictory. I would rather welcome some clarity on that from the Minister.

The actual test for who can access those data is “any person who can show to the satisfaction of the Secretary of State that he has reasonable cause for wanting the particulars to be made available to him.”

“Reasonable cause” is not defined in the legislation and seems to take precedence over the Data Protection Act 1998. However, since 2009, the release of that

information has been limited to members of an accredited trade association, which goes back to the point I have just made.

In 2015, the Government said that the DVLA

“takes the protection and security of its data very seriously. A comprehensive set of safeguards is in place to ensure data is disclosed only where it is lawful and fair to do so. Individuals may write to the DVLA to request that their personal information is not disclosed if it would cause unwarranted and substantial damage or distress. The DVLA does not operate a blanket opt-out process but considers each such request taking into account the individual's particular circumstances.”

That comprehensive set of safeguards is vague. When pressed on the specifics in a written question, the Government answered:

“The safeguards that are in place to protect information held by the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) vary depending on the channel used and sensitivity of the data processed through the service.”

All of that shows that the situation is a mess. There is a complex set of trade-offs between the role of data held by the state, the privacy of individuals, the rights of landowners and the obligations of operators, but in essence, the poor old driver, who just wants to park, is left dazed and confused. The British Parking Association has made a strong case for a single standard-setting body with an independent scrutiny board. It would deliver a single code of practice and a single independent appeals service for consumers. I would welcome the Minister's views on that proposal. Ultimately, we need to see the Government finally respond to the consultation. It has been almost exactly two years now, which is surely enough time to consider the responses and come up with a plan to clarify this mess, which is pleasing no one.

Nadine Dorries (in the Chair): Before I call the Minister, I ask him to please leave a few minutes at the end for Mr Foster to wind up the debate. That would be much appreciated.

10.45 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) on securing the debate on the disclosure of DVLA data to private parking companies. I welcome the opportunity to discuss a matter that is clearly of concern to him and to his constituents; there is a slight bias towards the south-west, but this is clearly of concern across the UK.

Although the policy on disclosure of DVLA data is of long standing, it is true that management of parking companies and the release of vehicle keeper data frequently generate significant concern. Of course, that is entirely understandable. No one likes to receive a parking ticket, and motorists become annoyed when they are the subject of enforcement action. Many examples have been shared of inappropriate and heavy-handed enforcement action. Motorists often disagree with the principle that DVLA vehicle keeper data can be provided to private companies for such purposes. I should point out that the private parking sector is not regulated by the Government. The Department for Communities and Local Government consulted on this issue in 2015 and is currently considering the approach to any future Government intervention. I am afraid I cannot give the House a detailed time as to when that will be finished.

As it stands, the private parking industry is an unregulated sector in which common law on breach of contract or trespass applies in the relationship between the motorist and the landowner. Drivers who choose to park their vehicles on private land do so in line with the terms and conditions, which should be clearly displayed on signage at the entrance to and around the car park. Those conditions may relate to the need to pay a fee to use the car park and to display a valid ticket, to observe the maximum permitted time for parking or possibly other conditions, such as a stipulation that parking is not permitted at all.

Parking control is necessary to ensure that landowners are able to exercise their legal rights and gain the benefit they are entitled to from the use of their land for that purpose. The use of wheel clamping used to be widespread in the sector as a means of parking enforcement, but was banned in England and Wales by the Protection of Freedoms Act 2012, meaning that that method of enforcement is now effectively outlawed. I am sure that colleagues will agree that, without any form of control, errant drivers could park as they like, breaching reasonable terms and conditions without fear of recourse arising from their misuse of the land. That would obviously have a detrimental effect on the availability of parking spaces for more compliant motorists.

Kevin Foster: To be clear, no one is arguing that there should be no ability to control. Does the Minister agree that the issue is about the heavy-handed enforcement, and the fact that the fines are far above those that local authorities find are perfectly adequate for management and enforcement in their own car parks?

Andrew Jones: I do indeed recognise that. I was just trying to clarify the legal position. My hon. Friend made his case extremely well and has now clarified it again.

The law allows for the release of DVLA vehicle keeper information to those who can demonstrate that they have reasonable cause for requiring it. That provision has been in law for several decades. To receive data, a requester must show that their need relates to the use of a vehicle following incidents in which there may be liability on the part of the keeper or driver. Where a parking infringement may have taken place, it is considered reasonable to provide the vehicle keeper's contact details, so that the matter can be taken up with the person responsible. Despite the unpopular nature of that process, it is a well-established principle in case law that such enforcement is lawful, as confirmed by the Supreme Court in late 2015.

Despite this being an unregulated industry, and while the law provides for the release of information, the DVLA has strict conditions in place in relation to the disclosure and use of data. The DVLA will only disclose vehicle keeper data to parking companies that are members of an accredited trade association; I will come on to that in more detail in a moment. Such trade associations have codes of practice that are based upon fair treatment of the motorist and require their members to operate to high professional standards of conduct, while allowing reasonable action to be taken to follow up alleged parking contraventions. The codes of practice contain requirements on clear and prominent signage, appeals processes and information that should be provided to

motorists on parking tickets. They also contain requirements on the use of automatic number plate recognition cameras, which are expected to be in good working order.

There should be no hidden charges or ambiguity for the motorist as to what is and is not permitted on the land. The codes of practice require that contact with the motorist is not threatening and that parking charge notices are issued promptly, so that the driver can recall the circumstances surrounding the event. A reasonable amount of time must also be given to the motorist to allow payment to be made before any escalation of the matter occurs.

Mr Rees-Mogg: These codes of practice are marvellous, but the problem that has been established in this debate is that they are not followed, and the DVLA is complicit in that.

Andrew Jones: I am coming to that. I recognise entirely what we have heard this morning.

A further requirement in England and Wales, where additional liability for parking charges exists for vehicle keepers, is that access to an independent appeals body is provided. That independent appeals service must be free to the motorist. The outcome of the appeal is binding on the parking company but not on the motorist, who can continue to dispute the charge. Companies that do not comply with the codes of practice can face expulsion from the trade association, resulting in the right to have DVLA vehicle keeper data removed.

Drew Hendry: Will the Minister give way?

Andrew Jones: I am running out of time, so I will not.

I want to answer the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay about whether there is enough enforcement action. Bad practices are tackled. The DVLA can and does suspend the disclosure of data to companies that have not been compliant. However, there is clear concern from Members that we need to go significantly further. I have been working to ensure that we get the balance right.

Let me reassure the House on how we control the data. We have had lots of debates in this House about the right to privacy of our personal data. The trade associations have a code of practice, which includes access to DVLA data being tightly controlled. Companies with an electronic facility to request DVLA data have to sign up to a detailed contract that lays out the requirements on the use and security of data. The DVLA undertakes remote checks on parking companies.

In addition, the Government Internal Audit Agency carries out detailed audit visits on the DVLA's behalf and undertakes more in-depth checking of individual cases to provide further assurance that requests have been submitted for genuine reasons and there is reliable evidence to back up the request. Non-compliance can result in sanctions, including the removal of the right to data.

The DVLA's controls around the disclosure of data to parking companies were subject to a detailed data protection audit by the Information Commissioner's Office last year. I can confirm that the Information

[*Andrew Jones*]

Commissioner awarded the DVLA the highest rating for the controls it has in place surrounding the disclosure of data.

There have been a few questions about costs. I can confirm that this is priced on a cost recovery model, so it is neither subsidised nor run at a profit. The DVLA charges a fee for providing vehicle keeper details. In the cost recovery model, the fee is £2.50, which is designed to ensure that the cost burden is met by the companies involved and not the taxpayer. There are significant volumes of requests; we are looking at potentially 4 million in the course of this financial year, as my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay highlighted. However, the Government are not seeing either a profit or a loss.

Many Members have mentioned constituents' complaints regarding bad practice and motorists who feel they have been unfairly treated by parking operators. There are several routes for redress should an operator fall short of the standards expected. The first is the company's initial appeal process, which it is required to offer under its code of practice. There is also the independent appeals service, which is free to motorists. I have already mentioned the need for an operator to demonstrate compliance with the code of practice in order to retain its membership of an accredited trade association. If there are breaches of the code of practice, the trade association is there to investigate and ensure that action is taken. Without membership, there is no access to DVLA data.

Consumer protection laws also apply here. Those laws are designed to protect consumers from unfair practices. Trading standards officers are there to investigate complaints and can take action against a particular company. Consumer protection legislation applies to individual cases and the actions of the company in individual circumstances. Breaches can result in prosecution.

I hope that colleagues will recognise that the DVLA has gone through significant controls to ensure that the data are handled correctly and that there are controls and audits. There was a question about responsibility. The DVLA is the responsibility of the DFT. The parking companies and on-street and off-street parking sit with the DCLG. We have to work on this issue together because, without car ownership data, accessed through the DVLA, this industry would stop.

Colleagues have raised issues with me in writing previously and today, and there is clearly a significant issue to resolve. The Government are most concerned about the matter, which is why the DCLG launched its consultation. I will ensure that DCLG colleagues are aware of concerns and the content of this debate. I will also arrange a meeting with the trade associations, to

highlight the concerns we have in this House about their members' practices and to review exactly what enforcement action they take. I share the view of my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) that this is a little bit David and Goliath. Our job is to stand up for the Davids, not the Goliaths. That is completely fair.

I have been asked whether there should be a single standard-setting body for the industry. Competition between industry bodies is generally quite good. Competition can improve services, so I do not think we necessarily need to have just one body. I was also asked whether the relationship between the trade associations and the DVLA is appropriate. It is legal, and it is controlled and audited. The information provision is managed. The concern lies in the code of practice and its enforcement. That is where the next actions will be, and I will take those actions forward from today's debate.

10.58 am

Kevin Foster: I thank all hon. Members who have contributed to this debate. It has been interesting to hear so many examples from across the length and breadth of these isles. This issue is not localised to Torbay.

Competition is good where it is about services, but we would not suggest having competing magistrates courts. Once upon a time, we did that for the civil courts, and it did not produce a good outcome. The concern of many is that the industry is able not only to mark its own homework but to choose the marker. We need to look closely at that. There are more than 4 million of these transactions. Given the debate we have had today about the cost and the comments made in a House of Commons Library document, based on a Transport Committee report in 2014, I suggest that the Minister places a letter in the Library. It would be helpful if he clarified that point.

Andrew Jones: I am happy to make that commitment.

Kevin Foster: I thank the Minister for that positive reply and the courtesy he has shown. This issue will continue, and further action is needed. We cannot stand aside and ignore the key role the state plays in handing over details that it compels its citizens to provide to the DVLA and in allowing some of these practices to continue.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the relationship between the DVLA and private car parking companies.

Treaty of Rome: 60th Anniversary

11 am

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the 60th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome.

It is good to be here today under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I think this is the second time that I have had the opportunity to do this. This week, as you will be aware, leaders from around Europe will gather in Rome to mark the 60th anniversary of the signing of the treaty of Rome. I thought that regardless of whether people voted to remain in or leave the European Union, it would be opportune for us to reflect on the 60th anniversary, and I thank the Minister for taking the time to come along today. It is a momentous event this weekend, and I think it right that we mark it with this debate.

For more than 60 years, European nations have worked together to create our continent's longest ever period of peace, freedom, stability and prosperity. In place of conflict, the European Union has allowed member states to find consensual solutions to problems through dialogue, diplomacy and democracy. It can be easy, in the day-to-day of politics, to lose sight of the achievement that there has been in the 60 years since the signing of the treaty and more generally in the past 70 years. As Winston Churchill once said:

“To jaw-jaw is always better than to war-war.”

We should always reflect on that in this place and elsewhere.

As a result of the treaties, all member states, no matter how big or small, are represented in the European Parliament, the Council, the Commission and the institutions, in which the emphasis is on seeking compromise and consensus among those nations. It is little wonder that the EU was awarded the Nobel peace prize in 2012 for its achievements to date. That is worth reflecting on as well.

This weekend, there will naturally be the elephant in the room of European cohesion, given that the anniversary comes just before the triggering of article 50 by the UK Government. I am sure that that will be in people's minds. I think our European partners should be mindful of the events and circumstances that led up to the UK's voting to leave the European Union. The EU has never been afraid of reform or debate, and I hope that it will take on board the lessons that need to be learned from the UK's experiences of the past few years, regardless of what the future might hold for these islands.

Nevertheless, that should not preclude us from reflecting on the EU's extraordinary achievements and successes. At a time of rising instability and economic uncertainty, it is worth bearing in mind that our closest neighbours politically and economically remain countries such as Ireland, Germany, the Netherlands, France and the other member states. Those are and will remain our closest partners economically, politically and, of course, geographically.

The Minister would be surprised if I did not raise the fact that Scotland voted overwhelmingly—it had the biggest gap between leave and remain—to remain part of the European Union. Every single local authority

area in Scotland voted to remain. Even those that voted against membership of the European Economic Community, as it was, back in 1975 voted to remain part of the EU. We voted to retain the benefits of EU membership and remain an open, inclusive and tolerant society that seeks to build economic partnerships with all those closest to us, be they in these islands or elsewhere in Europe.

We voted to remain in the EU—this goes back to the success of the treaties—because it makes our country safer. The European project has cemented peace in a historically unstable continent, not just after the second world war but in later years, when the EU had a positive role to play in areas as diverse as Northern Ireland and the western Balkans. We owe a debt of gratitude to our European partners for the positive role that they played in Northern Ireland and the successes of the peace process to date, but of course that is ongoing. The Minister will perhaps reflect on the fact that the carrot of EU membership and the norms associated with the European Union have been crucial to securing peace in the western Balkans, but I recognise that that important process is ongoing, and I hope that he will reassure us today of the UK Government's ongoing commitment to that part of Europe even in the aftermath of our leaving the EU. My ideal has always been that the EU would become—indeed, it is—a soft superpower, serving our domestic interests and of course complementing the work of NATO.

In those areas the treaties have made us safer, but we also voted to remain in the EU because it makes the UK wealthier. Access to the single market has brought considerable benefits to all of us, and not least to small and medium-sized businesses. It was interesting to see the work that the Federation of Small Businesses Scotland has done on this of late. It shows that our annual exports to EU countries outside the UK are worth more than £2,000 per person.

In Scotland, we also voted to remain part of the EU because it makes the UK fairer. Many fundamental rights have come from Europe. The right not to be discriminated against on the ground of age, race or gender and in many other ways comes from Europe, as does the right to parental leave, paid holidays and other benefits.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making an incredibly powerful speech about the benefits of the EU. It is clear that the EU has been instrumental in moving forward individual rights, including the rights of women. We should celebrate the fact that European women have the world's highest average score in the personal freedom index. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is important?

Stephen Gethins: My hon. Friend always makes excellent points, and she makes a particularly good point on this issue, on which membership of the EU has complemented those rights. I would be encouraged if the Minister reflected on our continued commitment to the rights that we enjoy as European citizens.

We also benefit from the EU because it makes the UK greener. EU legislation is having a direct impact on us right now. The clean air directives of the 1980s were a result of acid rain, as we will all remember, and we are benefiting from them right now—those who survive the

[*Stephen Gethins*]

debate will continue to benefit from them. We have also seen ambitious climate change targets, which are working because we are working in partnership with our European neighbours. In recent times, Scotland has had world-leading climate change targets, which it has met ahead of schedule. We have often found more common ground with our partners in Brussels than here at Westminster. It is important that we reflect on that in considering our environment.

Scotland also voted to remain in the EU because it makes the UK smarter. The EU provides our students with life-changing opportunities to study abroad through Erasmus, which I personally benefited from. Will the Minister tell us today about the future of those opportunities? Today, I have the great pleasure of welcoming people from the University of St Andrews to Westminster. That university gets one quarter of the funding for its world-leading research from European sources. It is the largest employer in my constituency, and a large number of jobs are associated with that relationship with Europe. Some of the work that the university is doing will benefit us for generations to come. There is of course concern about Horizon 2020 and other sources of funding, but there is also concern about the freedom of movement. A large number of academics and students in St Andrews and elsewhere make their institutions better places in which to work and study and make those areas better places to live, given the greater pool of talent that can be drawn on. That comes from freedom of movement. I benefited from the opportunities of freedom of movement, and I would be encouraged to see others benefit from that. We should not take opportunities away from young people, which is why so many young people voted to remain part of the European Union.

We respect the decision of people in England and Wales to leave the EU. We think it is a pity, because the treaty of Rome has delivered so many benefits to us over the past 60 years, but we accept it. However, after taking office, the Prime Minister assured the country that she would not invoke article 50 until she had secured a “UK-wide approach”, and the Scottish Government produced a compromise proposal that would have respected the decision across the UK but maintained our place in the single market. It is a shame that the UK Government do not appear to be taking forward that compromise. Will the Minister reflect today on that compromise proposal put forward by the Scottish Government? It is regrettable that the UK Government have not entered into the spirit of compromise.

The treaty of Rome set up a partnership of equals; it is increasingly clear that the treaty of Union has not. The EU, which started 60 years ago, is not at all comparable with the treaty of Union—that is like comparing apples with oranges, or *les pommes avec les oranges*. The EU would never have blocked a referendum on the UK making a choice on its membership, could not foist a Government on the less than 15% of the electorate in Scotland and just over a third who voted for them in the UK, and could not place nuclear weapons on our soil against our will.

We have a choice of two futures. One is with a UK that, I am afraid to say, looks increasingly isolationist, and where there are concerns in our key industries such as education, food and drink and the energy sector about struggling outside crucial EU markets. The other

is as an independent member state, working with our European partners in the same normal way that other similar states do. Scotland would be a medium-sized member of the EU and a net contributor that has met the *acquis communautaire* and enjoyed more than 40 years of membership already.

At this time of uncertainty in our relationship with our European partners, it is easy to lose sight of the major contribution that EU membership has made for all of us. The bloc is by no means perfect; building co-operation between 28 independent and sovereign member states is always going to be difficult. Necessary compromises will need to be made, and sometimes they will be a bit messy, but overall we are better within the EU and in a better place because of the signing of the treaty of Rome 60 years ago.

The EU has been a success for all the reasons that I have set out, and also by respecting the independence of its members and having political flexibility. It now has a thorny issue on its western flank. How it reacts to the UK leaving the EU while Ireland remains and Scotland possibly sets its own path will be tricky, but at the heart of the treaty of Rome, and at the heart of Europe’s strength, lies its flexibility. Frankly, it has solved more difficult problems than that one. As we are set for years of navel-gazing in the UK while we undertake the momentous bureaucratic task of trying to leave the EU, it is worth reflecting just for a moment—for this half-hour today—on the unprecedented success, 60 years on from its signing, of the treaty of Rome, which has touched and benefited each and every one of us. Thank you, Ms Dorries, for this opportunity.

11.12 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): I congratulate the hon. Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins) on securing this important debate and his thoughtful comments.

The six founding members of the European Economic Community—Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and West Germany—signed the treaty of Rome on 25 March 1957. The treaty built on the pre-existing European Coal and Steel Community, which was founded in the aftermath of the second world war as a project for peace. Its primary aim was to ensure that the European continent would never again suffer the blight of war that it had seen, generation after generation, in the run-up to that period. In that regard, I agree with the hon. Gentleman that the legacy of the treaty of Rome is one of great historical achievement, and its anniversary marks the longest period of peace in Europe’s written history.

The treaty was a major step in the journey of European integration. It was followed by the treaty of Maastricht, which established the European single market, and then the treaty of Lisbon, which established the European Union as we know it today—an organisation that is dramatically different from the European Economic Community, which the UK joined under a Conservative Government in 1973, against the opposition of the Scottish National party. This weekend, not only the six founding member states but 27 European nations will meet to celebrate those achievements and to reflect on the next steps in their journey. To that end, the European Commission recently published a White Paper on five

future scenarios for the EU. Those range from reducing the EU to nothing but the single market, to a major push towards greater integration. It is a matter for the remaining members of the EU to decide which course they choose to follow, but whatever they decide, we know that it will be a future where the United Kingdom is not a member, but a partner. It would therefore not be appropriate for us to attend the treaty of Rome celebrations or to speculate about the future direction of the European Union, but as the EU approaches its 60th anniversary we wish them well.

It remains overwhelmingly and compellingly in Britain's national interest that the EU should succeed both politically and economically. Let me be clear: as the Prime Minister has said, while we are leaving the European Union, we are not leaving Europe. We are seeking a new, strong and constructive relationship with the European Union—a partnership of friends and allies, interests and values.

While the institutions and remaining 27 member states of the EU consider their future, we are of course focused on the future of the United Kingdom. As a Minister at the Department for Exiting the European Union, I know well the strength of feeling that surrounds our withdrawal from the European Union, and many of the complicated issues—some of which the hon. Gentleman touched on—that it throws up. I made the case to remain in the European Union during the referendum, but I always committed to respect the result and I understand that we required the consent of the British people to remain a member of the EU. Now that we are focused on implementing the result of a UK-wide referendum, we should all focus on delivering the best possible deal for the whole of the UK.

Leaving the EU offers us an opportunity to forge a new role for ourselves in the world—not isolationism, as the hon. Gentleman suggested, but negotiating new trade agreements and being a positive and powerful force for free trade. Britain's economy is one of the strongest in the world.

Stephen Gethins: I am grateful to the Minister for his helpful and thoughtful comments. Will he take this opportunity to reflect on the education sector in particular? As I mentioned, the principal of St Andrews is visiting, along with a number of colleagues, and the university sector is important across the United Kingdom. It is an area of particular concern, and I would be grateful if the Minister addressed it.

Mr Walker: Absolutely. I was going to come to that issue later in my comments, but I am happy to address it now. From having a large and growing university in my constituency, meeting people at universities around the country and attending the higher education councils of the Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation, my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Joseph Johnson), I recognise the importance of some of these issues for the university sector. I was glad to see the commitment in the Government's White Paper to continue research collaboration with the EU, to be forward-leaning in our approach to making sure that Britain remains a scientific superpower and to building on our excellent record. I recognise that Scottish universities play an important part in research collaboration, and hope that through negotiations we will be able to agree to an approach that secures the benefits of it.

This is one of many areas where we in the UK Government agree with elements of the Scottish Government's White Paper that set out the benefits of areas where we can continue to work with European friends and allies. While we accept that we are leaving the EU, there are still areas where we will want to be able to work closely together. I recently visited the University of Glasgow and spoke to academics there about the importance of EU funding and structures for them. I recognise those issues, and we are certainly taking them on board as part of our negotiating strategy.

As I was saying, Britain has a strong economy and we are well placed to face the future. We will remain the bold, outward-looking nation that we have always been, and being a scientific superpower and a research leader in the world is an important part of that. Global Britain will be more than just a trading nation; we will continue to play a significant role in defence and security, promoting and protecting the interests of our people around the world. That will not change. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the peace process both in Northern Ireland, which we are absolutely committed to continuing and made a prominent part of our White Paper, and in the western Balkans. I recognise the important role that the European Union and NATO have played in that, and that the UK can continue to play in supporting peace in Europe. We should certainly continue to lean in and play that role, and we are able to do that partly as a result of our investment in defence as well as in soft power. The European Union will continue to be an important partner as we do that, as will many of its member states. The negotiation is not just about what is good for the UK; it is about what is good for the remaining European Union as well.

As the European Union considers its future and the UK builds its new role in the world, we will also redefine our relationship with the EU. We will approach the negotiations as friends. A constructive and optimistic approach to the negotiations is in the best interests of both the EU and the UK. The Prime Minister has now set out the Government's plan to achieve a new positive and constructive partnership between the UK and the European Union. We have set out our objectives to give as much certainty as possible throughout the process. Now, the overwhelming majority of people, however they voted, want us to get on with it, so that is what we will do.

We will negotiate and leave as one United Kingdom, seeking the best possible deal for the whole of the UK as we do so. We are not trying to cherry-pick aspects of EU membership. The Prime Minister has been clear that she respects the position taken by European leaders that membership of the single market would mean accepting all four freedoms. As the Prime Minister has also stated, being out of the EU but a member of the single market would mean complying with the EU's rules and regulations to implement those freedoms, but without having a vote on what the rules and regulations should be. It would mean accepting a role for the European Court of Justice that would see it have direct legal authority over our country. To all intents and purposes, it would mean not leaving the EU at all. We are leaving the EU and seeking a bold and ambitious partnership with the EU from the outside. Such an agreement will be in the interests of both the UK and the EU.

Stephen Gethins: The Minister will be aware from visiting the University of Glasgow, where I suspect he met Professor Anton Muscatelli, that there has been a debate among academia and the business community, and on a cross-party basis in Scotland, about having differential immigration systems in the UK. That could help to bridge the gap between England and Scotland on this issue. What consideration has his Department given to the differential immigration systems in other countries around the world?

Mr Walker: We are carefully considering all the elements of the White Paper that the Scottish Government presented to us. On immigration, we are aware that we have to meet the needs of the whole of the UK, including all its industries and all parts of the United Kingdom. I did indeed meet Professor Muscatelli and had a very useful conversation with him. That is part of the stakeholder engagement process that our Department has been undertaking throughout all the parts of the United Kingdom to make sure that we are looking at the opportunities of EU exit, as well as the risks.

We are looking for a mutually beneficial deal. In our future relationship with the EU, we want clarity and certainty. We want to take control of our laws.

Mr Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Walker: In one moment. We want to control immigration but recognise that that means meeting the needs of our economy, as well as the desire of the British people to see greater control. We also want to secure the rights of EU nationals in the UK and UK nationals in the EU, to ensure free trade and to co-operate in the fight against organised crime and terrorism. As we have discussed, we see significant opportunities for continued co-operation on education, science and research. Would the hon. Gentleman like to intervene?

Nadine Dorries (in the Chair): Order. Absolutely not. Mr MacNeil, if you wish to intervene in a debate, you should arrive at the beginning, not halfway through in order to do nothing other than make an intervention on behalf of the gallery. I am not allowing it.

Mr MacNeil: On a point of order, Ms Dorries.

Nadine Dorries (in the Chair): No, absolutely not.

Mr Walker: We seek a mutually beneficial relationship of friendship and co-operation. Our future as the United Kingdom is one where this Government will continue to protect and strengthen our precious Union of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. That will continue to be true as our whole Union and its constituent parts withdraw from the EU.

There has been significant intergovernmental engagement between the four Governments since the referendum result. The Prime Minister's first visit following the referendum result was to Edinburgh, followed quickly by Cardiff and Belfast. She recently spoke in Glasgow and was in Swansea with my Secretary of State only on Monday. We are committed to continuing to engage fully with the Scottish Government, the Welsh Government and the Northern Ireland Executive as we move forward into the negotiations and prepare for a smooth and orderly exit from the EU for all of us.

We will absolutely continue with our commitment to workers' rights, which the hon. Member for North East Fife referred to. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has often pointed out that many aspects of UK law go well beyond EU law in terms of those commitments. We also want to continue working with our friends and neighbours to meet our environmental commitments well into the future.

At this momentous time, it is more important than ever that we face the future together, taking forward our shared interest in the UK being an open, successful, global nation in future. As member states of the European Union meet this week to discuss the history and future of the European project, we wish our EU partners well. At the end of the negotiations, the UK will no longer be an EU member state, but it will be a close ally and friend. A strong partnership between the UK and the EU is in the interests of both, and we congratulate all the EU's members on this important anniversary.

Question put and agreed to.

11.24 am

Sitting suspended.

UN International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination

[MR GARY STREETER *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the UN International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

I am pleased to be having this debate on the day that the United Nations has declared an international day for the elimination of racial discrimination. The theme this year is racial profiling and incitement to hatred, including in the context of migration. I wonder whether the UN had any particular person in mind when it came up with that theme. I hope that, if Donald Trump is watching, he might send us a tweet.

Why this day? On 21 March 1960, at a peaceful demonstration in Sharpeville, South Africa, police turned their guns on protesters and started shooting. They killed 69 people and injured hundreds more. Therefore, each year, the international community comes together to observe this day. In South Africa, it is human rights day, a public holiday to commemorate the lives lost in the fight for democracy and equal human rights. Until now, Parliament has not fully and formally acknowledged this day. As the MP for Brent Central, the most diverse constituency in Europe, I am pleased to be leading this debate.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend and neighbouring MP for bringing this important debate to the House. She mentions the diverse constituency that she is proud to represent here in Parliament. Our constituencies are close to each other and share areas such as Kilburn High Road, where there is a lot of racial profiling of black men. I am sure that she will come to this in her speech, but does she agree that something must be done about the racial profiling of young black men in the Kilburn and Brent area? It is adding to the disillusionment of many in our society.

Dawn Butler: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Racial profiling is not a good way to police communities; in fact, it builds resentment and adds to the problem. On this day when we acknowledge and try to eliminate racial discrimination, that issue should and must be addressed.

It is important that our Parliament marks this day. Until we live in a post-racial world, we must be vigilant. I am sure that that world will happen, but I am also sure that it will not happen in my lifetime. Our UK Parliament is the mother of all Parliaments, and we are at our best when we lead the way. While I am talking about leading the way, I thank Mr Speaker for allowing us to acknowledge this day in the state rooms at a wonderful reception last week.

I hear people say all the time, “I’m not racist; I have black friends. I haven’t got a racist bone in my body.” We need to wake up. I am not sure how many people watched ITV last night, but I did. It showed an undercover sting against a right-wing terrorist group that, although banned from the UK, still exists. We must be careful. Given the imminent triggering of article 50 and the election of President Trump, whom I mentioned earlier, this day is becoming extremely important.

We are witnessing a surge in intolerance, lack of understanding of different communities and dehumanising of individuals. Dehumanising a person makes it easier to justify inhumane actions towards them: “They’re not like us. They’re different. They have different colour skin. They have an accent. How can we trust them?” We should be embracing differences; they make us stronger, not weaker. We should be fighting poverty and global warming, not other human beings.

I sometimes wonder what UKIP expected when it published that awful “Breaking Point” poster depicting a crowd of brown-skinned refugees. Yes, UKIP’s side won the referendum, but racist views have increased, along with hatred and violence. Sexism, racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, anti-refugee sentiment—all the tools of hate are on the rise.

Tulip Siddiq: My hon. Friend is being generous with her time. Does she agree that the Government should be doing more to take in refugees, that the abandonment of the Dubs amendment, under which we were meant to help unaccompanied children around the world to come to our country, should be condemned and that we should be doing more?

Dawn Butler: I agree with my hon. Friend. The thing about hate and racism is that it will stop only when we stop it. The Dubs amendment was important. It gave hope to people fleeing circumstances that we too would flee if we were faced with them. Rowing back on that commitment was hugely disappointing.

We must stand up for the rights and dignity of all. An attack on one minority community is an attack on all communities. Every person is entitled to human rights without discrimination. Protecting somebody else’s rights does not in any way diminish our own. Last week, I asked a question on the Floor of the House using British Sign Language. I did it to raise awareness for deaf and hard of hearing people, so that their language could have legal status. That in no way diminished my rights; it only enhanced theirs.

Next week, when the Prime Minister triggers article 50, Parliament will close for two weeks for Easter. During that two weeks, it is even more important that we are vigilant for signs of the aftermath. We must look out for our friends, our neighbours and people we do not even know. We must not forget that we are all a minority at some point, and we should treat people as we would like to be treated.

Angela Davis said that

“it is not enough to be non-racist; we must be anti-racist.”

Hate crimes have spiked since 23 June 2016. Reported hate crime rose by 57%. Seventy-nine per cent. were race hate crimes, 12% were sexual orientation hate crimes, 7% were religious hate crimes, 6% were disability hate crimes and 1% were transgender hate crimes. However, those are just numbers, which do not tell the full horror of those hate crimes, so here are a few examples of incidents that have occurred over the past few months.

Anti-Semitic stickers were plastered on a Cambridge synagogue. Three young males racially abused a US army veteran on a Manchester tram, telling him to go back to Africa. A British Muslim woman was grabbed by her hijab as she was having dinner in a fish and chip shop. A letter was sent telling Poles to go home as a fire was started in their Plymouth home. An Edinburgh taxi

[Dawn Butler]

driver from Bangladesh was dragged by his beard. A 40-year-old Polish national was killed because he was allegedly heard speaking Polish. A 31-year-old pregnant woman was kicked in her stomach and lost her baby. On Valentine's day, a gay couple were attacked by five men for falling asleep on each other. I could go on.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for bringing this critically important debate. She will know that, in Newcastle, we are celebrating Freedom City 2017, marking 50 years since Martin Luther King came to Newcastle to accept an honorary doctorate and spoke about the three great evils: poverty, racism and war. The examples that she has given show us, if we did not know already, that we must embed the legacy of Martin Luther King's work and continue the struggle, because we are far from living in a country where people are judged by the content of their character rather than the colour of their skin.

Dawn Butler: I absolutely concur. Martin Luther King was a great orator. He also said:

"I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be...this is the interrelated structure of reality...all mankind is tied together...in a single garment of destiny."

Until we realise that, we will never live in the post-racial world that we hope for and that was Martin Luther King's dream.

Some racial discrimination is from unconscious bias, but some is overt. There are elected people who hold overtly racist views, such as the councillor who argued that she was not racist—even after proclaiming that she had a "problem" with "negroes" because there was "something about their faces". You could not make it up! Racial and ethnic discrimination occurs every day, hindering progress for millions of people around the world. Racism and intolerance take various forms, from denying individuals the basic principles of equality to fuelling ethnic hatred. At their worst, they can turn people to violence and even genocide. They destroy lives and communities and poison people's minds. The struggle against racism and discrimination is a priority, not just for us in the UK but for the international community.

For anyone who has experienced racism, not much of what I have said today will shock them, but it highlights just how far we still have to go and the importance of educating the young and facing the uncomfortable truth so that history does not repeat itself. Sometimes we have to fight a new, mutant strain of racism, so we always have to be aware of what is going on around us and stand up for other people as well as ourselves.

My parents were migrants who came to this country and suffered racism. Actually, I like to call them expats, because they left their home in the warm, sunny climes of Jamaica to come to cold England, full of smog and fog, to help the country to rebuild after the war. When we speak to our elders, we are acutely aware that racism and hate are not necessarily new. There are pictures of racists here on the walls of Parliament. I remember my first office; I had to look at Enoch Powell's face every time I walked in, because it was right there at the entrance. Sometimes I would make a rude sign at the photo when I walked in, but in general it upset me.

I decided that I did not want to start my day by being upset, so I insisted that the picture was moved. If the House authorities had not removed it, I would have removed it permanently.

We must also remember Britain's part in the slave trade, which is the foundation of much of our national prosperity. It was justified by the empire and the language of racial superiority, but that is not what defines us. It is a part of our shameful history, but surely there must come a time when it stops—when it no longer matters that a person is different from us and when we appreciate what we have in common. The Mayor of London has spoken about choosing

"hope over fear and unity over division".

When we see only hate, that hate becomes so great that it transforms into something else, where the problem is not just the colour of someone's skin, but their accent or the fact that they are committed to fight for someone else's rights.

At the height of the xenophobic atmosphere, an MP and leading migrants advocate was murdered. The murderer gave his name in court as "Death to traitors, freedom for Britain". That MP, Jo Cox, was my friend and the friend of others in this place and beyond. Even after the hateful, despicable crime by that terrorist, her family wanted us to "love like Jo" and repeat her mantra that

"we are far more united and have far more in common than that which divides us."—[*Official Report*, 3 June 2015; Vol. 596, c. 674-75.]

That is why it is important to acknowledge this day with the rest of the international community. We must unite together with one voice and build bridges, not walls. As William Shakespeare wrote:

"If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die?"

My theme tune when I face discrimination is a song written and recorded by the British singer-songwriter Labi Siffre. It was inspired by a television documentary on apartheid in South Africa that showed a film of police killing black people. It is "(Something Inside) So Strong". These are the words:

"The higher you build your barriers, the taller I become
The further you take my rights away, the faster I will run
You can deny me, you can decide to turn your face away
No matter, 'cause there's something inside so strong
I know that I can make it, though you're doing me wrong, so wrong
You thought that my pride was gone—oh no
There's something inside so strong
The more you refuse to hear my voice, the louder I will sing
You hide behind walls of Jericho—your lies will come tumbling
Deny my place in time, you squander wealth that's mine
My light will shine so brightly it will blind you
Because there's something inside so strong."

I hope that the Government commit to marking this day each year, so we never forget to remember those who gave their lives for equal rights and to celebrate the beauty of our diversity. After all, we have only a short time on this earth.

Mr Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Colleagues, we have about eight minutes for each Back-Bench speech.

2.46 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. I particularly thank the hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) for bringing such an important debate to Westminster Hall today. Her speech was delivered so eloquently and with such high emotion, which is only right, given the topic. It will be remembered in Parliament for years to come.

Rights to equality and non-discrimination are cornerstones of human rights law. Today, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights is asking people to “Stand up for Someone’s Rights Today”, which is an important step that I believe we should all be taking. I will speak briefly about three main issues today: the impact of discrimination on the individual, the impact on refugee communities, which are extremely vulnerable, and why we must learn lessons from the past and never forget them.

Racial discrimination is surely toxic, not only for the individual who experiences it, but for society. It has an impact on people’s self-esteem and it can even lead to mental health issues, such as depression, loneliness, isolation or feeling ostracised. Discrimination closes us to experience, rather than opening our appreciation for diversity, culture and religion. It is an unhealthy position to take: it undermines the self-worth of those who experience it, but it is also unhealthy for those who discriminate, because it closes them off from experiences of culture, religion and tolerance that would enhance their own being.

Education is key, particularly for younger generations at school and beyond. The internet can widen our horizons, but it can also be a place where people experience discrimination and intolerance. Surely we should be looking at the UK Government’s policy on that and at how they work with providers. The internet can help us to connect. It can be positive; it can help us to speak to people from different nations, understand their experiences and learn about their lives. It can be a doorway to understanding, but it must be used appropriately. It can be very important in the future, given the way in which we can link with people from right across the world in an interactive manner.

Secondly, racial discrimination can impact upon disenfranchised communities, particularly refugee populations. It is not helpful to ban particular races from entering countries, and I implore the President of the United States to reconsider his actions in that regard, because his policy has no actual basis in risk assessment or risk management. Such a heuristic measure does nothing to promote understanding, tolerance or integration, and in the long run it does little for security.

We must understand that often refugees are fleeing conflict, torture, starvation, malnutrition or other significant life-impacting situations—things that we would never want ourselves or our families to experience. As a member of the International Development Committee, I was privileged to visit the refugee camps in Jordan and Lebanon at the end of last year and to meet and speak with refugee families and their children. I was able to interact with the young children in their schools, including those who were traumatised and had not been able to speak for days or even weeks, and needed mental health

care—those needed expert help and assistance. I was told about the difficulties that host communities experienced in integrating large numbers of refugees, and the strains that Governments felt were being placed on local jobs and on education and health systems. Both Jordan and Lebanon have done much to address these issues, but there is much more to do.

When Governments do not allow refugees to live, work or engage properly in local communities, it creates a “them and us” attitude. It reduces tolerance and understanding. Integration, tolerance-building and learning from each other, are key to the way forward. We should encourage Governments to progress in this manner, but we also need to look at our own role, particularly over the Dubs amendment, and our attitude to refugees. Lone children in Europe; those who need our assistance; those who are vulnerable; those who may be disabled; those who have no parents to help to look after them—surely we must be able to open our hearts to those children and, more importantly, offer them refuge.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): One thing that severely worries me is that I get many letters from constituents who say that the matter of children coming into this country is of deep concern to them. I write back and say, “I have not had one constituent who has said to me, ‘I will take a child into my house’.” That really worries me, when we compare it with what happened in 1938-39 with the Kindertransport. We have changed in the way we approach this sort of thing.

Dr Cameron: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. We must open our hearts and our homes to lone children. It is incumbent upon us as a progressive society to do so, and I know that local authorities in Scotland are keen to accept more children and more child refugees.

Bob Stewart: Local authorities, not families.

Mr Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Order.

Dr Cameron: I know from speaking to Save the Children that those children are very much in need. Many of them are going missing; we do not know what has become of them. As a country with a responsibility in the world, surely we must take that very seriously.

Thirdly, learning lessons from the past is important. If we cannot learn lessons from the holocaust and ensure that such dehumanisation of a race never occurs again, then there is little that we can learn in this world at all. It is incumbent upon us to challenge discrimination wherever it occurs—in schools, colleges, the workplace and beyond. Political leaders must lead and ensure that anti-Semitism and other forms of discrimination are challenged in all of our systems.

We all have a part to play, from the nursery teacher teaching our toddlers to the university lecturer to politicians. We must challenge discrimination at all levels of society. Only then will we achieve true equality: when we stand up, stand together and ensure that we are no longer divided but that we celebrate diversity.

2.54 pm

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter.

[Naz Shah]

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) for securing this debate. Her powerful words made me emotional. This debate is so timely. This day gives us an opportunity to reflect on the past, the present and the future, and to address the stark discrimination that so many people in this country face. While we have made some strides to improve opportunities for those of all races, we have to recognise the challenges and the disparity that remain. We have so much more to do.

The past has been marked by successes—individual successes, like the police chief superintendent from West Yorkshire police, Mabs Hussain, who is one of only two officers from a black and minority ethnic background to attain that rank in Yorkshire. I recently held an event to celebrate him, but he said then that he hopes to see a day when there is no longer a need to celebrate the success of individuals from BME backgrounds and when people like him are just the norm, but sadly they are not. He is an exception to the rule. He has overcome more difficult odds than those faced by his white counterparts. The truth is that although we see individual successes that can inspire, they are sadly only a footnote to the systematic failures that we see. That is a harsh truth and a harsh reality.

Chi Onwurah: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. On the success of some and the lack of success of many, does she agree that the loss of potential and achievement from which the United Kingdom suffers because of the challenges faced by this generation and particularly by the previous generation—the generation of the parents of my hon. Friend the Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler)—means that the UK suffers economically as well as socially? It is in our economic interests as well as our social interests to ensure that everyone can realise their potential.

Naz Shah: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I absolutely agree with her sentiments.

It is a harsh reality that many young black and Asian children, and children of other ethnicity, grow up in this country without the same opportunities as their peers. It is a harsh truth for those who will work just as hard but will be paid less—those who have their chances stifled from birth because of the colour of their skin.

Tulip Siddiq: Is my hon. Friend aware of the Equalities and Human Rights Commission report from last year that showed that BME people with degrees are two and a half times less likely to have a job than their white counterparts, and are more likely to be paid less—an average of 21.3% less—than their white counterparts when they enter the employment world?

Naz Shah: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention, and I will mention that later in my speech—I am very much aware of it and I agree with her.

Sadly, what I have described is a well-evidenced truth, as my hon. Friend has just pointed out. We only need to look at the House of Commons research on representation in public life from June 2016 to see the scale of the challenge before us. Those from BME backgrounds are severely under-represented in all the professions—not

only here, in both Houses, but as judges, teachers, in local government, in the armed forces, and particularly as police. BME representation in police forces is 5.5%. Twenty-four years since Stephen Lawrence and 18 years since the Macpherson review, we are no closer to having a representative police force. That is not progress. BME representation in public life shows marginalisation at best and pure discrimination at worst.

In August 2016, the EHRC published a major review of race equality in Britain. It revealed a post-Brexit rise in hate crime and long-term systemic unfairness and race inequality, including a justice system where black people are more likely to be the victims of crime while also being three times more likely to be charged and sentenced if they commit a crime. Race remains the most commonly recorded motivation of hate crime in England and Wales, at 82%. That is not equality.

Despite educational improvements, black, Asian and ethnic minority people with a degree are two and a half times more likely to be unemployed than their white equivalents, and black workers with degrees are likely to be paid 23.1% less than their white equivalents. That wage gap exists at all levels of education, but it increases as people become more qualified. That is not equality, and it shows that the challenge is increasing. Since 2010, there has been a 49% increase in unemployment among 16 to 24-year-olds from ethnic minority backgrounds compared with a fall of 2% among those who are white. White workers have seen an increase of 16% in insecure work, while the rise among black and Asian workers has been 40%. Pakistani, Bangladeshi and black adults are more likely to live in substandard accommodation than white people. Black African women in the UK have a mortality rate four times higher than that of white women and are seven times more likely to be detained under the Mental Health Act 2007. That is not equality; it is systematic failure.

While we stand here today and mark the UN's international day for the elimination of racial discrimination, we must be mindful of the challenges. We must remember the reality that people of ethnicity face, even in developed countries such as ours. In February 2017, Baroness McGregor-Smith's review of race in the workplace was published. It demonstrated how unequal our workplaces are, how the chances of those from BME backgrounds are stifled and how over-qualified BME workers are less likely to be promoted than less qualified employees. The review makes 26 recommendations, all of which I call upon the Government to implement.

Leaving the EU gives us an opportunity to decide what kind of country we want to be. A report by the Women and Equalities Committee considered the need for strong equality legislation after we leave the EU and made key recommendations, which, I would argue, the Government are morally obliged to enact. [Interruption.] I am not sure of the time of my speech.

Mr Gary Streeter (in the Chair): You have plenty of time. Carry on, please.

Naz Shah: The hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), who is no longer in his seat, mentioned constituencies, and it is important to touch upon that issue before I close my speech. He said that we in Britain have changed regarding refugees, in that families do not want to take Syrian refugee children. I am very

proud to come from Bradford. It is a city of sanctuary. We have held events in Bradford specifically aimed at people taking refugee children, and families are coming forward. I have had numerous messages from individuals asking how they can take in children from Syria and play their part. Why has it taken so long? I am a member of the Home Affairs Committee, and we have taken evidence from councils that say they have spaces. Regarding the Dubs amendment and how Britain has changed, I feel there is a venomous narrative, created by the likes of parties such as the UK Independence party, but we as Britain are greater than that. We as people are greater than that. Post-Trump and post-Brexit, we must concentrate even more on ensuring that we build those bridges.

I call on the Minister to consider all three of the reports I have mentioned, as a stepping stone which, if followed through, could help to steer us on a different path—one of real, not just imagined, equality. As Baroness McGregor-Smith wrote in her review, the time for talking is over; now is the time to act. That will require a concerted and sustained effort from us all, but the solutions are already there, if we choose to apply them.

3.3 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Streeter. I am very pleased to contribute to the debate, and I join others in commending the hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) on her passionate and deeply personal speech.

I still vividly remember when I first discovered what race discrimination was. At the age of eight or nine, I was watching the TV in my granny's house and I realised that there was a lot of stuff in the news about something called anti-apartheid protests, which at the time I could not even pronounce. I asked my mum what it meant, and she explained that it was about a system in which black children and white children were not allowed to go to the same school or play against or with each other in football matches, a system in which black people and white people were not allowed to go on the same bus or to the same shops. Basically, they were supposed to live their entire lives without ever interacting with each other, except, of course, where black people were working as domestic servants, or near-slaves, for white people. Even as a wee boy—I was not an angel; I was still telling the kind of jokes in the playground that we now try to persuade children not to tell—I could not imagine anyone wanting to live in a society like that. Where I grew up there was not a big ethnic minority population, but I could not imagine wanting to see people divided by barbed wire fences because of the colour of their skin, and almost 50 years later I still cannot understand that. I cannot imagine why anyone would choose that as a way to run a society.

Sometimes it is not even anything as much as the colour of someone's skin. Another clear memory I have, again about South Africa, is that as a teenager I was watching a TV documentary about a wee girl whose parents were white Afrikaners. She was born with white skin, but somehow managed to get facial features that meant she was classed as a negro under the South African system. Her parents refused to let her mix with the blacks, but other white parents did not want their children mixing with her because they thought that she was a negro, so the poor wee soul went to about five

different schools as a result of the outcomes of court cases and education board appeals. I could not understand why the parents did not see that as an indictment of the apartheid system under which they lived. The case even led to a change in the race laws in South Africa, not to let black children and white children play together in the playground—that would never have happened—but to say that if two parents were certified white Afrikaner, their children could not be classified as anything else. That completely destroys any shred of credibility that the argument that people are somehow born to be superior or inferior ever had. It is a bit like Crufts having to pass a law saying that it is not permitted to breed two pedigree springer spaniels and call the offspring an Alsatian or a poodle. So even as almost a young man, I was aware that people were trying to put some kind of scientific justification on racism, and I could also see that anything approaching common sense said that that just did not add up.

Something else I saw in that documentary helped me to understand not where racism comes from but how it can be perpetuated. A teacher of a class of white six-year-olds was explaining why the blacks were inferior, talking about how the “funny” shape of their eyes, ears, mouths and noses, and the unclean colour of their skin, meant that they had clearly been made to be inferior. Today, that would, I hope, horrify even white South Africans, but at that time it was how one of the wealthiest and supposedly most developed countries was bringing up its children. It is not surprising that it is taking a long time for those children to realise the error of their ways.

Of course, we do not do that these days, we do not bring up our children to support racial prejudices—except that we do. Perhaps we do not do it in the same way, by getting teachers to teach the creed of racism to our children, but we do it through what we print on the front pages of our newspapers. If we look back through the past year or two of front-page headlines in some newspapers, the word “migrant” appears more than almost any other word, and never in any context other than to create fear and hatred and continue to paint the myth that if someone is an immigrant they are somehow a danger, rather than a benefit, to society. I have even heard Members of the House of Commons speaking in debates in the Chamber in such a way that makes an explicit assumption that we have to vet every single Syrian refugee because the fact that they come from a predominantly Muslim country somehow makes them more likely to be a danger to us than the criminals we are quite capable of growing among the white working-class and middle-class populations around the UK's towns and cities.

It is that kind of assumption that has been identified as the main theme of this UN international day for the elimination of racial discrimination. The UN talks about racial profiling and incitement to hatred, including in the context of migration, and as someone said earlier, there are one or two people who could do with heeding those words very carefully indeed. I do not think it is a mistake to link racial profiling with incitement to hatred, because I cannot see any purpose behind such profiling other than racial discrimination, and I cannot see any way that racial discrimination can ever avoid going towards incitement of hatred, racial violence and even worse.

[Peter Grant]

Somebody has already mentioned the New York declaration for refugees and migrants. It is worth reminding ourselves of what that says:

“We strongly condemn acts and manifestations of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance against refugees and migrants, and the stereotypes often applied to them...Demonizing refugees or migrants offends profoundly against the values of dignity and equality for every human being, to which we have committed ourselves.”

Those are very fine words. Sadly, too many of the Governments whose heads signed up to those words show something different by their actions. Imagine if every child in America was asked to recite those words as well as singing the “Star-Spangled Banner” at the start of the school day. Imagine if every politician in these islands or elsewhere had to recite those words as part of their oath of office. Imagine that as well as—some people would say instead of—a brief period of communal prayer in the Christian tradition in this Chamber, we all stood on camera and recited those or similar words each and every day before we set about our deliberations. That would at least send a message that what we are here for is to promote the equality of human beings and not to promote inequality and discrimination. Why can we not do something like that?

The horrific statistics that the Equality and Human Rights Commission produced in its report last year have been mentioned. Although the statistics are based on research in England and Wales, it would be foolish and complacent to suggest we would find anything significantly different in most parts of Scotland or in most parts of the rest of the United Kingdom. For all the fine words, and for all the length of time that we have been claiming to be an equal society, we are not.

I want to finish with some personal comments from Baroness McGregor-Smith in the foreword to the document that was referred to earlier. She says:

“Speaking on behalf of so many from a minority background, I can simply say that all we ever wanted was to be seen as an individual, just like anyone else.”

There is no reason on earth why that simple dream should ever be beyond the reach of any human being on God’s earth.

3.11 pm

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): It is pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Streeter. I also commend the hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) for securing this debate and for her truly excellent speech today.

I was interested to read that the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has reminded Governments around the world that they have a legal obligation to stop hate speech and hate crimes, and has called on people everywhere to

“stand up for someone’s rights.”

He said:

“Politics of division and the rhetoric of intolerance are targeting racial, ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities, and migrants and refugees. Words of fear and loathing can, and do, have real consequences.”

The hon. Member for Brent Central spoke eloquently about those killed in Sharpeville, South Africa, when

they demonstrated against apartheid laws. In recognising that and then proclaiming the international day in 1966, the UN General Assembly called on the international community to redouble its efforts to eliminate all forms of racial discrimination. But here we are, 57 years on, with so much to do. This issue affects everything. For so many people all over the world, the spectre of racism and discrimination looms large over their daily lives.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): On that point, in a 2016 ruling the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination asked the UK Government to facilitate the Chagossians’ return to their islands home and also to properly compensate them. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government must respect the rights of the Chagossian people? The Government must uphold international law and take proper action to allow them to return home.

Kirsten Oswald: I thank my hon. Friend for that useful intervention. I entirely agree with her point.

For many more people racism is an occasional concern, but that concern still has the potential to destroy their lives. It stifles their potential and that of their children. It causes people to live in fear and despair. How can it be that after all these years, so many people today still have such cause for concern here and around the world, and such starkly different life chances, simply because of their race, their religious beliefs or where they came from?

I make no apology for repeating today the concerns that I highlighted in another debate in this Chamber recently. I said I was worried and fearful in a way I had never been previously for the future of my children, who are mixed-race. That speech resulted in my receiving my very own racist abuse, but that is absolutely nothing to how people must feel when they are routinely treated differently and unfairly, and abused, because of their racial or religious background.

Let us be quite clear. Here and now there is a feeling bubbling away that it is somehow becoming more acceptable than it has been in my lifetime to treat people differently because of the colour of their skin, because they are seen as different. That needs to be acknowledged and addressed. There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that the way to address it is for Governments and people in our position in Parliaments all over the world to stand up and speak out, and, as the hon. Member for Brent Central put it, to be anti-racist. The silence of politicians and the lack of concern and action is exactly what is needed to let racism and discrimination grow and take hold.

The politics of Trump and the politics of UKIP are sleekit, and there is a huge danger that we will allow their nasty racist nonsense to creep into our daily lives. It is absolutely our job here to push against that and to make sure that people know that we will always do so.

The more irresponsible political language and discourse becomes, the worse the impact on anyone who appears different or who can so easily be stereotyped and put into somebody else’s make-uppy box. As the UN has made clear, such issues face people all over the world and, as we have heard, people who are fleeing across the world. Imagine fleeing persecution, war and terror and meeting with hostility, suspicion and discrimination. Is that really what we are all about?

Every time we turn our backs on people who are being treated badly or fleeing for their lives, we make the situation worse for many people, even beyond those directly affected. What about the child refugees, all alone, whom the UK Government cannot bring themselves to let in? Turning them away sends a very powerful message: if you are different, you are not wanted. Thank God they are not my children.

Every time a politician who should know better—who does know better—uses race as a political tool, they are not only failing themselves, but failing so many other people who deserve for all of us to be focused on fighting discrimination. Yes, Sadiq Khan, that is you. I wish that he would hear the eloquent words of the hon. Member for Brent Central.

Maybe it would be easy for me to say, “Look at Scotland; look at the Scottish Government.” It is true that one of the big things that attracted me to join the SNP was the focus on diversity and inclusion. It is true that the Scottish Government have done much to foster a positive sense of diversity and to welcome those fleeing, and I am proud of all of that. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) said, this is not an area where we can have any degree of complacency. For all the important work that has been done, there is always more to do and there are always more issues to be addressed. So we work hard at that all the time because it is important, and because it is the right thing to do for all of us.

In concluding, I want to reflect on someone who made a big impression on me, who I was delighted to hear our First Minister quote in her welcoming and inclusive speech to our conference on Saturday. The late Bashir Ahmad MSP was a truly inspirational man. He embodied much of what is best about our modern, diverse, open Scotland. Born in Amritsar, he came to Scotland from Pakistan and was elected as our first Asian MSP in 2003. He campaigned tirelessly to give a voice to communities that had been little heard from, and we all benefit now from the steps he took then. When he launched Scots Asians for Independence, he gave a speech saying:

“It isn’t important where you come from, what matters is where we are going together as a nation.”

Now more than ever that should resonate with all of us here and give us pause for thought as we go about our jobs.

3.18 pm

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) on making me cry twice in a week. Thanks very much for that. The first time was last week at the beautiful event held at the Speaker’s House to mark this day. Today, it was understandable that there were few dry eyes in here.

On 21 March 1960 an 82-year-old stonemason in Pretoria, South Africa, wrote a poem in Scottish Gaelic with a Swahili refrain condemning the bloody massacre in Sharpeville of 69 black South Africans, many of them shot in the back. Originally from the Isle of Mull, Duncan Livingstone was a Boer war veteran who had worked and lived in Glasgow before emigrating to South Africa and spending the rest of his life there. What was clear to that Hebridean Glaswegian, whose work is still visible in the city today, was clear to right-thinking

people across the world, and in 1966 the UN declared 21 March the international day for the elimination of racial discrimination.

While we seldom see such blatant and violent racism on such a scale in developed countries, at least today, pernicious racial discrimination remains in most if not all societies. Just because most of us will never experience it and most of us will rarely witness it, that does not mean it does not happen. Some of it is in a blatant form. I did not want to intervene on the hon. Member for Brent Central, because the point she was making about race hate crimes was too important, but I will say that the increase in Scotland was very much less. I say that not to say “Scotland good, England and Wales bad”; I say it because I think it has an awful lot to do with the difference in political rhetoric from each Government. It does make a difference.

We have not eliminated racism in Scotland. Far from it. Let me fast-forward to Glasgow, 50 years on from when Duncan Livingstone wrote that Gaelic-Swahili poem. About eight years ago I accompanied a Sudanese friend to the housing office, because I could not understand why, as a homeless person, he had not been offered accommodation—anything at all—one year on from becoming homeless, which happened as a result of his refugee status being granted. The housing office informed me that he was not classed as homeless because he was staying with a friend. “But he’s sleeping on a yoga mat on the living room floor, and has been for a year,” I said. What did they say in response? They told me that that did not necessarily constitute homelessness—actually it does—because “lots of Africans are used to sleeping on the ground. They like it.” That is blatant. He was denied his legal rights. It was only eight years ago. That is racial discrimination.

I think the really dangerous racism, other than institutionalised racism, is that which is under the radar. It is so subtle that unless you are the recipient, you probably would not pick up on it. It is not always intentional—most people do not want to be racist—but I have heard people speak about black friends of mine not in critical terms, but saying how they are quite aggressive and forceful, when they are nothing of the sort—they are simply expressing themselves. We all need to be honest with ourselves about it, because confronting our own thinking is the best way to change it. I am not excluding myself from that. My partner is black and I have had people telling me that therefore I must not be capable of racism; but that is such a dangerous way to think. I am subjected to media images and propaganda the same as anyone else. None of us is immune to thinking or acting in a racially discriminatory fashion, but we are all capable of challenging our own thoughts and monitoring our actions, and morally obliged to do so.

When I say none of us is immune, I primarily mean none of us who are white. I sometimes read comments from white people who say “But black people are just as racist”. I keep saying we need to learn and educate ourselves, and I am going to share something about my education around 20 years ago when I would hear people say that. I did not really agree with the statement, but I was not sure why. It did not sound right to me, but I would have agreed at the very least that there was racism from some black people towards white people. Then a good friend—a Mancunian Pakistani with a bit of Glaswegian thrown in—explained that

[Anne McLaughlin]

while there might be prejudice from a black person to a white person, as that black person probably is not as propped up by the levers of power, as embedded in the UK's institutions, as immersed in the establishment of the UK, it cannot be called racism. It is simply an opinion that ordinarily has little impact on the white person's life. Racism—I am not trying to define it here—is about the desire and ability to exercise power over someone because of the colour of their skin and the colour of one's own skin. The world is still weighted in favour of white people. The UK is still weighted in favour of white people.

That brings me to the biggest problem as I see it, which is institutionalised racism. Who runs the judiciary? White people. Who runs the Government? Primarily white people. The civil service, Churches and media? White people. As for some sections of the media and the responsibility they have, we can talk about the irresponsible way they behave—most Scots will remember when every drunk person in a TV drama series or a film had to be Scottish. We hated that, unless it was “Rab C. Nesbitt”, of course, but at least we had positive role models too. Black children growing up rarely had positive black role models. It was not that they did not exist, just that they never got to see them. Just as importantly, neither did we. Instead, when black people were on TV it was generally a negative portrayal. My partner Graham—he is Jamaican, and his mother is from Grenada—told me that when Trevor McDonald came on the news, it was an event. There he was, a black man being listened to and taken seriously. Now, he says, it does not even register with him when a black person is on TV and being taken seriously. He did add, however, that it is absolutely right that the next step has to be for them to get parity in their industry.

I was going to talk about increasing income disparity between people of different ethnicities as they become more qualified, but the hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) covered that for me, so I shall take the time instead to respond to a comment from the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) about letters he gets telling him that child refugees should be brought here; he said none of the letters offers to give them a bed. Who would write to their MP to go through that process? That is not what people do. No one writes to me offering to give a bed. It does not mean that those people are not out there. As we have heard, local authorities and Governments across these islands have said that they have places available, and people available to take children in.

Peter Grant: I cannot give any personal constituency experience, but I have good friends in a neighbouring constituency who wanted to offer their entire house to Syrian refugees. At that point the reason they could not was that the Home Office was not planning to let in enough Syrian refugees for Fife's quota to fill one big house in North East Fife. That may be why people have not offered to provide houses—because there simply were not enough refugees being allowed in to need the houses in the first place.

Anne McLaughlin: I sometimes do not know whether to laugh or cry in this place.

Tulip Siddiq: In my constituency lots of people want to take in children, but the sad truth is that the Government have said no more children are allowed in. Does the hon. Lady agree that perhaps the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) needs to have a word with the Government about the Dubs amendment before he starts talking about how people have changed in this country?

Anne McLaughlin: I agree. I wish that the hon. Member for Beckenham had stayed to listen, but perhaps we shall encourage him to read *Hansard*.

To return to the hiding of positive black role models, it is obviously worse for those who are not just black but women as well. I want to tell the story of Mary Seacole, in case hon. Members do not know it. She was a Scots Jamaican nurse who raised the money to go to the Crimean war and nurse war-wounded soldiers. What she did was not hugely different from what Florence Nightingale did, although some argue it was a lot better; I am not one of them. However, they were remembered differently. Mary Seacole finally got a statue last year. It sits outside St Thomas's Hospital facing the House of Commons. MPs will remember getting letters from the Nightingale Society saying “Seacole was no nurse. Fine, give her a statue, but not there—not in such a prominent place. Hide it away somewhere.” I thought, given that she was the first black woman in the UK to be honoured in such a way, that that behaviour was an absolute disgrace. What is also disgraceful is the fact that in 2016 she was the first black woman to have a named statue in her honour. The history books are full of white people—men, mainly, but white all the same—but history itself is full of inspiring people of all ethnicities.

I want us to be able to look back in not too many years' time and be horrified at some of the subtle racism we have heard about today. I want us to be embarrassed that only a tiny percentage of the Members of this House were from BME communities in 2017, and to ask how on earth we allowed our great institutions to be so white. If future generations look back at us and shake their heads in disbelief, so be it, because at least they will be living in a better time—a time when, I hope, discrimination based on someone's ethnicity will have been completely eliminated.

3.29 pm

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. I congratulate the hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) on securing the debate and on setting the scene so beautifully and eloquently, as always, and so passionately as we observe this day. It is of course important to mark this day. She said that we should be united together with one voice. In turbulent political times, it is wonderful to find any kind of platform where we can join together in one voice, so we should embrace that. My hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) rightly spoke about education being key, as it can widen horizons, but there is an increasing propensity for discrimination online. We should be concerned about young people's exposure to that.

The hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) spoke about black, Asian and minority ethnic representation in public life. It is absolutely clear that we need to

address that face on. She also gave some shocking statistics on employment. My hon. Friend the Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) gave an international perspective and said that we clearly are not an equal society. We are not, unless women are given their due and rightful place, are paid accordingly and have equal representation across society.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) always speaks out on these issues. She faced abuse when she spoke out for people suffering racial abuse. Unfortunately, that is what happens when we raise our voices—we find ourselves also the subject of abuse. She rightly expressed concern for her children, but she also spoke, rightly, of the need to help those in need, wherever they may be. She also spoke of the late Bashir Ahmad, who was my friend and a friend of my family. He is greatly missed, and his words ring true today, just as they did so many years ago.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin), while stealing some of my time—I am always happy to give it to her—gave her personal insight, as usual. She has fought for equality all her life and has never been afraid to speak out. I say to all those who speak out that it means so very much to us as members of the BAME community that people are prepared to do so. I make that point as a BAME MP. I am proud to be standing here with my fellow parliamentarians from the Scottish National party, who are all non-BAME parliamentarians but are happy to raise their voices and speak up for what is right.

I often face the question, “Where do you come from, Tasmina?”, which is followed up with the question, “No, but where do you really come from?” I want to take a couple of minutes to speak about the impact of racism on young people and children, because it endures and lasts a lifetime. You may not have considered this to be so, Mr Streeter, but as a child in Edinburgh—I was one of the first children of mixed marriage, which started to take place a number of years ago—I faced an awful lot of racial discrimination. I was called many names: golliwog, black Sambo, Paki—you name it, I got all of it. I was bullied at school, beaten up and so on, and I did my very best to keep it from my parents. My late father was from Pakistan, and the last thing I wanted as a young child was for him to feel guilty that it was because of him that I was facing that abuse. There are young children who feel the same way today.

What is of even greater concern in relation to my children and those of Members in the Chamber and those listening in to the debate is that, as well as that racial discrimination based on where someone comes from or the country someone’s parents are thought to come from, there is religion discrimination, too, which is of great concern to us all. Discrimination makes people feel inferior. What is the impact on later life? Women spend their whole lives working doubly hard to show they are good enough—triple hard if they are from the BAME community. They feel they have to do so much more than anyone else to earn their stripes. That is certainly something that I feel.

Women who have chosen to wear the hijab have experienced much discrimination, which is unacceptable. As we have heard from Members from all parties, it is a woman’s right to wear what she wants, when she wants, whatever that might be. We should always stand up for women in that respect. Racial discrimination and racial profiling do exist. I have been on international trips

with fellow MPs, and it might horrify you to learn, Mr Streeter, that the only person who gets stopped at immigration is me. I get taken away for questioning, and it is embarrassing. Let us be honest about what exists. My colleagues, including one who is sitting with us in Westminster Hall, have watched it happen.

In her conference speech at the weekend, our First Minister asked:

“What kind of country do we want to be?”

She has asked that on many an occasion, and a Member here today asked that. We should continually ask ourselves that question: what do we want our country to look like? What kind of impression do we want people to have of us, whether that is us in the UK or from our perspective in Scotland? I hope that we want to be an outward-looking country. We in Scotland pride ourselves on that. At our conference at the weekend, we had a fantastic session where we highlighted and profiled our BAME candidates who are standing in the forthcoming council elections. That was not a sideshow or a fringe event; it was main stage, because that is where BAME people should be in public life. I hope and trust that they found it as fulfilling as I did to watch. I am sure those in the audience enjoyed their contribution, as well.

The UK Government have allowed an obsession on immigration, targets and toxic rhetoric to develop. The phrases have become all too common. Those with power have tremendous platforms, and they should use their words to impact positively on people’s lives. If they do not do that, they impact negatively. They have to talk about being an inclusive, welcoming society on all the stages and at every opportunity they have. If they fail to do so, it is the people from BAME communities who face the consequences—our children, their children, refugees and people who are fleeing conflict and war to make this country their home—not them. We are so much better than that. If we are in a society where people are questioning whether we should be taking in refugees, we have to take a good look at ourselves and wonder, “What kind of platform have we created? What kind of society have we created that people even think they can say such things?”

There is much work to do, and I hope we can work together across the House on that. I ask the Minister to implore his colleagues in Government to use every platform they have to engage positively on the importance of immigration and how people from different backgrounds contribute not only to the economy, but to tradition, culture and all the things that should be making Scotland and the whole of the United Kingdom great.

3.37 pm

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): I thank every Member who has contributed this afternoon, but most especially I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler). Sadly, this debate is more important than ever before, as we try to eliminate that which divides us and celebrate that which unites us.

I had the privilege of being born and growing up in my hon. Friend’s constituency, in Willesden Green. The first 19 years of my life were spent there. Even in the 1960s, it was one of the most multicultural parts of Great Britain. It was something that we celebrated. Growing up there in the 1960s, it was normal to see people of all backgrounds, faiths, skin colours and

[*Fabian Hamilton*]

religions, whether that was in my street, my school or my home, where my father operated his office as a local solicitor. It was a shock to go to the University of York in 1974, where I seemed to be the blackest person in the city.

My father's experience in fleeing Europe in 1934 and coming to this country unable to speak English was very important in my upbringing and my understanding of what discrimination is about. He was fleeing an increasingly Nazi Europe, increasing intolerance towards Jews and increasing violence against Jews. He came to this country seeking sanctuary, which he was given. After school, he joined the British army. He had become a British citizen, and by then of course he spoke very good English. Fighting in occupied France was a lesson for him in why a united Europe was important and why racism and discrimination must be eliminated. He never spoke of that time in France, but he helped to set up the Willesden Friendship Society in the 1960s. People from all backgrounds and from all over the world came to our house in Jeymer Avenue and talked about how we could make our community much more multicultural and less discriminatory.

I am proud to now represent one of the most multicultural constituencies in Yorkshire, apart from that of my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah), of course. In north-east Leeds, we have perhaps a greater diversity, if not a greater majority of people from different backgrounds. Chapeltown is historically the place where people have come to seek refuge from other countries and from persecution to make a better life in Great Britain. They include Jews escaping the pogroms of the nineteenth century and people coming from parts of Africa to escape persecution today.

I was chair of the Leeds City Council race equality committee for six years and learned how we could adopt policies to try to bring our citizens together to share what we had in the great city of Leeds, my adopted home, and to create a better society for everybody. Chapeltown has the oldest West Indian carnival in the country; I am glad to say it is older even than that in Notting Hill, by one year. We celebrate our 50th anniversary this year. It is a coming together of people from all different backgrounds to celebrate carnival among ourselves, even if we have never visited the Caribbean.

A middle-aged woman, originally from the Philippines, came to see me shortly after the referendum campaign. She was in deep distress. This will echo a lot of the contributions made this afternoon: her distress was based on the fact that her next-door neighbour came up to her the day after the referendum, 24 June, and said, "Have you packed your bags yet?" She explained that she was British and had lived in this country for 20 years; she works as a nurse at Leeds General Infirmary. He said, "But have you packed your bags yet?" She said, "Why? I am not European." He said, "No. We voted yesterday for all of you lot to leave the country." That is the kind of division that we are seeing up and down our nation, from Scotland right down to Cornwall, and it is something that I know everyone in this room and in this House would agree is entirely reprehensible.

The struggle against apartheid, which many have referred to this afternoon, galvanised many of us in the '70s when I was growing up and when I was at university

and becoming politically aware—many of my friends and family were, too. South Africa and the struggle against apartheid brought many people into the Labour party and many other political parties—I would say all political parties represented in this House today. It was the struggle against the blatant discrimination and injustice that we saw on our TV screens that galvanised many of us into political action. It was certainly my political awakening.

We have heard some excellent contributions today. I was also almost in tears listening to the contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for Brent Central. I thank her very much for that. She said enhancing other people's rights does not diminish our rights. That should be a motto for all of us. Enhancing other people's rights does not affect us—it makes and helps to create the better society that we are all here to try to create.

In her typically gentle way, my good friend—I hope she will not mind my calling her that—the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) made a powerful point about her visit to the refugee families in Jordan and Lebanon with the International Development Committee. I have also made such a visit: I went to Azraq in Jordan in January, as a member of the Front-Bench team. She also said something important that relates back to the holocaust: that we must learn the lessons of the holocaust, to celebrate the diversity of our society. Just last Sunday, I was with the holocaust Survivors Friendship Association, in my constituency in Leeds, meeting with men and women now in their 90s—the youngest was 88—who survived the holocaust and still live today to tell the stories and to share the experience that they suffered. That is something we must never forget.

We heard excellent contributions from, for example, my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West, who always speaks so powerfully, on this subject and many others. We heard from the hon. Members for Glenrothes (Peter Grant), for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) and for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin). We heard an intervention from the gallant Member, the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). I am sorry he is not in his place. I have had many dealings with him. He is someone I admire enormously for what he has done in his military career and since he has been here in the House. He said something interesting about Syrian children. He said that not one of his constituents pleading for Syrian children to come and be looked after here by his constituents or anyone else has actually offered their home. One contribution this afternoon pointed out that people would not write to their MP to offer their home for a Syrian child or family, but I can tell you that I have received those letters. I am sure many of us have.

Mr Gary Streeter (in the Chair): So have I.

Fabian Hamilton: Many of us have had constituents saying, "I have spare bedrooms; come and use my bedroom. I am offering it to those families."

Let me conclude so that the Minister can answer the many excellent points that have been made this afternoon. We have heard condemnation—rightly so—of Nigel Farage's infamous "Breaking Point" poster, which was, of course, incredibly offensive to all of us, so I will not say any more about that, but I would like to ask the Minister about the lack of support for the rights of EU

nationals living in the UK after we leave the European Union. Can he say something about whether he believes that that has contributed to an increasingly hostile environment for EU nationals still living in the UK? What are the Government going to do to ensure that a message of zero tolerance towards racially motivated crimes in general gets broadcast? I know that the Minister is committed to that, but I would like to hear more about what he is going to do.

We have heard that the Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, has adopted, like Donald Trump, vitriolic rhetoric towards refugees and migrants, threatening to refuse entry to any non-Christian, while also putting up barbed wire fences and using tear gas to disperse crowds of refugees and migrants. Yet Hungary is still in the European Union. I hope the EU is able to do something about that.

It is worth remembering that, in many Western societies, it is still often the case that racial and religious minorities are one and the same. We need to adopt an approach to foreign policy challenges such as the refugee crisis that is based on a fundamental rejection of religious bias as well as racial bias.

Finally, I press the Minister to set out in more detail how the Government plan to co-ordinate with the European Union after Brexit on major foreign policy issues and potentially on asylum reform. Those should be key issues in the article 50 negotiations, but to date the Government have said next to nothing about them—a concern that was highlighted last week by the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs, among others. In our society, there is no place for racism. We believe—I am sure we all believe—that there is one race: the human race.

3.47 pm

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. I congratulate the hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) on securing the debate. I genuinely commend her for the moving way in which she presented her case and the words of her song—I have to say there was a moment when I thought she was going to sing it.

I was pleased to hear the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin) mention the great Mary Seacole. It is right that we remember her contribution. We remember her in Government too. The Home Office building in Westminster is made up of three buildings—one is named after Robert Peel, one after Elizabeth Fry and the other after Mary Seacole—so Ministers and officials are reminded of her every day as they go about their work, much of which may well be on the issue we are debating today.

On the international day for the elimination of racial discrimination—a day on which my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has made a very definitive statement—we also remember what happened in the township of Sharpsville in South Africa in March 1960 and those who died in what was supposed to have been a peaceful protest. We express our total solidarity with all victims of racism and reiterate our determination to challenge discrimination in whatever form it takes, at home and abroad. Combating all forms of racism remains an important part of this Government's international human rights policy. I would like to set out some of the work that we are doing around the world.

The UN convention on the elimination of all forms of racial discrimination underpins international co-operation to prevent, combat and eradicate racism. Effective implementation of the convention is essential if we are to achieve its aims. That is why the UN General Assembly reviews that implementation through a UN resolution. As a co-sponsor of the resolution, the UK takes a leading role in the United Nations' work to counter racism worldwide. Through the UN, we work to ensure the international community focuses on strengthening national, regional and international legal frameworks to make a reality of the protections contained in the convention. During the current Human Rights Council session in Geneva, we are working very hard to build international consensus about the importance of fighting racism and the best ways to do it.

The UN is not our only channel for that work. We are also working through other key international institutions. For instance, through the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe we are supporting countries with a disaggregation of hate crimes data. It is fair to say that the UK has become a world leader in this area. Furthermore, last year we co-hosted, with Poland, an OSCE event in which we shared the lessons learned in our response to the absolutely unacceptable spike in reported hate crime following the EU referendum.

We are also supporting projects that tackle anti-Semitism. For example, we are funding the translation into Polish and Romanian of the "Police Officer's Guide to Judaism". That guide to Jewish religious practice is published by the Community Security Trust to help police officers to effectively and sensitively investigate anti-Semitic crimes. As part of our continued commitment to fight anti-Semitism, we remain an active member of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance.

The UK is also represented by our independent expert, Michael Whine, on the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance. That organisation monitors racism, xenophobia and other forms of hate crime, and prepares reports and issues recommendations to Council of Europe member states. Having the UK represented by an expert ensures that the UK's approach to race equality issues is heard and properly understood in the Council of Europe.

The UK's strong international reputation in the fight against racism is underpinned by our long and proud tradition as an open and tolerant nation. Although work remains to be done, we can credibly claim that Britain today is a successful multi-ethnic country. Members of our African, Caribbean, Asian and other ethnic minority communities are represented in every area of British society—in business, academia, sport, the arts and politics.

The UK also has some of the strongest equalities legislation in the world, but we know that on its own it is not enough. We have to recognise and challenge racism and discrimination whenever they occur. The Prime Minister has made clear her determination to do just that. One of her first acts in office was to launch an unprecedented audit of public services to reveal racial disparities. That audit is being conducted right across our public services, from health, education, employment, skills and criminal justice. It may reveal difficult truths, but we should not be apologetic about shining a light on any injustice. It is only by doing so that we can make this a country that works for absolutely everyone.

[*Sir Alan Duncan*]

As has been mentioned today, the despicable rise in racist incidents after the EU referendum highlighted even more strongly the need to tackle the scourge of hate crime. That is why in July we published a new hate crime action plan that focuses on reducing incidents, increasing reporting and improving support for victims. It was accompanied by an additional £1 million for prevention work. We will review the plan next year to ensure it is delivering on its commitments. In January, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government announced a further £375,000 of new funding to tackle hate crime. The new package will support a range of organisations working with faith and minority communities that have historically faced challenges in reporting hate crime.

As part of the Government's continued commitment to building strong, united communities, we have spent more than £60 million since 2010 on our integration programme to bring communities together. We have provided more than £5 million since 2010-11 to the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust as part of our ongoing commitment to holocaust remembrance and education, and just under 6,000 local commemorative events took place in January. We are also proud to fund Tell MAMA—Measuring Anti-Muslim Attacks—the first service to record anti-Muslim incidents and support the victims. So far, we have provided more than £1 million to fund it. In the coming months, the Government will bring forward plans for tackling the issues raised in Dame Louise Casey's report into integration and opportunity in isolated and deprived communities.

Once again, I thank the hon. Member for Brent Central for initiating this debate. I and the Government believe that every individual, regardless of their racial or ethnic origin, should be able to fulfil his or her potential through the enjoyment of equal rights, equal

opportunities and fair responsibilities. The Government reiterate our commitment to stand up against injustice and inequality wherever it occurs. As the Prime Minister said, it is by tackling the injustice and unfairness that drives us apart and by nurturing the responsibilities of citizenship that we can build a shared society and make it the bedrock of a stronger and fairer Britain that truly works for everyone.

3.56 pm

Dawn Butler: It has been a pleasure to serve under your stewardship, Mr Streeter. I am disappointed that the Minister has not committed to ensuring that we mark this day every year in our calendar in the UK. The Government have some programmes, but I can tell the Minister that the audit will find that the system is flawed, and Government legislation is compounding the situation for people from minority communities. The cost of tribunal fees is stopping people getting justice when they deserve it. I can also tell the Minister that most of the laws for promoting equality were passed under a Labour Government.

I thank the Minister for agreeing that we will mark this day—the Government are willing to mark it—every year. I may have missed it, but I hope he will write to me at a later date to confirm that the Government are indeed committed to marking this day as the UN international day for the elimination of racial discrimination. I thank everybody who contributed to the debate. Their excellent contributions show that there is a deep understanding of the issue and what needs to be done to work towards achieving our goal of fairness in society.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the UN International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

Nuclear Decommissioning Industry: Pensions

3.58 pm

Mr Gary Streeter (in the Chair): All the protagonists are here for our next debate, so we can start a minute and a half early.

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

That this House has considered pensions in the nuclear decommissioning industry.

I have been seeking to secure a debate on pensions in the nuclear decommissioning industry for some months, as I am deeply disturbed by the way workers have been treated and betrayed by the UK Government. I speak on behalf of those in my constituency of North Ayrshire and Arran who work on the Hunterston A site, but this matter is of material interest to all workers across the United Kingdom who share the sense of betrayal and treachery at the fact that their pensions have been treated as if they were of no account.

[MR PHILIP HOLLOBONE *in the Chair*]

The betrayal that those workers feel should come as no surprise to anyone who has followed events since the nuclear estate was privatised by the Thatcher Government in the 1980s. Guarantees were made requiring the new private sector employers to continue to provide pension benefits for those employed at the time of privatisation “at least as good as those they were receiving in the public sector”.

Those guarantees and legal protections have now been abandoned.

That situation was made starkly clear by the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority and other employers consulting on reforms to two final salary schemes, seeking the views of members on changes such as moving to a career average, revalued earnings arrangement and a cap on pensionable pay. The UK Government decided that because the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority is classified as public sector, those schemes should be reformed under the Public Service Pensions Act 2013. Clearly, however, those pensions are not public sector ones, as I shall go on to make clear.

The erosion of decommissioning workers’ pensions is unacceptable. Radical reform of those pensions has already taken place in the mid-2000s, when they were closed to new entrants, who now have inferior defined-contribution pensions. Public sector reform takes no account of the fact that decommissioning sites are now in the private sector, nor that, unlike for other public sector workers, redundancy is an inherent part of decommissioning workers’ employment.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate. Pension rights in the event of redundancy are particularly important for workers undertaking decommissioning at Trawsfynydd power station in my constituency because of the timescale for closure and the age profile of the workforce. I hope she agrees that we need a commitment from the Minister in her response that a solution will be found for employees of Magnox Ltd and other companies affected by the Enterprise Act 2016.

Patricia Gibson: I very much concur with the hon. Lady. We are seeking a response from the Minister that will show fairness and an understanding of what such workers have already gone through and of the assurances that were made. All future action should take full account of that.

As I said, redundancy is an inherent part of the employment of decommissioning workers, since cleaning nuclear sites is time-limited. The prospect of redundancy is therefore written into the job in a way that does not apply to any other. The job of a worker at a nuclear decommissioning site is highly technical, skilled and sometimes even dangerous. The prospect of redundancy being in-built in people’s jobs is bad enough, but to have their pension eroded at what increasingly looks like regular intervals is simply unacceptable. It creates disincentives for workers to enter or stay in the industry, and it is extremely bad for morale.

The uncertainty created by that erosion of pensions affects not only the workers, of course, but their families and their financial planning for their retirement, and it shows with crystal clarity that any legal protections offered by Governments to workers mean nothing when they can be ripped up and disregarded when convenient. I raised that very matter at Treasury questions two months ago and was told by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury that

“it is necessary to have terms and conditions that reflect the modern situation that applies across the economy as a whole.”—
[*Official Report*, 17 January 2017; Vol. 619, c. 769.]

Will the Minister tell me how that response squares with the cast-iron guarantees made to workers when the nuclear estate was privatised? Were the workers told that those so-called cast-iron guarantees were actually written on water?

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Is that not a constant theme? People take out pensions in good faith, whether state or private, to plan for something that might happen 20, 30 or 40 years later, but by the time they get there the goalposts have been moved.

Patricia Gibson: Absolutely, and I will discuss that later in my speech. There is indeed a chilling wider pattern and a broader narrative becoming increasingly apparent as each day passes.

Those workers are classed as public sector workers, but their terms and conditions are not devolved to the Scottish Parliament as they are for other public sector workers. Indeed, Scottish nuclear workers still have their severance and early retirement terms dictated by the UK Government. The goalposts are clearly being moved when it is deemed financially beneficial for the Government or the industry, while the pensions interests of the workers are a secondary consideration.

The Office for National Statistics classified Magnox as a public sector organisation, which means that the pensions of its workers are in scope of reform by the UK Government, despite the fact that they work on sites that have been privatised. The UK Government have proposed to reform IR35 tax arrangements for contractors working in the public sector or for public authorities. Draft guidance from the Government uses the definition of a public authority contained in the Freedom of Information Acts, which includes bodies specifically listed in schedules to the Acts, publicly

[*Patricia Gibson*]

owned companies and any other body designated as a public authority by the Secretary of State. Interestingly, Magnox is not listed in the schedules, and that is because it is a privately and not publicly owned company. Consequently, the Freedom of Information Acts do not apply to Magnox except where stipulated in employee contracts with the NDA, and so neither do the IR35 reforms.

Nothing but confusion and concern can be caused by the use of different definitions of the public sector in different legislation and UK Government proposals. That is a matter of concern to the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority as well as to nuclear decommissioning workers. The reason it matters so much to the workers at Hunterston A and other sites throughout the United Kingdom is the adverse financial impact such definitions will have on the employees of Magnox. The goalposts must not be moved and definitions must not be manipulated by the powers that be to the financial detriment of those who work on such sites day in, day out.

I wrote to the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on that very issue, asking for the apparent confusion to be clarified. I sent my letter on 7 February but, to date, I have had no response—presumably the Secretary of State himself is trying to work out the apparent contradiction. I hope he is able to do so soon, because the workers in Hunterston A and the rest of the industry are waiting on tenterhooks for him to dispense his wisdom about such a bewildering state of affairs.

All of that comes hard on the heels of the punitive exit payments cap, which will have a hugely detrimental impact on the pensions and redundancy payments of over-55s made redundant after years of service. As I have pointed out, those workers are caught up in the problem because they have been classified as public sector workers, even though they are employed in the private sector. The only fair and reasonable thing to do would be for the UK Government to announce that those workers are to be exempt from the exit payments cap under the Enterprise Act 2016.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate. She is right to talk about the double whammy faced by nuclear workers. During the passage of the said Act, reference was made to their pensions not being touched. The Government, however, broke their word, which had been given not only at the time of privatisation but last year as well. I hope that the Minister will take note of that and respond, because it is unfair to those dedicated workers and their dedicated communities.

Patricia Gibson: Absolutely. My only disagreement with the hon. Gentleman is that, taking into account the reforms to those pensions in the mid-2000s, as well as the new exit payments cap reforms, we are actually talking about a triple whammy. I very much hope that the Minister will have something to tell us about the cap.

The exit payments cap for nuclear decommissioning workers was pressed to a vote in the Commons during the passage of the Act, but the Government voted us down. I hope—perhaps blindly optimistically—that the UK Government will be willing to reconsider. Talks

have led to a new Nuclear Decommissioning Authority proposal, but the trade union consensus is that more must be done to put pension provision on a par with the public sector, including improvements for new starters in the defined-contribution scheme so that their pension is protected on any outsourcing.

Clearly, despite significant pension guarantees in the 1980s, the major pension reform in the mid-2000s and the exit payments cap, workers in the nuclear decommissioning industry are in the firing line. As has been mentioned, the fact is that this is part of a broader narrative from the UK Government, who are taking action to reduce public sector pensions across the board. We saw it with the way the WASPI—Women Against State Pension Inequality—women had their feet cut from under them as they approached what they thought was their retirement age, and we now see it with this catalogue of broken promises and betrayal of nuclear decommissioning workers, as everyone who is present would acknowledge.

It is clear that this Government, despite protestations to the contrary, see a pension not as a contract but as a benefit. To be clear, a pension is a contract, not a benefit. It is paid into, and people have reasonable expectations that what they can expect at the end of their working life should be clear and that they can depend upon it. Public sector workers, the WASPI women and now workers in the nuclear decommissioning industry have discovered to their cost that that is no longer the case. Those contracts can be torn up at will—or so it would seem. Assurances apparently mean nothing. Years of service and paying in mean nothing. If that is the case, what does it say about the relationship between the governing and the governed? What can one put faith in if not a contract with one's Government?

These moves have to be resisted. Workers in the nuclear decommissioning industry are currently considering an offer from the Government. I do not know the details of that offer, but sadly, I am pretty sure that it will mean a further erosion—to some degree—of those workers' pensions. That is simply not acceptable, for all the reasons that we have heard. I say to workers who are not directly affected by this measure, "Next it may well be your pension." That is why this issue should matter to us all. Who knows what group of workers will be next in the firing line? I urge the Minister and this Government to think again.

4.12 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) on securing this important debate and her passionate and informative speech. The Government understand the concerns of the workforce across the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority estate, including employees working at the Hunterston A power station in her constituency, about public sector pension reform. It is good to see my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) in her place, representing the interests of her constituents who work at Sellafield.

We recognise the vital decommissioning work that the NDA and the wider workforce across the estate deliver, while prioritising safe and secure operations in a difficult environment, and we remain firmly committed

to supporting the nuclear decommissioning programme. The NDA was allocated £11 billion of taxpayer funding for the 2015 spending review period. However, in line with the challenges that the UK faces to balance the deficit, the NDA was set a proportionate programme of efficiencies and savings for that period of around £1 billion, and it was agreed in the spending review that some of those savings would come from reform of the two defined-benefit final salary pension schemes in the NDA estate.

Approximately 10,800 employees are members of those final salary pension schemes, which, as the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran mentioned, closed in the 2000s. The aim of the NDA consultation is to reform those schemes into career average revalued earnings schemes, in the spirit of the recommendations made by Lord Hutton in his 2011 review of pensions. Since 2006, new starters have been offered membership of a high-quality defined-contribution pension scheme, which is out of scope for reform.

The Government acknowledge that CARE reform would require amendments to statutory pension protections that were put in place at the time of the privatisation of the electricity sector in the 1980s and by the Energy Act 2004, when the NDA was established. Those protections sought to provide pension benefits for existing scheme members that were at least as good as those they received prior to those reforms. That is why the Government have worked with the NDA to consider how best to implement pension reform.

As a first step, the NDA held discussions with the trade unions about the potential for non-legislative options as an alternative to CARE to realise the required savings. As a result of those discussions, the NDA launched a consultation document on 9 February setting out details of two options—the CARE option and a non-legislative pensionable pay cap option. The consultation was due to end on 10 March.¹

During those discussions, several concerns were raised, which the Government and the NDA actively listened to and sought to address. Following a meeting in February between the NDA, national trade union representatives and the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), who has responsibility for energy, the NDA and trade unions reached agreement to table a third option for consultation with the workforce that better reflected the circumstances they face—a revised CARE pension reform proposal.

That option was announced by the NDA and the trade unions in a joint statement on 2 March. The consultation period has therefore been extended until 21 April to allow the NDA workforce to consider that new option. The trade unions have committed to hold consultative ballots on the proposal, described as the best achievable through negotiation, and support implementation if their members accept the proposal. Those ballots are due to take place in April and conclude by early May.

Albert Owen: The Minister is making an important point. I, too, welcome the progress that has been made on the pension, but will she deal with the exit payments cap? No discussions were held about that. An exemption was given to the Royal Bank of Scotland, to give one

example. She is a reasonable person. Nuclear workers have been caught up in this. Will she agree to look into this serious issue and come up with a reasonable response?

Margot James: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that important point, which was also raised by the hon. Members for North Ayrshire and Arran and for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts). My Department and the NDA will continue to meet trade union representatives regarding the cap on exit payments. My hon. Friend the Energy Minister is listening to the important concerns of workers in the NDA estate about that cap and is in discussion with the Treasury.

Patricia Gibson: I wonder whether I may hurry the Minister along and raise the question of the apparent confusion in legislation about whether these workers are public sector workers or private sector workers. Why do the goalposts apparently change when it is convenient that they should—but not to the workers' advantage?

Margot James: I understand that point, which the hon. Lady also made in her speech and which I took note of. I gather that she wrote to the Secretary of State about that very point in early February and is still awaiting a reply. A reply will be forthcoming. I am very sorry that I am not able to be definitive today, but I can assure her that Ministers in my Department take her point and the point made by the hon. Member for Ynys Môn very seriously indeed. We are listening to the concerns of the workforce she represents, and, as I said, my hon. Friend the Energy Minister is in discussion with the Treasury to try to clarify the point, so that the workforce know where they stand. I absolutely sympathise with a workforce who do not know where they stand—it is an unsatisfactory situation, but I assure her that it is one that is approaching a remedy.

We recognise that nuclear decommissioning is a closure industry and many workers have devoted careers to the industry knowing that their sites may close before they retire. We are actively exploring the potential impact of the cap on workforces at sites that are being actively decommissioned and are on the path to closure, such as Hunterston A in the hon. Lady's constituency. I will pass all hon. Members' comments on to my hon. Friend the Energy Minister.

Once the consultation period on the pension issue has finished, the NDA will take account of the consultation responses and make proposals for Ministers to consider after that. The Government will not take a final decision before the consultation has concluded. However, we believe that the revised CARE proposal offers a fair and sustainable solution.

As the debate draws to a close—the hon. Lady will have a further say—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. I am afraid that the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) does not have a further say as this is a half-hour debate. The Minister has 10 minutes left, so there is plenty of opportunity for Members to intervene if they wish to do so, but the debate must finish no later than 4.30 pm.

Margot James: Thank you, Mr Hollobone. I am sorry, I thought the proposer of the motion had two minutes at the end. The hon. Lady may take advantage

[Margot James]

of your offer of further interventions; I would be delighted to give way. While I am on my feet, however, I will continue.

I reiterate that the Government recognise the concerns that the hon. Lady and other hon. Members have raised about the workforce across the NDA estate and pension reform. I emphasise that the aim of pension reform is to balance the legitimate concerns of taxpayers about the present and future costs of pension commitments with the workforce's concern about maintaining decent levels of retirement income, to which they have contributed and which they have earned. It is right that we debate that important issue and I thank all Members for their views.

Albert Owen: I heard what the Minister said and appreciate that she will take this issue back to the appropriate Minister. Will she or the Energy Minister agree to meet a delegation of cross-party representatives from the nuclear workers' areas? She will know about early-day motion 915, to which there are 120-plus signatories. This is an issue across the country. Can we meet to have further discussions? This debate is helpful, but we need further discussions.

Margot James: I will certainly pass on the hon. Gentleman's kind invitation to meet to my hon. Friend the Energy Minister. He is gainfully employed at the moment, meeting the Treasury, with the interests of the NDA workforce very much near his heart. I am sure that he will consider the invitation proffered.

Dr Philippa Whitford: We had a debate regarding Hewlett-Packard's takeover of Digital Equipment's workforce. At that time, the Minister responding said that nothing could be done because it was a purely private company. However, in this instance, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) said, the goalposts have been moved in the definition of public and private and back again, so the Government can do something for these workers.

Margot James: The hon. Lady makes a good point about the difference in the nature of the public-private definition. The industry has had £15 billion of Government and taxpayers' support, so it sits where it sits. My officials will reflect on the views that all Members have given today, as we consider further the options for NDA pension reform. The Government will set out the next steps following the NDA consultation on pension reform.

Question put and agreed to.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. At this point I would have gone on to the next debate, but the rules of engagement are that the Minister has to be present as well as the proposer of the motion. I intend to start the debate as soon as the Minister walks into the Chamber. The sitting is suspended until that point.

4.24 pm

Sitting suspended.

Stoke-on-Trent City of Culture 2021

4.27 pm

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Stoke on Trent City of Culture 2021.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and it is an honour to have this opportunity to discuss the extraordinary heritage and culture of my great city of Stoke-on-Trent: the centre of our country, the centre of my universe, and the centre of a cultural renaissance that is breathing new life into an industrial heartland that has been overlooked by too many for too long. An oft-forgotten jewel nestled between the larger, gaudier baubles of Birmingham and Manchester, Stoke-on-Trent is a friendly, welcoming city with a rich heritage and an attitude and outlook all of its own. With its upcoming bid for city of culture 2021, Stoke-on-Trent is finally stepping out of the long shadow of its neighbours and showing the world what it is capable of. We are a hidden gem that will be hidden no more.

Our city was one of the launch pads of the industrial revolution and, from the opening of Josiah Wedgwood's factory in Etruria in 1769 to the present day, the Potteries has quite literally made its name as the birthplace of the modern ceramics industry. Wherever we may be, whether in the furthest corners of the world, in the Minister's Department, or even in our Tea Room, we are likely to find ourselves dining from tableware made in Stoke-on-Trent—made, in fact, in my constituency.

I was privileged to be present at the maiden speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) only last week, during which he told the House about the turnover club—those loyal ceramic enthusiasts who flip their plate, wherever they might be, to discover its origins. As a proud member of that club, I can tell hon. Members that our excitement upon discovering that all-important back stamp is entirely understandable, because the undeniable truth is that Stoke-on-Trent produces the finest ceramics in the world; we always have and we always will.

Ceramics is not just our history, it is our heritage. It continues to shape our culture and drive our economy in the most creative and innovative ways. Nowhere is that better demonstrated than in Middleport, in the heart of my constituency. The original home of the iconic Burleigh Ware pottery, opened in 1888, the factory has been fully restored thanks to the dedicated work of the Prince's Regeneration Trust and now stands as a tribute to our industrial past and a driving force for our economic future. Today, it is best known as the location of the BBC's "Great Pottery Throw Down"; a fabulous showcase for Stoke-on-Trent and the ceramics industry, it is now in its second season, and I am delighted to announce that it is about to be commissioned for a third.

It is wonderful that our city's extraordinary heritage is being recognised in shows such as that, but let us be clear: as proud as we are of our ceramics industry, there is so much more to us than that. As well as being a fully operational pot bank, Middleport serves as a gallery and exhibition space for local artists, as a community hub and as a development centre for a host of bespoke

ceramic and design businesses. From the Clarice Cliff-inspired works of Emma Bailey to the textural experiments of Libby Ward and the photography of Richard Howle—whose Potteries-themed railway posters I have proudly displayed in my living room—Middleport is an incubator for the talent and creativity of Stoke-on-Trent. Elsewhere, we are home to Staffordshire University, a respected higher education institute with an admirable record in art and design.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you for allowing me to speak, Mr Hollobone. My hon. Friend will be aware that there are multiple bids to be the city of culture, including some from Wales. On my two recent visits to her great city of Stoke-on-Trent, I was particularly impressed by the city's commitment to education—specifically around the infrastructure and investment in both the further and higher education sectors. Does she agree that that reinforces the strength of Stoke-on-Trent's bid to become the city of culture?

Ruth Smeeth: Of course there are other bids, but none so great as that from Stoke-on-Trent; no one will match my constituency. However, I agree that education is at the forefront of our bid, which is to ensure that not only my own constituents, but the entire country are educated about how much Stoke-on-Trent has to offer. We will lead that role from Staffordshire University.

My city is the birthplace of Reginald Mitchell, the inventor of the Spitfire, and Arnold Bennett, the great literary icon of the Potteries. Captain Smith of the Titanic was also born in Stoke-on-Trent, and while his ship's maiden voyage may not have gone quite according to plan, its name lives on in the form of the award-winning Titanic Brewery. Its plum porter is particularly good; I am not just saying that because they occasionally let me brew it—they also let me taste it.

Our musical heritage is also long and varied. Connoisseurs of northern soul made pilgrimage to the Golden Torch in Tunstall in the early '70s, while Shelley's Astrodome was a national hotspot for the acid house scene in the '80s and '90s, helping to launch the careers of DJs such as Sasha. Stoke-on-Trent can also lay claim to two rock and roll legends: Slash from Guns N' Roses was born in Burslem—the mother town of the Potteries—before moving to LA, while Lemmy from Motörhead also hailed from the area. A bronze bust of the bourbon-swilling frontman can be found in our wonderful Potteries Museum and Art Gallery in Hanley.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): That's in my constituency.

Ruth Smeeth: Yes it is—never mind. Our most well-known son in recent years is, of course, Robbie Williams—my former constituent—whose song-writing team continued to ply their trade from Burslem for many years. His mother is well-known for her charitable ventures in the area, supporting schemes such as the incredible Ruff and Ruby project, which supports some of our most vulnerable young people.

This year marks the fourth anniversary of the Stoke-on-Trent literary festival, which will be hosted at the Emma Bridgewater factory in the heart of Stoke-on-Trent, which is also not in my constituency. Our former colleague and "Strictly Come Dancing" star Ed Balls will be

attending this year. Ours is a city fizzing with energy and creativity. Every week I meet someone who is breaking new ground and creating something extraordinary.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I am most grateful to the hon. Lady for securing the debate. As the Member for Stafford, I support Stoke-on-Trent's bid to become the city of culture; what is good for Stoke-on-Trent is good for Stafford and the whole of Staffordshire. Does she agree that Stoke-on-Trent is at the centre of a region—Staffordshire—that has many literary figures? Not only was there Samuel Johnson from Lichfield, but there was Izaak Walton, from Stafford; the current poet laureate, Carol Ann Duffy, who went to school in Stafford; Richard Sheridan, the former MP for Stafford; and, indeed, J.R.R. Tolkien, who lived in two places in my constituency. There is a variety of literary talent centred on Stoke-on-Trent to draw from for the city of culture.

Ruth Smeeth: I thank the hon. Gentleman for both his intervention and his support for this important bid. I could not agree more. We are blessed with the number of cultural icons across our great county, and I look forward to being able to celebrate them with both the country and the world should we be successful in our bid to be city of culture 2021.

More and more young people are finding the opportunity to harness and shape their creativity, just as their ancestors shaped the clay beneath them. However, one of the great frustrations for me and many others is that that is not the image of Stoke-on-Trent that so many people have, and that it is all too often not the way our great city is portrayed by the national media. Those who watched reports of the recent by-election in Stoke-on-Trent may have been left with the impression of a city in decline. Journalists posed by abandoned shop fronts or derelict bottle kilns, talking down our city and, disgracefully, its people. They did not bother to mention that the abandoned shopping centre they stood in front of is scheduled for demolition, or that it is just yards away from a growing city centre and a thriving cultural centre. If Michael Crick had thrown a stone from the Labour party's campaign office, he would have had a better than average chance of hitting one of our great theatres.

Given the coverage, is it any wonder that, when people come to Stoke-on-Trent, they always express their surprise at how green a city we are? We have beautiful, award-winning Victorian parks in Burslem, Tunstall and Hanley—and apparently some in the south of the city, too. We have magnificent lakes and gardens, and we have more miles of canals than any city in England. Stoke-on-Trent has its problems. We accept that, and we are working hard to remedy them, but nothing will be fixed by talking down the city or ignoring the progress it has made. In fact, it is precisely our heritage and our culture that hold the key to fixing some of those problems, regenerating our city and inspiring the next generation.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): As one of three Members who represent the current city of culture, I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate and wish her and her city very well. There is something to say about legacy. In our few short months as the city of culture, we have already seen that things are changing; there is a spring in the air, people are

[Karl Turner]

happy and money is being spent. Investment is coming into the city, which is very important for the legacy. I wish my hon. Friend well.

Ruth Smeeth: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I look forward to visiting Hull this year to experience his city of culture. I think that is the key point: even at this stage, we have to commit to ensuring that the bidding process leaves a legacy, not just that we manage to secure the award. Hull is an inspiration now and I hope it will also be an inspiration at the end of the year.

Returning to my great city, I will this week be visiting the wonderful Portland Inn Project, which is working to turn a disused public house into a thriving community centre. Such projects do not just regenerate a building—they create the space for communities to come together. It is about improving our physical space, but it is also about creating something more meaningful. Culture is not just about what we do; it is about who we are. At the heart of our city's ceramic history is not just the objects we produced; a whole community was shaped by shared struggle and fired by shared injustice—a fact highlighted as we commemorate the 175th anniversary of the pottery riots later this year. Those events shaped our industrial and cultural landscape, placing the labour movement at the heart of our community and our culture, and they continue to do so today.

Throughout our history, people have been brought together by pride in their work and the heritage of the city they built together—a city that has so much to offer today. The city of culture bid is an opportunity for people to see the other side of Stoke-on-Trent, and it is already happening. Just a couple of weeks ago, *The Times* ranked us 11th in its list of the top 20 cultural places to live in the UK.

Matthew Rice, the managing director of Emma Bridgewater, wrote an excellent book titled “The Lost City of Stoke-on-Trent”, exploring the hidden architectural gems of the six towns. It is a fine book, and I am sure everyone in the room has read it; if they have not, I recommend it. I always felt that its title struck a pessimistic note—a lament to a city whose best days are behind it. I hope that this speech and our wider debate will offer Members an insight into the hidden city of Stoke-on-Trent and the marvels that can still be found there, just beneath the surface.

It is a city shaped by 1,000 hands, just like the clay that made its name, and fired by the hopes and passions of its people. It is a place with so much more to offer than it is given credit for. I believe we can demonstrate that to the rest of the country and to the world by making Stoke-on-Trent our next city of culture. I urge the House to support our bid.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The debate can last until 5.30 pm. Two hon. Gentlemen are seeking to catch my eye. While I would normally call the most experienced Member first, I will call Gareth Snell first because he is a recent by-election victor. I am sure Mr Ffello will not mind.

4.41 pm

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you very much, Mr Hollobone. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship in this debate, as we seek to showcase the very best parts of the city that my hon. Friends and I represent. You will have already seen, though, that parochialism among the three constituencies is very much alive and well.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) on securing this debate. She mentioned, albeit briefly, one of Stoke's historic sons, Arnold Bennett. This year marks the 150th anniversary of Arnold Bennett's birth in Hanley, in my constituency. His tales of Turnhill, Bursley, Hanbridge, Knype and Longshaw provide a witty and pithy account of life in the Potteries at the turn of the last century. Whether in stories about Anna of the five towns or the Clayhanger family, he illuminated the real-life problems facing society at the end of the Victorian era through his application of what we would now call the creative industries.

While the wealth of Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire was derived from our heavy manufacturing, ceramics and mining, Arnold Bennett also knew the value of arts and culture. He once said:

“Am I to sit still and see other fellows pocketing two guineas apiece for stories which I can do better myself?...If anyone imagines my sole aim is art for art's sake, they are cruelly deceived.”

That is potentially the benefit that my city can derive from its bid to be the city of culture in 2021. It is not just a financial but a social benefit. We understand the added benefits that can be derived when we go above art for art's sake, and how it can help to heal some of society's greatest wounds.

The Potteries is rich in culture. I cannot hope, in the time available to me, to do it justice, but I will do my best. For theatre lovers, we have some of the finest boards that have ever been tread—the Regent, the Victoria Hall, the Mitchell Memorial Theatre and the New Vic, which is a purpose-built theatre in the round. Each not only provides a brilliant night out but works with young people, older people and those who feel left behind to use culture and creativity as a conduit for tackling problems in their communities. Those who wish to eat and drink will find some of the finest breweries and restaurants in the west midlands. For those who wish to continue their festivities, an array of clubs and night-time venues will provide many a happy—if blurry—memory.

Our cultural contributions run deep. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North mentioned the distinguished careers of music legends Slash, Lemmy and Robbie Williams, but I am afraid to say that she neglected to mention that of Jackie Trent, who is well known as the composer of the theme tune to “Neighbours” and can trace her roots to the Potteries.

Robert Ffello (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): I cannot allow this opportunity to pass by without mentioning Gertie Gitana.

Gareth Snell: My hon. Friend, as always, shows his experience in matters that are above me. Given that my hon. Friends the Members for Stoke-on-Trent North and for Stoke-on-Trent South (Robert Ffello) are present, and that my other neighbour, the right hon. Member

for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley), is the Culture Secretary, it would be remiss of me not to point out that everybody needs good neighbours, and that with a little understanding, you can find the perfect blend.

Stoke-on-Trent's historic contributions to cultural advancements are not limited to music, food, theatre and ceramics. We have a rich scientific heritage too. Sir Oliver Lodge, born in 1851 in Penkhull, was a physicist and inventor who identified electromagnetic radiation independent of the work being carried out by his contemporary, Hertz. His work gave the world the spark plug. The fact that that is not better known is shocking. Thomas Twyford, born in Hanley in 1849, may have bequeathed to our society one of the greatest cultural advances ever: the single-piece ceramic flush toilet. In doing so, he performed a public duty for public sanitation.

Our city's industrial heritage is well preserved at the Etruria Industrial Museum. The Potteries Museum and Art Gallery, which my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North mentioned, is also home to part of the Staffordshire hoard. The Wedgwood Museum in Barlaston has kept a real and tangible link with the historic family, who made their name in Stoke-on-Trent. The Gladstone Pottery Museum in Stoke-on-Trent South ensures that skills from our past are being passed on to our children for their future.

Jeremy Lefroy: The hon. Gentleman mentioned the name Wedgwood. He may also know that one of the Wedgwood family, Emma Wedgwood, married Charles Darwin, who has an extremely strong connection with our area. I do not think one needs to say more about Charles Darwin, but I am sure that if Stoke-on-Trent were to be city of culture, we would celebrate that connection.

Gareth Snell: Absolutely. The Wedgwood family are still very much active in civil society in Stoke-on-Trent today, in a number of ways, and I am sure they will lend their support to our bid.

In recent years we have seen Appetite Stoke run public art exhibitions to demonstrate that culture is part of Stoke-on-Trent's everyday existence and not simply something that happens at weekends. It has been successful in bringing forward plans for young people to be more actively involved in how Stoke-on-Trent celebrates its heritage and past, and it encapsulates what we can do going forward.

Thinking of the past, it would be remiss of me not to mention that Philip Astley was born in 1742 in neighbouring Newcastle-under-Lyme and spent most of his formative years in the Potteries. He, of course, is known as the father of the modern circus. Stoke-on-Trent has another famous adopted son in the form of Neil Baldwin—or Nello the Clown, as he is known to us—who was Stoke City's kit man but has also been a great advocate for the circus industry; he still performs, even though he is in his early 70s.

I cannot participate in this debate without mentioning Staffordshire University. It is one of the finest universities that can be found—a modern university that has taken all that modernity gives and made the most of it. It has a thriving ceramic art department. It has a world-renowned gaming department that is now at the forefront of developing digital technologies. Its performing arts are

well received, and it is difficult to get tickets to some of its events, although I figure I might have a slightly better chance now. The university is also at the cutting edge of scientific advancement, which participates heavily in the cultural identity of Stoke-on-Trent.

Finally, it would be wrong not to mention professional football, which is a great part of our city's cultural identity. Stoke City is one of the oldest professional football clubs in the world. It has been at the forefront of community work across Stoke-on-Trent, and its current chairman, Peter Coates, does much to help and support the city.

Ruth Smeeth: I could not agree more about the role of sport in terms of my city's culture—or our city; I might share it. As wonderful as Stoke City is, does my hon. Friend agree that the only true football club is Port Vale, in the north of the city, which happens to have the Wembley of the north as its stadium?

Gareth Snell: I most certainly do not agree. There is but one team in Stoke, and that is Stoke City. My hon. Friend should look at the name, although I appreciate that she has her own loyalties.

Jeremy Lefroy: Perhaps I can cool things down a bit. To be serious, is it not true that Stoke City is a fine example of a local family—local investors—putting money into their local club and taking a long-term view? Would that most other premiership teams followed that model.

Gareth Snell: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct. This is not even about the football club. Peter Coates and Stoke City have demonstrated that there is a role in communities for professional football clubs that wish to make an investment with their fans. It is not simply about providing a game mid-week or at weekends. There are multiple examples across Stoke-on-Trent of families, young people and schools benefiting as a direct result of the commitment that the Coates family and Stoke City have shown to Stoke-on-Trent. Without them, our city would be all the poorer.

Stoke-on-Trent is a city where people can eat and drink, laugh, dance and sing, learn, love and live. We are artists, educators, innovators, engineers, potters, miners, toilers and industrialists. Ours is a city of culture born out of labour, and a city that has contributed so much to so many. It is a privilege to support the motion this afternoon.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): I will need to start calling the Front-Bench speakers no later than seven minutes past 5.

4.51 pm

Robert Ffello (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): It is, as ever, a delight to see you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone. I am pleased to have the opportunity to contribute to this debate—although my colleagues have stolen most of my lines—because for me, no city is more suitable than Stoke-on-Trent to be the UK city of culture 2021.

I am proud to call Stoke-on-Trent my home and to serve as one of the three ambassadors from within the city—there are also ambassadors more widely—here in Westminster. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) on securing this debate on our behalf.

[Robert Ffello]

As has been mentioned, during January and February this year we saw Stoke-on-Trent subjected to an unprecedented level of media and public attention as a result of the by-election. We should have seen a showcase for the progress that has been made. Let me pause here and just note that much of that progress started under previous, Labour-run councils over the past decade. The by-election should have been a showcase for the progress in our city by the high-tech industries that have sprung up and for the incredible work ethic, industriousness and, above all, creativity of the people of Stoke-on-Trent. Sadly, tragically, what we saw was anything but.

My colleagues and I have spoken time and again of our disappointment with the way that Stoke-on-Trent was portrayed by the media, who were more interested in a good story than a true one. We saw images of disused bottle kilns, crumbling derelict buildings and expanses of disused land. The latter two are the sort of thing that any city possesses, and the reason for the former, in many cases, is that the kilns are protected as a symbol of our city's rich heritage. In Stoke-on-Trent, those images in particular were used to feed into the UK Independence party's narrative of a city on its knees—a false narrative.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): Is not the real message from the by-election a tribute to the people of Stoke, the vast majority of whom voted for parties other than UKIP?

Robert Ffello: Absolutely. I am grateful to my hon. Friend, because his point leads nicely to the next paragraph of my speech.

We saw off UKIP last month because of a fantastic campaign, the excellent candidate we had and that positive message, as my hon. Friend has just noted, but also, I think, and as he also said, because the people of Stoke-on-Trent know deep down that our city is better than we were told we were. They are proud of where they live, and if people had taken the opportunity to find the true Stoke-on-Trent, they would have known exactly why. Yes, of course Stoke-on-Trent has its problems, and we could debate for hours where they stem from, but there is a responsibility on journalists, commentators and politicians to paint a fair picture, not one that matches their agenda or preconceptions. Long after they have returned home, the hard-working people of Stoke-on-Trent are doing all they can—all we can—to make our city a better place.

Culture can mean many different things to different people. In many ways, it is what you make it. It is easy for people to compare their city with another and see what it lacks. We are pretty good at self-deprecation in Stoke-on-Trent, but it is less easy to wax lyrical about the things that perhaps we see every day. We have the immediately obvious cultural examples that have been mentioned. We have fantastic museums, such as the Gladstone Pottery Museum in Longton, as well as less well known but equally superb things such as Appetite Stoke, the small art galleries across the city and groups such as B Arts. As has been mentioned, we have theatres attracting some of the biggest names in music, comedy and theatre, as well as smaller productions put on by amateur groups as varied as Five Towns theatre, North

Staffs Operatic Society, the All Woman choir and Trentham brass band, to name just a few. There are dance groups such as Steelworks in Fenton and the Kaytelles in Blurton. Their sessions are attended by hundreds of youngsters every week.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North mentioned Titanic Brewery, but there are microbreweries across our city producing, quite frankly, Mr Hollobone, the sort of brew that would make you not want to set foot out of Stoke-on-Trent and travel down to London—they are that good.

We have wonderful parks and fabulous green spaces. In my own area, we have Longton's Queen's Park, and Fenton boasts both Fenton Park and Smithpool. There is also a huge array of residents' associations doing sterling work on behalf of the communities that they represent. There are the fabulous waters in and around the city, which are looked after by groups of volunteers who give their time freely and happily to cherish the areas that we have.

As has been mentioned, Stoke-on-Trent has the fantastic premiership club Stoke City and the wonderful bet365 stadium. We do tease our hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North about Port Vale. I remember that when I first spoke to someone in Stoke-on-Trent about football—which seems like many hundreds of years ago—they said to me, "Of course, there are two teams in Stoke-on-Trent: Stoke City A and Stoke City B." But we will move quickly on from that.

Ruth Smeeth: As wonderful as Stoke City are, and they do wear the right colour strip, it is fair to say that Port Vale have done so much for our city, not least in bringing back one of our cultural icons, Robbie Williams, at every opportunity, and therefore they will be a core part of our bid, not least by building on our city of sport status, which we had such great success with last year.

Robert Ffello: I thank my hon. Friend. There is nothing I can add to what she has said, but I will just say that I am a trustee of the community fund of Stoke City and never cease to be impressed by the outreach work done by the club. I, too, pay tribute to the Coates family and the investment that they have made in our city.

What I have not mentioned but cannot be ignored is the ceramics industry. Stoke-on-Trent is much more than ceramics, but the area is still known as the Potteries for a very good reason. Yes, the industry was decimated, but it is on the up. Gone are the days of a skyline dominated by bottle kilns, but now the industry is at the cutting edge of technology, supplying a mind-boggling array of sectors as well as supplying more traditional products. The work done by small independent potters, such as one of my favourites, Anita Harris Art Pottery, is of the highest quality, and similar-quality producers seem to be springing up all the time. It is amazing, Mr Hollobone, that you can go and speak to someone and in their back kitchen they will have a kiln, where they will be producing work of the finest quality.

Middleport Pottery has become the face of "The Great Pottery Throw Down", but the mighty Wedgwood, perhaps the biggest name of all, still has its factory in my constituency. It has recently undergone major renovations to improve its facilities and expand its

shopping and, of course, its museum offering. Tristram Hunt, the previous Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central, described the Wedgwood collection as

“perhaps the most compelling account of British industrial, social and design history anywhere in the world”—
anywhere in the world.

Jeremy Lefroy: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that this is not just about the history, vital though that is? Even today, the ceramics industry is a net contributor to our trade balance: we export far more than we import. As the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) said previously, the products can be found all over the world, even in the European Parliament and the World Bank.

Robert Ffello: Indeed, and long may that continue, and long may I continue to be a member of the pot turners club as well. I say this just as an aside: we need to ensure that that industry gets the best possible deal out of Brexit.

The fact that the campaign to save the Wedgwood collection was the fastest fundraising campaign in the 111-year history of the Art Fund tells us everything we need to know about its importance. Josiah Wedgwood was the pioneer of so much that has shaped modern Britain, from marketing to distribution and the division of labour. He was one of the fathers of the industrial revolution, not to mention a prominent abolitionist, and is yet another reason to be proud of our city.

It should not simply be the volume that decides which city is successful in its bid to be capital of culture, as the guidance for the bid acknowledges; it should be the quality and diversity of the offer. If it was about sheer volume, London would be capital every time. However, if we want to see a wide range of projects covering a multitude of different categories, engaging all ages and ethnic groups and being truly and properly inclusive, there is nowhere better than Stoke-on-Trent. We have a truly ambitious and wide-ranging series of projects that will absolutely do justice to the honour of the title.

I believe that Stoke-on-Trent City Council was right to bid for city of culture 2021. If I may delicately suggest, those in power now may have been a little slow to back the previous Labour Administration’s plans for the city, but I am delighted to provide my support now and to give the bid truly cross-party support. When it comes to improving our city, there is no place for party politics.

Gareth Snell: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. It is worth noting—I am sure he was going to get to this point—that every local authority in Staffordshire, irrespective of political hue, backs this bid, which has got genuine cross-party consideration locally across Staffordshire and across the Members of Parliament as well.

Robert Ffello: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point. It is important that the bid has that backing from across parties and across Staffordshire. City of culture status for Stoke-on-Trent has the potential to inspire, to build pride in our city and to showcase our true face, not the impression that has been built up through decades of cheap shots and uninformed criticism.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): I want to intervene on my hon. Friend before he finishes, because I have been waiting throughout all the speeches for some mention of one of the greatest things I discovered on my recent trip to Stoke: the Staffordshire oatcake. After an evening in one of the lovely pubs that have been mentioned, there is nothing greater than having a cheese and bacon oatcake to finish the evening.

Robert Ffello: Absolutely—I have a feeling that my hon. Friend will be receiving a packet of oatcakes before too long.

I can absolutely guarantee that no other city that has bid for city of culture 2021 will embrace it like Stoke-on-Trent will. Residents of our great city have always embraced the opportunity to highlight all that makes Stoke-on-Trent a fantastic place to live and, as many of my colleagues will testify, anyone who has ever visited will say that there are no friendlier people anyone could possibly meet. They are warm, they are generous, they are proud and they deserve the opportunity that city of culture status can bring. Liverpool, Derry/Londonderry and now Hull have enhanced the title of city of culture and been enhanced by it, and we will do the same.

To finish, I want to mention my, sadly now deceased, mother-in-law June Clarke. She was a paintress, like so many others, at Spode. She was walking past a shop a couple of years ago and stopped and said, “I painted that,” as she pointed through the window. Of course, as might be imagined, her comment was met with a little hilarity at the time, because she was pointing at a plate high up on a shelf in the shop. She described that, on the back of the plate, there would be a unique mark—her mark—that she had put on it many decades earlier. After going into the shop, lifting the plate down from that high shelf and turning it over, we saw that there was indeed her mark on the back. The level of skill involved meant that she could still recognise her own brushwork on that plate, which she had painted more than 40 years before. In many ways, that for me is the culture of Stoke-on-Trent: huge quality with a humble modesty—cultural excellence then, and cultural excellence now.

Stoke-on-Trent city of culture 2021 will be a perfect marriage of the historical excellence of our city and 21st-century creative genius. I am backing my city.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): I know that both Opposition spokesmen are going to exemplify quality and humble modesty as well. The guideline limit for Opposition speeches in a one-hour debate is five minutes. I call John Nicolson.

5.4 pm

John Nicolson (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Thank you very much indeed, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) on securing this debate.

The role that the city of culture competition can play in re-energising and regenerating a city should never be underestimated. Back in 1990, Glasgow became the first UK city to be named European capital of culture, and it relaunched our city to an international audience. Glasgow is now known for its creativity and dynamism throughout Scotland, Europe and the world.

[*John Nicolson*]

It was after the success of Liverpool's year as European capital of culture 2008 that the UK city of culture competition was established. In a short period, it has captured the imagination of cities throughout the UK, with 14 applying for the inaugural award. Hull fought off competition from 10 other candidates to be named UK capital of culture 2017. Stoke-on-Trent also faces stiff competition, not least from both Paisley and Perth north of the border, but today's debate has illustrated just how strong a bid Stoke's will be.

Last September, I was delighted to visit Stoke-on-Trent with the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport, as part of our inquiry into "Countries of Culture". While there, we were given a fascinating tour of the Potteries Museum and Art Gallery. My personal highlights were the national ceramics collection, which included famous frog cups and dinner plates made for Catherine the Great, and the extraordinary 7th-century Anglo-Saxon Staffordshire hoard. Other attractions included the Spitfire that we have heard about. During a roundtable discussion with local representatives from the arts and heritage sector, it was clear that Stoke has so much to offer.

Yet despite that, and as we have heard, Stoke is often characterised as a rundown, post-industrial city. During the recent by-election, it was referred to as the "capital of Brexit"—an image that conjures up angry provincialism. Stoke does not deserve such a moniker. My image of Stoke is very different. Its cultural offerings are not limited to museums and fine old buildings. It has a track record of delivering world-class art events through the Appetite arts programme. Since 2013, it has brought vibrant and varied events to the city, from large outdoor circus spectacles in parks to intimate folk gigs in bus stations.

It is clear that Stoke-on-Trent might have had all the qualities to be named the UK city of culture 2021 were it not for two words: Perth and Dundee. My hon. Friends the Members for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) and for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) would not forgive me if I endorsed Stoke-on-Trent's bid, so alas I cannot—Paisley and Perth are two other able contenders in the competition. After Derry/Londonderry in 2013 and Hull this year, it is surely only fair that the UK capital of culture now comes to Scotland, since we are still in the UK, at least in the short term.

As the Prime Minister embarks on her tour of the nations in an attempt to turn us all into born-again Brexiteers ahead of triggering article 50, and as the love-bombing of Scotland begins ahead of our next referendum on independence, maybe those who wish to show just how much the UK cares about Scotland can show some appreciation for Paisley or Perth and name one of them the city of culture as a farewell present.

Ruth Smeeth: While the hon. Gentleman spoke a great deal of sense about our great city—

John Nicolson: I always do.

Ruth Smeeth: For that I am very grateful, but does he agree that being part of the Union means celebrating everything that makes up the Union? Surely he would not want to be bribed to stay in the Union in order to get this. In fact, if he wants the city of culture 2021, he should stop campaigning to leave the Union.

John Nicolson: I cannot believe the hon. Lady managed to shoehorn a bit of British Unionism into a question when I was giving such a politically neutral speech. We are proud members of the European Union and intend to stay a European country.

It might just be a coincidence, but in November 2013 the city of Dundee lost out to Hull in its bid to be named UK capital of culture. Less than a year later, Dundee recorded the strongest vote in favour of Scottish independence in the country. Dundee, always one step ahead when it comes to trends in Scottish politics, has now set its sights on becoming the European capital of culture in 2023—perhaps an indication of where it believes its future to lie.

Applying to be named city of culture is an important opportunity for many towns and cities throughout the UK. The competition allows people to rediscover and better understand the culture and heritage of the place that they call home. It inspires self-confidence and a sense of pride in community. It provides a platform to showcase the best of any given city to the rest of the country.

All of us who have listened to and participated in this debate will have learnt something new about Stoke-on-Trent. Each of us will also have taken something away from the debates we have had on the other applicant cities—Paisley, Perth, Sunderland and Swansea. I take this opportunity to wish all the applicants for UK's city of culture in 2021 the best in the months and years ahead.

5.10 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am afraid that the shadow Minister for culture, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), is otherwise detained, so you are stuck with me, his far-less cultured colleague, responding from the Front Bench today. I add my congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) and to my other hon. Friends on their contributions. Stoke could hardly ask for better advocates for the city or for its bid. With the breadth of support, ranging from Charles Darwin to "Neighbours" via the circus industry, it is hard to see how the bid can fail.

In January 2009, the then Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport—my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham)—announced that the Labour Government would commission a working group to report on the feasibility of establishing a UK capital of culture competition. The aim was to build on the success of Glasgow and Liverpool as European capitals of culture in 1990 and 2008 respectively. In both cases, those post-industrial cities demonstrated huge talent and initiative, which helped to regenerate communities and solidified a lasting legacy. To this day, both cities retain an excellent reputation for the arts, enhanced by that year in the spotlight.

The Labour Government—working with Phil Redmond, who first proposed the competition and went on to chair the working group—created a UK city of culture programme that recognises, in the words of my right hon. Friend, that

"culture and creativity should be viewed as part of the answer to tough economic times and not as a distraction or a luxury".

We are certainly still experiencing tough, if not tougher, economic times, and the Government have been too slow to recognise the role of arts and culture in economic regeneration, so I am pleased to see that the UK city of culture programme continues to thrive and to demonstrate that creativity and culture are central to the economic and social successes of our communities.

At the heart of the UK city of culture venture is, to paraphrase the working group's report, the desire for culture to act as a catalyst for social, economic and civic agendas. Rather than imposing a prescriptive checklist, the programme gives a platform to local identities and promotes existing talent and initiative for all the world to see. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) said in 2009:

"excellence and innovation in the arts does not begin and end inside the M25".

Given all that, it is obvious why so many UK cities are keen to bid for the 2021 title. As convincing as my hon. Friends have been, I hope they understand that I cannot back a particular bid from the Front Bench. However, it is clear that Stoke-on-Trent is an excellent candidate for city of culture, not least because that programme is built on recognition of the economic importance of the arts. That connection is particularly clear in Stoke, where ceramics are unquestionably both an art and industry that remain at the heart of that community. Stoke's bottle ovens are testament to the intersections between technology, science, art and aesthetics. We must learn to harness that force to regenerate our economy.

As we have heard, there is so much more to Stoke than the potteries. Museums, theatres, breweries and businesses all contribute to the city's cultural identity and pride, and to the cultural renaissance that my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North spoke so passionately about. Regardless of the outcome of the next round of bids, Stoke is an excellent example of a creative community, and its bid alone will show those who rarely look beyond the M25 exactly what they are missing. The city of culture programme has been extremely successful and I hope that that will continue with whichever city wins next.

When Derry/Londonderry was the first UK city of culture, it was plain for all to see how that city had changed. On the day that we have heard the news of the death of Martin McGuinness, it is appropriate to acknowledge how his home city changed from being the crucible of the troubles a few decades previously to being a venue for the peace process to flourish and for subsequent regeneration. The title drew attention to a side of the city that was already thriving, but was previously seldom seen.

Likewise, Hull—the current title holder—is enjoying widespread media coverage and public engagement. The regeneration has already begun, as my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner) made clear. The online media outlet, Insider Media Ltd, reports that the restaurant industry in Hull is already benefiting from the city's cultural status. With events ranging from Comic Con to film screenings, the hard work and commitment of the people of Hull to their city and their culture is getting the praise and attention it deserves. It is also fitting to pay tribute to the work of Councillor Stephen Brady, Labour leader of Hull Council, for championing culture as an agent of change for economic regeneration.

Stoke, or any other bidding city, does not need a title to be a city of culture. Culture is already central to Stoke. However, the city of culture programme's importance is in increasing national attention and giving credit to work that is already going on. I hope that the competition continues to thrive; that the next city to win the title enjoys the same success as its predecessors; and that the Government continue to support this excellent initiative of the last Labour Government.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): If the Minister would be kind enough to conclude his remarks at 5.27 pm—perhaps his Parliamentary Private Secretary could prod him with 30 seconds to go—that would allow Ruth Smeeth a couple of minutes to sum up the debate.

5.16 pm

The Minister for Digital and Culture (Matt Hancock): It is a great pleasure to serve under your excellent chairmanship again, Mr Hollobone, and to congratulate the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) on securing the debate. Rarely has a more harmonious debate taken place in this Chamber. The hon. Lady is a passionate advocate for her city, and we have also seen that from Members on both sides of the House who support the bid. There is clearly strong cross-party support. From hearing the hon. Lady, I am sure that Stoke will make strong proposals in April, as, no doubt, will the 10 other cities that are bidding for this prestigious title.

Only last week, *The Times* named Stoke in 11th place on its list of the top arts hotspots in Britain—one place behind Hull, the current UK city of culture. That is the first of many facts in my speech that have already been mentioned—just wait till I get on to the oatcakes. The council, which is strongly behind the bid, has brought together a wide array of partners and has incredibly exciting plans to revitalise the area. My opposite number, the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), is an absolutely brilliant shadow Minister—her saying that she is not cultured is modesty beyond anything that is reasonable—and I was struck by her saying that the city of culture accolade finds a city where culture is already thriving but is hitherto not enough seen. That description of the impact of being city of culture was incredibly well put.

Stoke has a great history and a global reputation. Most people know it for its ceramics. People can visit the most complete coal-fired Victorian pottery in the UK at the Gladstone Pottery Museum, and they can decorate their own pottery during an Emma Bridgewater factory tour, both of which have been mentioned. I am the proud owner of Emma Bridgewater mugs, both at home and at work, where I have one with my ministerial title on it. It is extremely exciting and sits on my desk at work. There is also the Wedgwood Museum—funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund—which contains the stunning Wedgwood collection, reflecting centuries of cultural innovation.

When it comes to the impact of culture on the economy, I strongly agree that culture and creativity are central to social, economic and civic renewal. We talk about the impact of culture on an economy a lot now, but we can see that through the ages in the potteries of Stoke. The Wedgwood collection has been managed by

[*Matt Hancock*]

the Victoria and Albert Museum since December 2014, following fundraising efforts by the Art Fund and others and with the help of the former Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central, who is now the excellent new director of the V&A. The connection between the V&A and Stoke is one that I only expect to strengthen under his astute directorship.

Middleport Pottery, a major regeneration project funded by the Prince's Regeneration Trust, hosts the BBC's "The Great Pottery Throw Down", which I am told is hugely popular but I have not seen. I will have to watch it. If it is anything like the other great pottery throwdowns in film that I have seen in my time, it will be extremely exciting. Stoke-on-Trent also has almost 200 listed buildings—there is a fact nobody has mentioned yet—many of which are connected with the ceramics industry.

It is not just about ceramics and pottery; the city has a lot of other cultural assets too, including Trentham gardens, the Regent theatre, the Victoria Hall, the New Vic and the Potteries Museum and Art Gallery. We have heard about Titanic Brewery, Appetite Stoke, the Five Towns theatre, Trentham brass band, Steelworks at Fenton and many others. In recent years, the area has enjoyed significant investment from Arts Council England and the Heritage Lottery Fund. For instance, Hanley Park, one of the largest Victorian parks in the UK, was awarded £4.5 million for refurbishment by the HLF in 2015. Then, of course, there is the football, and finally, Stoke's contribution to fast food, the oatcake. Stoke-on-Trent clearly has a lot to be proud of, but why is it worth bidding for UK city of culture status?

Robert Ffello: The Minister is right to point out the investment in culture by organisations, but it is also important to highlight investment by businesses. For example, although I know my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) will be upset by this, Valentine Clays Ltd is about to open a fantastic brand-new facility in a big, marvellous building in Fenton. It shows that businesses are also investing in and getting to grips with our city.

Matt Hancock: With so much local knowledge on display in this debate, added to the contribution made by the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner) about the impact that city of culture status can have on a town, I am really a bit part in this debate. All the arguments have already been made, and most of the facts deployed.

UK city of culture is about naming a city, getting the attention of the whole country and putting on a pedestal that city's cultural assets and value in order to lift it and showcase it to the rest of the country and the world. I saw that for myself in Hull, where I spent a lot of time growing up because I had family there. The impact has been incredibly exciting, including the regeneration in the town centre, such as the opening of the completely refurbished and absolutely brilliant Ferens Art Gallery. It has brought to Hull people who might otherwise not have considered it and asked people in the rest of the country and worldwide, as well as the people of Hull themselves, to look again at the city, see it in a positive, vibrant light, as it has been seen for much of its history, and lift it on its path of urban renewal. It is incredibly exciting. Walking through parts of Hull that I had not

been to for 10 or 15 years and seeing them renewed and rejuvenated has been a pleasure, and I look forward to doing so in the city of culture 2021.

To put some hard facts on the issue, we estimate that being the city of culture 2017 will deliver a £60 million boost to the local economy. Hull has already had investments of more than £1 billion, creating thousands of jobs, since winning UK city of culture status in 2013. It has been named by Rough Guides as one of the top 10 cities to visit in the world this year; similarly, Londonderry saw 1 million visitors during its year as UK city of culture. I love the fact that the fans at Hull City now chant, "You're only here for the culture!" I am sure that that can happen at both Stoke City and Port Vale, should Stoke win for 2021. The city of culture project builds on the European capital of culture project and next year's great exhibition of the north in Newcastle and Gateshead.

No matter how far each of the 11 cities reaches in the competition, I hope that the galvanising effect of bidding will already have had a small impact. Much of it is about bringing people together, breaking down boundaries and encouraging a mixed economy of business, philanthropy and public sector funding to come together to lift a city. I hope that in the bidding process, Stoke and its surrounding area—we have heard support from my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy)—has been able to lift its eyes to the horizon and make the argument locally that culture and creativity are not something to be scaled back; rather, they are critical to the investment that people want in a sense of place and belonging.

Before I leave a couple of minutes for the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North to respond to the debate, I know what the people of Stoke watching this want me to do, but sadly, as I am sure she knows, it is the one thing I cannot do: grant her wish that Stoke will definitely become the city of culture. However, I commend her efforts and offer good luck to her and all the people of Stoke as the competition goes on.

5.26 pm

Ruth Smeeth: It has been a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, in this debate on an important issue that is close to my heart. Before moving on, I want to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmere (Chris Elmore), the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), and my neighbours and hon. Friends, the Members for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell), for Stoke-on-Trent South (Robert Ffello), for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner), for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) and for Redcar (Anna Turley) for contributing to this debate; it has been a diverse range. I also thank the Front-Bench speakers, especially the Minister, for celebrating my great city and how much we have to contribute. The Minister has not given me the answer I want, but I did not expect him to—yet.

I was remiss in not mentioning earlier that the oatcake has been the break-out star of the recent by-election, in addition to my new colleague.

Gareth Snell: Upstaged by batter.

Ruth Smeeth: Yes. Not only has the oatcake been mentioned in this debate, it made it into *The Guardian's* food pages last month, a clear sign of the culinary zeitgeist if ever there was one.

My colleagues and I truly believe that the city of culture bid is important because it will help our children dream. It will show them how much we have already achieved and what we can achieve together in future. There is nothing more important for us. We have also seen in this debate how much Stoke-on-Trent has to offer. I hope that hon. Members have seen a little snippet of how brilliant our city is. If they did not visit this year during the by-election, although I think most colleagues did, I urge them to come and see how special we are.

It is a testament to how much we have to offer that so many of my colleagues have come to this debate, but how much more can we achieve if we are awarded city

of culture status for 2021? I thank everyone for their support, and I look forward to welcoming them to the city in 2021 when we have city of culture status.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Stoke on Trent City of Culture 2021.

5.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 21 March 2017

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): In February 2015, the Government appointed five commissioners to exercise all executive functions and some non-executive functions at Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council. It followed critical reports by Baroness Alexis Jay and Dame Louise Casey, which found significant failings at the council contributing to child sexual exploitation in Rotherham.

On 9 February 2017, I announced my intention, after careful consideration of the recommendation of the commissioner team, to return six service areas to Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council—adult social care and the council's partnership with the NHS, external partnerships, economic growth, town centre, grounds maintenance and audit. On the same day, representations were invited from the authority regarding this intention. I have now considered the representations, including from the leader and the chief executive, and I am satisfied that the council is now able to exercise functions relating to these service areas in compliance with the best value duty, and that the people of Rotherham can have confidence that this will be the case.

The leader and the chief executive also made representations for the return of the power to appoint council representatives to external bodies. The return of this power was also recommended by the lead commissioner in his letter of 10 February. I am also satisfied that the council is able to exercise this function in accordance with the best value duty.

Therefore, today I am exercising my powers under section 15 of the Local Government Act 1999 to return seven functions to the council. The Education Secretary and I have issued further directions amending the directions issued on 13 December 2016 to do so. Handing back these powers increases democratic control and is a significant milestone for the council, which has demonstrated steady progress in its improvement journey.

With effect from 21 March, councillors will be responsible for decision making in these seven areas. The commissioners will continue to provide oversight on these areas as well as the set of functions returned last year and ensure that they are exercised in accordance with the statutory best value duty. Commissioners also continue to retain powers in additional service areas including children's services (including all services relating to child sexual exploitation) as well as the appointment of statutory officers.

Sir Derek Myers, the lead commissioner, will also be stepping down at the end of this month having overseen the return of three quarters of services areas to the council over a two year period. I am grateful for the leadership he has shown in taking a failing authority in hand, and steering it through a rapid and wide-ranging improvement journey. As there is now a reduced role for commissioners, I will not be appointing any additional commissioners. Commissioner Ney will become Rotherham's lead commissioner with effect from 1 April 2017.

[HCWS548]

HEALTH

NHS England: Mandate 2017-18

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (David Mowat): I have laid before Parliament the Government's mandate to NHS England for 2017-18, in accordance with the Health and Social Care Act 2012. This outlines our objectives for NHS England and sets direction for the NHS as a whole. It also confirms NHS England's budget for the coming year, including a 1.4% real-terms increase.

NHS England is responsible for arranging the provision of health services in England. Building on the current multi-year mandate, which came into effect on 1 April 2016 and set long-term objectives and goals to 2020, the renewed mandate focuses on the same seven high-level objectives:

- to improve local and national health outcomes, and reduce health inequalities, through better commissioning;
- to help create the safest, highest quality health and care service;
- to balance the NHS budget and improve efficiency and productivity;
- to lead a step change in the NHS in preventing ill health and supporting people to live healthier lives;
- to improve and maintain performance against core standards;
- to improve out-of-hospital care; and
- to support research, innovation and growth.

The mandate sets out the key annual deliverables in each area to achieve the 2020 goals.

The Government continue to support the NHS's own five year forward view blueprint for transforming services to respond to the challenges of the future. The Government have committed to a £10 billion increase, over and above inflation, in NHS funding by 2020-21. In parallel, it is vital that the NHS delivers the productivity and efficiency gains set out in the five year forward view to live within its means and that NHS England ensures financial balance in the NHS, alongside NHS Improvement.

Core to the mandate is delivery of the NHS's A&E turnaround plan to return the majority of trusts to the 95% standard by the end of the financial year. This will require close working with local authorities to reduce delayed discharges from hospital, following the Government's injection of additional funding for social care in the spring Budget 2017; rolling out new models for urgent and emergency care to ensure patients receive care in the safest and most appropriate setting; and streamlining governance and oversight of A&E across NHS England and NHS Improvement.

The Government are investing more in mental health than ever before to support delivery of the ambitious goal, set out in the mandate, of 1 million more people with mental health conditions to access services by 2020. This includes embedding the first ever access and waiting times standards for talking therapies, eating disorders and early intervention in psychosis; and developing and implementing a five-year improvement plan for crisis and acute care.

The five year forward view set an ambitious vision for transforming out-of-hospital care for patients, including improving access to general practice; greater integration

of primary, community and social care to provide personalised care for patients; rolling out new models of care across the population; and achieving early diagnosis, service and improved outcomes for cancer patients.

In the coming weeks, NHS England will set out its plan for delivering the five year forward view, which will summarise progress to date and set out a plan for future delivery, including the next stage of development for sustainability and transformation plan footprints and progress towards establishing accountable care organisations: 2017-18 should be the year in which we see concrete progress on these local sustainability and transformation plans, with NHS England supporting local leaders to drive improvement in outcomes. As part of this effort, the Government have already made £325 million of capital funding available for the best STPs over the next three years. In the autumn a further round of local proposals will be considered.

We are also laying before Parliament today a revised mandate for 2016-17 to take account of changes to NHS England's budget, including for primary care transformation funding and the move to market rents by NHS Property Services.

Copies of the 2017-18 mandate and revised 2016-17 mandate can be viewed online as attachments at:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2017-03-21/HCWS547/>.

[HCWS547]

TRANSPORT

Additional Airline Security

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): Today the Government announced there will be changes to aviation security measures for selected inbound flights to the United Kingdom. The House will be aware that the United States Government made a similar announcement earlier today regarding flights to the United States and we have been in close contact with them to fully understand their position.

In conjunction with our international partners and the aviation industry, the UK Government keep aviation security under constant review. The UK has some of the most robust aviation security measures in the world, and at all times the safety and security of the public is our primary concern. We will not hesitate to put in place measures we believe are necessary, effective and proportionate.

Under the new arrangements, phones, laptops and tablets larger than length 16.0 cm, width 9.3 cm and depth 1.5 cm will not be allowed in the cabin on selected flights to the UK from the countries affected. Most smartphones fall within these limits and will continue to be allowed on board. However, devices larger than these dimensions may not be carried in the cabin. This is in addition to other existing security arrangements. This will apply to inbound flights to the UK from the following locations: Turkey, Lebanon, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Tunisia.

Passengers are therefore advised to check online with their airline for further details.

We understand the frustration that these measures may cause and we are working with the aviation industry to minimise any impact. Our top priority will always be to maintain the safety of British nationals. These new measures apply to flights into the UK and we are not currently advising against flying to and from those countries. Those with imminent travel plans should contact their airline for further information. More information can be found on the Department for Transport website and the travelling public should consult the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's travel advice pages on gov.uk.

I know the House will recognise that we face a constantly evolving threat from terrorism and must respond accordingly to ensure the protection of the public against those who would do us harm. The update we are making to our security measures is an important part of that process.

We remain open for business. People should continue to fly and comply with security procedures.

[HCWS549]

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