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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 20 July 2017

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Mr Speaker: On today's Order Paper it is noted that on 30 August 1917, Lieutenant the hon. Francis Walter Stafford McLaren, Royal Flying Corps, Member for Spalding, died of injuries sustained after his aircraft crashed during a training flight off the coast of Scotland. We remember him today.

Oral Answers to Questions

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Brexit: Environmental and Animal Welfare Standards

1. **Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): What plans he has to ensure that (a) environmental and (b) animal welfare standards are maintained after the UK leaves the EU. [900586]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): The European Union (Withdrawal) Bill will convert the existing body of EU environmental and animal welfare law into United Kingdom law. The Government have made it clear that we intend, as a minimum, to retain our existing standards of environmental and animal welfare once we have left the EU. We have some of the highest animal welfare standards in the world and I intend us to remain world leading in the future.

Vicky Ford: In Chelmsford during the recent election, more constituents wrote to me about animal welfare issues than about all other issues put together. People care, and British farm standards on animal welfare are world leading. What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to ensure that British farm standards are not undermined by cheaper, less welfare friendly products from other parts of the world after we leave the EU?

Michael Gove: I congratulate my hon. Friend on her election in Chelmsford and also thank her for her dedicated work in the European Parliament on many of these issues. I, like her, received many representations from constituents about these issues, and my commitment is clear: while we want to lead the world in free trade, we also want to remain a world leader in animal welfare. There will be no compromise on our standards as we seek to ensure that we pilot a better position for British farming and British trade in the future.

15. [900600] **Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): Fine words, but our bee population requires more as the research published in the peer review journal *Science* demonstrated just a few weeks ago. Will the Secretary of State today pledge to end the use of neonicotinoids in the UK and tell us whether the precautionary principle adopted by the European Union will be transposed into UK law?

Michael Gove: I share the hon. Gentleman's commitment to ensure that our bee population and our pollinators are protected. I pay close attention to the science in that report, and we will ensure that our policy on neonicotinoids follows existing EU protections and is enhanced in line with the science.

14. [900599] **Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend confirm that article 13 of the Lisbon treaty, which categorises animals as sentient beings, will be part of the repeal Bill?

Michael Gove: Absolutely. Before we entered the European Union, we recognised in our own legislation that animals were sentient beings. I am an animal; we are all animals, and therefore I care—[*Interruption.*] I am predominantly herbivorous, I should add. It is an absolutely vital commitment that we have to ensure that all creation is maintained, enhanced and protected.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State to his place and thank him for his visit to Wakefield during the recent election. He can rest easy in the knowledge that he played some small part in my return to this place.

The UK's participation in the EU's registration, evaluation and authorisation of chemicals, or REACH, regulation system allows us to protect the environment and human health, and allows UK businesses to sell exports worth £14 billion to the EU each year. It is our second biggest export after cars. The Environmental Audit Committee's inquiry into the future of chemical regulation heard that the legislation cannot be cut and pasted. There are severe concerns about market supply chain freeze and regulatory disruption. How will the Secretary of State regulate chemicals when we leave?

Michael Gove: Better.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): I do not envy the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs the task of transcribing legislation, because 80% of what it deals with is at a European level. However, is it not the case that there are important stakeholders, such as the water industry, that are quite clear that they want the whole canon of legislation to be transcribed as it is into national law?

Michael Gove: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. She was an outstanding Secretary of State in this Department, and the leadership that she continues to show in this area is outstanding, too. She is absolutely right: we want to transcribe and read across existing protections, including the precautionary principle, and then enhance them as and when appropriate.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): Reports this week show a massive rise in US-style mega farms, suggesting that the industrial farming seen in the US is coming to the UK. What is the Minister doing to resist that trend?

Michael Gove: We need to be aware that there are always forces that will lead some small farmers occasionally to want to co-operate with others—to meet capital investment requirements, for example. One thing is clear: I do not want to see, and we will not have, US-style farming in this country. The future for British farming is in quality and provenance, maintaining high environmental and animal welfare standards. We have a world-leading reputation based on doing things better, and that will not be compromised while I am in this Department.

Leaving the EU: Farming

2. **Robert Courts** (Witney) (Con): What assessment he has made of the opportunities available for the farming industry after the UK leaves the EU. [900587]

4. **Luke Hall** (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): What assessment he has made of the opportunities available for the farming industry after the UK leaves the EU. [900589]

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): Leaving the EU presents a major opportunity for UK agriculture. We will be able to design new domestic policies that benefit British agriculture, the countryside and the environment. We have announced our intention to introduce an agriculture Bill in this parliamentary Session in order to provide stability to farmers as we leave the EU. We have pledged to work with industry to devise a new agri-environment system, to be introduced in the following Parliament.

Robert Courts: One of the most promising opportunities after we leave the EU will be to expand the range of markets available to our farmers, but that will come with corresponding challenges. Will the Minister please explain what the Government propose to do to open the new markets that will be available to the farmers of west Oxfordshire while maintaining our high standards, which are not always observed in other parts of the world?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Since 2015, DEFRA has opened around 160 new markets to quality British foods. In the future there could be opportunities to export more British produce, particularly meat and dairy. However, as the Secretary of State has made clear, we value our high standards in food production and animal welfare, and they will not be compromised as we develop future trade agreements.

Luke Hall: Does the Minister agree that once we leave the European Union we can adopt a new, more effective and more tailored agricultural policy that will benefit farmers in south Gloucestershire and right across the country?

George Eustice: I very much agree. One of the great opportunities that we will have after leaving the EU will be the ability to design more effective and better targeted domestic policies to support our environment and promote productive farming.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Does the Minister agree that the role played by the massive farming base in Northern Ireland—pigs, poultry, grain and dairy—must be utilised and enhanced? What discussions have taken place with the Ulster Farmers' Union on the needs of the farming community post-2019 and vital subsidies?

George Eustice: The hon. Gentleman makes an incredibly important point. Agriculture is very important to the Northern Ireland economy—its dairy and poultry sectors are particularly strong. I have previously met the Ulster Farmers' Union leaders. Indeed, I met one of the dairy companies from his constituency only yesterday. This Saturday the Secretary of State is planning to meet the president of the Ulster Farmers' Union.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Tapadh leibh, Mr Speaker. Farming and crofting leaders in Scotland hope that agriculture will be fully controlled in Scotland post Brexit, and according to fishing leaders the Secretary of State has intimated that the Scottish Government will control fishing to 200 miles—incidentally, Na h-Eileanan an Iar is probably the only constituency to reach 200 miles of the exclusive economic zone. Therefore, can I have it on the record that the Government will indeed be back in this position and that farming and fishing for Scotland will be controlled in Scotland post Brexit?

George Eustice: Some of these matters are obviously already devolved. I think that everybody recognises that there also needs to be some kind of UK framework to protect the integrity of the UK single market. On leaving the EU, we will take control of our agriculture policy, and there is an opportunity to give all the devolved Administrations more control than they currently enjoy to be able to do that while protecting the integrity of the single market.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that after leaving the EU we must have a risk-based regulatory system based on sound science to ensure that UK farmers are world leaders?

George Eustice: Yes; my hon. Friend is absolutely right. We believe that there should be careful risk-based assessment when it comes to regulation. We also have a great opportunity to change the culture of regulation. The reality of the common agricultural policy, as it exists now, is that there are far too many complex rules against which farmers are judged. We have an opportunity to simplify that and have a much more effective system going forward.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): The National Farmers Union says that the number of seasonal farm workers coming to the UK has dropped by 17%, and a report published this week states that

“the silence from Government on the labour question is astonishing.” Food production, processing and packaging rely heavily on migrant labour—the Office for National Statistics states that they make up 41% of the workforce. Why are the Government ignoring the industry's warnings? Will they compensate for the loss of produce as a direct result of this complacency, and will they ensure that the food manufacturing industry continues to have access to the workforce it needs?

George Eustice: There is no silence from the Government on this issue—indeed, there was a debate in Westminster Hall just last week where we discussed this issue in detail. We have the seasonal agricultural workers scheme transition group, which monitors seasonal labour

requirements. It met in March, it had informal discussions last week, and it will meet again later this week. In addition, the Home Office intends to commission the Migration Advisory Committee to do a piece of work on the labour needs of this country after we leave the EU.

Sue Hayman: Well, that all sounds marvellous, doesn't it? So why does the report say we have a looming food crisis if everything is under control? It says we could actually run out of some foods after Brexit. One of the authors, Professor Tim Lang, accuses the Government of a

“serious policy failing on an unprecedented scale”

for their handling of the food security situation. The Secretary of State is notoriously dismissive of expert advice, but does he accept the findings of this report, and will he meet me and industry representatives to urgently discuss the food crisis before us?

George Eustice: The issue with that report is that it has not looked at the issues as closely as we have in DEFRA. We have been studying all these issues at tremendous length. The truth about food security is that it depends on increasing food production globally at a sustainable level and on open markets around the world, and those are challenges whether we are in or out of the EU. There is nothing about leaving the EU that will affect our food security.

CAP Successor Scheme: Scotland

3. **Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on a successor scheme to the Common Agricultural Policy after the UK leaves the EU. [900588]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): Since being appointed as the Secretary of State, I have met the Scottish Agriculture Minister and the Scottish Environment Minister at the royal highland show. I will continue to work with all of the devolved Administrations, and indeed to consult more widely, on the design of any new system of agricultural support.

Alan Brown: Those are nice, kind words from the Secretary of State about how he will work with the Scottish Government, but the blatant reality is that clause 11 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill is one of the most naked power grabs ever seen, because it allows the Westminster Government to impose decisions in devolved matters. Will the Secretary of State confirm that, despite his rhetoric, this means that Westminster can impose a successor CAP system on the Scottish Government?

Michael Gove: What I can confirm is that the conversation I had with the Scottish Agriculture Minister and the Scottish Environment Minister was cordial. We have committed to working constructively together, and each of the devolved Assemblies and devolved Administrations has a role to play in helping us to design the successor regime to the common agricultural policy.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): The greatest agricultural event not just in Britain, but in Europe and indeed the world—the royal Welsh show—is taking place next week. Does my right hon. Friend

agree with me and with the 250,000 people who attend the event that, in a pre and a post-Brexit world, the best showcasing of agriculture is taking place in Builth Wells?

Michael Gove: I can absolutely confirm that to my hon. Friend. I am looking forward to going to Builth Wells on Monday. It will be my second visit to Wales in a week; I was in Cardiff last week talking to NFU Cymru, the Farmers Union of Wales, and the Country Land and Business Association in Wales. As someone whose wife is Welsh, my affection for my hon. Friend's constituency—and, indeed, for the royal Welsh show and for Welsh agriculture—is second to none.

Mr Speaker: I hope the right hon. Gentleman's affection will be reciprocated. We very much hope so.

Michael Gove: It certainly is by Mrs Gove.

Mr Speaker: I am very glad to hear it. We are all interested to hear about the very healthy state of the Secretary of State's marriage, which was not in doubt.

Animal Welfare

5. **Mrs Kemi Badenoch** (Saffron Walden) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve animal welfare. [900590]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker—[*Interruption.*] Well, I think we are all on the same page in the Conservative party and singing from the same hymn sheet.

We have some of the highest animal welfare standards in the world, and I am continually building on this. We plan reforms to pet sales and licensing, to live exports, and to welfare at slaughter, and we are considering some other animal welfare measures as well.

Mrs Badenoch: I thank the Minister for his answer. Like many colleagues in the House, I have received huge volumes of correspondence on this issue. Will he commit to consulting closely with environmental and animal welfare groups when establishing these new regulations?

Michael Gove: Absolutely. May I take this opportunity to congratulate my hon. Friend not just on her election to this House but on her brilliant maiden speech yesterday? Consultation with environmental and animal welfare groups has been at the heart of the approach that DEFRA has taken, and it has also been central to developing the new policy agenda that I hope to take forward.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): I am very concerned about the potential impact on animal welfare in Dudley of illegally dumped waste at the Rowan Oak site in Shaw Road. Local businesses are furious about the amount of time it is taking the Environment Agency to deal with this. Will the Secretary of State look at this personally, talk to the Environment Agency, and help me to get this matter sorted out?

Michael Gove: I certainly will. Again—

Mr Speaker: I am a little uncertain as to how the animals were impacted on by this matter, but I do not think any further adumbration on the issue is required from the hon. Gentleman; the Secretary of State seems at home, so let us hear from the fella.

Michael Gove: The hon. Gentleman is a doughty champion for his constituents, never more so than in raising this case. I have already talked to the Environment Agency about the increase in the number of illegal waste sites and the damage that that does to human and, indeed, animal health and welfare. We are reviewing how we investigate and prosecute the criminals behind this activity.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I am sure that people will be greatly reassured by what the Secretary of State has said today about animal welfare. On the back of that, will the Government commit to increase the penalties for people convicted of animal cruelty?

Michael Gove: I am actively reviewing this matter. As my hon. Friend knows, I am not someone who will automatically reach for stronger criminal sanctions as the only route to dealing with a problem, but there are particular cases of animal cruelty where we may well need to revisit the existing criminal sanctions in order to ensure that the very worst behaviour is dealt with using the full force of the law.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Across the country, complaints are still frequently made to the police concerning the killing and chasing of foxes and hares by hounds as part of organised hunts. What steps will the Secretary of State take to ensure better enforcement of the Hunting Act 2004, which clearly represents the will of the British people?

Michael Gove: The law of the land must always be enforced without fear or favour.

Leaving the EU: Food Security

6. **Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD):** What assessment has his Department made of the potential effect on food security of the UK leaving the EU. [900591]

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): Food security depends on global factors including increasing global production sustainably, reducing waste, and ensuring open markets to facilitate trade around the world. With regard to the EU, we are prioritising securing the freest trade possible, including an ambitious and comprehensive free trade agreement and a new customs agreement.

Tom Brake: Does the Minister accept the definition of “food security” provided by the former Government chief scientific adviser, Sir John Beddington—notably, that food security is characterised as requiring a food system that is sufficient, sustainable, safe and equitable? By reference to which indicators of food security will DEFRA be judging the food security consequences of the post-Brexit food and agricultural system?

George Eustice: The Foresight report to which the right hon. Gentleman refers set out that this country has a high level of food security. We have open markets, and a relatively high level of self-sufficiency as well, although that is not the key factor in food security. The report actually highlighted that there were no issues on food security. As I said earlier, we do not believe that leaving the EU has any impact on food security at all.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): Food security can be enhanced by supporting the export of great British foods throughout the world. It is no surprise that I love British food and drink—particularly Lancashire cheese and British beer, both produced in my constituency. Will the Minister ensure that as we approach Brexit and these trade deals, we do a lot more to ensure that many more markets around the world can enjoy the food that I enjoy here in this country?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We made it clear in our manifesto that we want to open new markets and to produce more and export more great British food from this country. He cites some great examples from his own constituency. We continue to press hard to open new markets and create new opportunities.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State said earlier that he was not in favour of mega-farms, yet there has been a 26% increase in the history of this Government. This has an effect not only on food security, animal welfare and food standards, but on the structure of our British farms, including the future of tenant farms. What will the Minister say to tenant farmers about their security after Brexit?

George Eustice: I had a meeting with the Tenancy Reform Industry Group just a couple of weeks ago, where we discussed in detail the issue of tenancy law, including whether we could review the workings of existing farm business tenancies and whether we could do more to encourage models such as contract farming, share farming and franchise farming to create new opportunities for new entrants.

Rural Economy

7. **Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con):** What steps his Department is taking to support the rural economy. [900592]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): The Government are absolutely committed to supporting and strengthening the rural economy to allow good businesses to grow and thrive. We have invested nearly £2 billion of public funding in delivering superfast broadband. We have the universal service obligation, and we will be securing improvements to mobile connectivity in rural areas.

Sir Edward Leigh: The best way to help the rural economy is to keep farmers in business. Will my hon. Friend will give me a modest little birthday present today, and undertake to be positive about reintroducing a deficiency payments scheme? That scheme was very popular with farmers before 1972, and the United States

introduced such a scheme after 2002 that was not contrary to World Trade Organisation rules. The scheme would actually help the rural economy greatly.

Dr Coffey: We will study my hon. Friend's comments carefully. I must admit that I was born in 1971, so I do not have any direct knowledge, but he will know of the ongoing support that the Conservative Government will continue to give farmers, and we have made a commitment to continue that stable support as we transition out of the EU.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): One of the best things the Government could do to support farmers in my constituency, particularly sheep farmers, is just give them simple clarity about whether they will be paying tariffs on their exports to Europe of sheep products. That will be key to their ability to plan their investment with certainty during the next 18 months.

Dr Coffey: The right hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Government have set out the approach we intend to seek for a comprehensive free trade agreement with the European Union once we depart from it. We want to provide such clarity as soon as possible, and he will be aware that the negotiations are ongoing.

17. [900602] **Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con):** I note that the Minister is aware that the cost of the bureaucracy related to applying for common agricultural policy subsidies has been considerable for farmers over recent years. Will she reassure me that this cost under the new British agricultural policy, or whatever it ends up being called, will be considerably lower and that it will be easier to apply for?

Dr Coffey: I am very happy to assure my hon. Friend that our future agricultural policy will be designed in a way that reduces needless and energy-sapping bureaucracy. We expect it to be simpler than the CAP, but she will recognise that we have a duty to ensure that taxpayers' money is spent carefully and transparently. We will continue to reward farmers and landowners, who manage our precious countryside, in a way that supports the best environmental outcomes.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): In the Minister's answer to the original question, she mentioned the roll-out of rural broadband. May I appeal to the Minister by saying that the roll-out is taking far too long in many communities, including my own constituency? What more will she do to speed up the installation of superfast broadband in rural areas?

Dr Coffey: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Welsh Assembly Government are working closely with local communities and BT Openreach to reach such places. I am sure he will be able to follow up on that directly, but I will pass on his concerns to my right hon. Friend the Minister for Digital.

EU Markets (West Country Food Exporters)

8. **Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab):** What recent discussions he has had with food exporters in the west country on safeguarding tariff-free access to EU markets. [900593]

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): As the right hon. Gentleman knows, I have a number of leading west country food manufacturers in my constituency, including Falfish and Rodda's cream, both of which are successful exporters. In addition, we are working closely with trade organisations, such as the Food and Drink Federation, to understand the needs of the industry. We have been clear that we intend to put in place a new partnership with the EU, which will include a comprehensive free trade agreement.

Mr Bradshaw: The Minister will know that 80% of west country fish and 30% of our lamb is exported straight to EU markets, free—currently—of tariffs and other barriers. Those food producers will be extremely concerned by the comments today of the International Trade Secretary, who appears completely relaxed about the prospect of leaving the EU with no deal. Does the Minister agree with him, or with the Chancellor, who said that this would be a very, very bad thing?

George Eustice: As the right hon. Gentleman will know, the UK has a significant trade deficit in food and drink products with the EU, so the EU needs access to our market as well. We have a significant deficit of around £18 billion a year, and I believe it is in the EU's interests, therefore, to secure a free trade agreement too.

Mr Speaker: Ah, how very apposite; the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) was banging on about fish. I call Mr Marcus Fysh.

Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): I am afraid I am not going to speak about fish today, Mr Speaker, but another time I will be happy to do so.

Farmers in Somerset expect their Government to negotiate continued tariff-free cross-channel trade, and hundreds of thousands of farmers across the EU expect the same of theirs. What are Ministers doing to secure engagement now between Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs and Europe's national customs agencies to ensure that timely and appropriate data exchange keeps agricultural trade smooth after we leave the EU?

George Eustice: We have set out plans in this Session for Bills dealing with trade and customs, and those Bills will address the issues that my hon. Friend has raised. I know that colleagues right across Government are working in a great deal of detail on customs issues to secure an agreement.

Farm Subsidies

9. **Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD):** What his Department's policy is on farm subsidies after 2020; and if he will make a statement. [900594]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): The Government have committed to providing the same cash total in funds for farm support until the end of the Parliament. We have also announced our intention to introduce an agriculture Bill in this Session to provide stability for farmers as we leave the European Union, and of course we will continue to protect and enhance our natural environment.

Tim Farron: The average hill farm has an annual income before CAP payments of minus £10,000, and therefore hill farming as a sector is under enormous pressure, despite the fact that it is utterly fundamental to food security, to the protection of our environment and, indeed, to the maintenance of the landscape that has just won the Lake District world heritage site status. Will the Secretary of State reflect on the fact that successive Governments have used the common agricultural policy as an excuse for not providing direct, tailored support for hill farmers? Will he use this opportunity to promise me, the House and hill farmers across the country that he will introduce a hill farm allowance to protect our uplands and the hill farming industry?

Michael Gove: A very well-crafted question, and may I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his re-election in Westmorland and Lonsdale and take the opportunity to pay tribute to the dignified and principled way in which he has led his party? He is absolutely right that hill farming and upland farming matter. The proposition he puts forward is not the only way of ensuring that we can maintain the environmental and broader cultural benefits that hill farming brings, but I shall do everything possible to ensure that as we replace the common agricultural policy, the needs of hill and upland farmers are met more effectively than ever before.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): I thank Members very much for supporting me in becoming the Chair of the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. As we reform our support systems for agriculture, and our environmental schemes in particular, we can make them less complicated—we will not have to count trees, work out whether a tree is a sapling and so on—and ensure that we can retain water and do everything that we want to do with the environment, as well as producing food. We have an ideal opportunity to do that as we bring the new British farming policy together.

Michael Gove: I add my voice to those of everyone in the House in congratulating my hon. Friend on securing re-election as Chairman of the Select Committee. Once again, he absolutely hits the nail on the head. As we move outside the European Union, our system of agricultural support must protect farmers through the vicissitudes they face; and, critically, the environmental benefits that farmers secure for us every day must be at the heart of any new system of support.

Topical Questions

T1. [900604] **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): May I wish every Member of the House an enjoyable recess and hope that they will take the opportunity to sample some of the range of great British food and drink that is available, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans) pointed out, as they holiday in these islands? Over the next few days I will be visiting Northern Ireland and Wales, and I very much enjoyed my earlier visits to Scotland. Agriculture and fisheries are stronger as part of our United Kingdom, whichever part of it we are privileged to represent.

Mr Carmichael: Of course, the finest food to be found anywhere includes Shetland lamb and Orkney beef, which are always best eaten in the community of their production. Anybody who wishes to join me over the summer recess in Orkney or Shetland will be very welcome. Those fine products get a lot of protection from the protected geographical status and protected designation of origin schemes, which we currently enjoy as part of the European Union. What is DEFRA doing to ensure that our food producers have protection that is at least as good after we leave?

Michael Gove: The right hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. As someone who recently had the opportunity to sample Orkney's fine smoked cheese at the royal highland show, may I add my praise for the produce of the beautiful islands he represents? Geographical indicators are of course a very useful tool. We want to ensure that, outside the European Union, British food, from whichever part of these islands it originates, can have its status and provenance protected at the heart of effective marketing.

T4. [900607] **Luke Graham** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): Considering that my right hon. Friend has managed to complete 99.2% of the common agricultural policy payments in England, what assistance and co-operation can he offer the devolved Administration in Edinburgh, who have managed only to reach 90.4%?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. It did not surprise me, though it may have surprised others, that we increased the representation of Scottish Conservatives in this House by 1,200% at the general election, not least in the north-east and Ochil and South Perthshire, where farmers are suffering as a result of the maladministration of the Scottish Government. Many of them are asking why the Scottish Government cannot learn from the Department for Environment and Rural Affairs and, instead of prating on about independence and constitutional uncertainty, learn from their partners in the rest of the United Kingdom.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): The Secretary of State talks a great deal about gaining control of our waters after Brexit, but, as usual with this Government, so much of the detail is sadly lacking. Since 2013, three British-based vessels of the Royal Navy fishery protection squadron have not been exclusively used for fisheries enforcement. The Government's own figures show that the number of boats boarded by the fishery protection vessels has plummeted from 1,400 to just 278 over the past six years. Will the Minister explain what, "Take back control of our waters," actually means and why fishing enforcement has dwindled so dramatically under this Government? Will he agree to conduct an urgent review to assist the level of fisheries enforcement required now and after Brexit?

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): I can tell the hon. Lady exactly what taking back control means. When we leave the EU we automatically, under international law, become an independent coastal state. That means that we will have responsibility for managing our exclusive economic zone, which is 200 nautical miles or the median line. We already enforce those waters. The hon. Lady raises concerns about the number of vessels, but most of the

work these days is digital. We have a control room in Newcastle that monitors the movement of every single fishing vessel in the country.

T5. [900608] **Ms Esther McVey** (Tatton) (Con): Although the Government provide support for cattle farmers affected by TB, can the Secretary of State reassure me that goat and sheep farmers in Cheshire will get comparable compensation?

George Eustice: My right hon. Friend is right. There is a particular problem in Cheshire, which is why two years ago we introduced six-monthly surveillance testing. We held a consultation in December on changing the way in which we calculate compensation rates on other species, including sheep and goats. The pig industry has some concerns and we are reviewing and addressing them. It is important to recognise that we already pay compensation to people with sheep and goat farms affected by TB.

T2. [900605] **Mr Ben Bradshaw** (Exeter) (Lab): Is “thick as mince, lazy as a toad and vain as Narcissus” an appropriate description to use for a fellow Cabinet member? If hard Brexiteers in our Government are falling out in that way, how on earth can the Secretary of State expect our European Union partners to take our negotiations seriously?

Michael Gove: The right hon. Gentleman, I am sure, is aware that we are working well together in government—*[Laughter]*—and I do not recognise the description he just gave as fitting any Member of this House.

T6. [900609] **Robert Courts** (Witney) (Con): Farmers in west Oxfordshire welcome the Government’s assurance that CAP funding will be guaranteed until 2020 and for structural schemes for the lifetime of the scheme. Could the Government give further assurance as to what assistance will be given to farmers who plan on a five-year cycle?

George Eustice: I have been very clear to farmers that, in moving to a new system, we recognise the importance of a gradual transition. We have been very clear that we will work with farmers and industry over the next year or so as we work out our plans. We will then put in place a gradual transition from the old system to the new.

T3. [900606] **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): Many of my constituents in Blaydon have suffered badly from landfill sites on their doorstep. What plans does the Secretary of State have, first to reduce the amount of waste going to landfill, and secondly to ensure that environmental protections are not only preserved but strengthened in the Brexit process?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): I welcome the hon. Lady to the House. I am sure that she will be a worthy successor to David Anderson, the gentleman with whom I worked previously. I assure her that we are working with councils to identify the barriers to increasing recycling in their areas. One London borough recycles less than 15% of its waste whereas other areas

recycle more than 60%. There are lessons that we can share, and I am actively engaged in that, including in working with the Environment Agency on the proper regulation of landfill sites.

T7. [900611] **Rachel Maclean** (Redditch) (Con): My hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Chris Davies) has drawn the House’s attention to the fantastic show in his constituency. I wish to draw hon. Members’ attention to the most spectacular summer’s day out in Worcestershire, the Hanbury show, which is held in my constituency. However, the farming communities in Inkberrow, Hanbury and the Lenches, who take part in the show with their fantastic produce, are concerned that, post-Brexit, there will be standards that affect the import and export of their products and have a negative impact on their trade. Will the Minister give us specific reassurances on that?

George Eustice: The Hanbury show is indeed a famous and strong agricultural show. The Secretary of State addressed the point earlier. We are clear that we prize our high standards of animal welfare and food and that they will not be compromised in any future trade agreement.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): In Blaenau Gwent, we are proud of our Tudor Brewery. However, although beers can trade on their Britishness, there is no guarantee that they are produced on these shores. With calls to buy British ever louder, what are the Government doing to ensure that customers know that British brands are made in Britain?

Michael Gove: The hon. Gentleman makes a good case and I look forward to enjoying a pint of Blaenau Gwent-brewed beer before too long. Outside the EU, we will have the capacity, should we choose to exercise it, more effectively to brand British food as British. As I said earlier, Members of all parties recognise that provenance matters for food and drink, and British is always best.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): Last summer, I was pleased to meet key representatives from the charity Surfers Against Sewage. I congratulate them on their battle against plastics in our seas and marine environment, including the Solent and the River Itchen in my constituency. The summer holidays are due to begin. Will Ministers outline the work that we are doing around our coastlines, particularly the Solent and the Itchen, to ensure that they are safe for water sports and our local wildlife?

Dr Coffey: I, too, congratulate Surfers Against Sewage on not only its direct activity, but its ongoing campaigns. I was therefore pleased to meet Hugo Tagholm in the past year. Our beaches are of better quality than at any time since the industrial revolution. Last year, we introduced tougher bathing water standards, and even under those tough standards, 93.2% of England’s beaches were rated excellent or good. I visited the Itchen last month. I am aware of some of the challenges, including the pressures of abstraction, but we will do what we can to improve the ecological as well as the leisure quality of rivers and beaches.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Further to the question from the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), will the Secretary of State say exactly how he will ensure that products such as traditional

Grimsby smoked fish, produced by the excellent Alfred Enderby's traditional smokehouse in my constituency, retain their protected geographical indications?

Michael Gove: As someone who grew up with the scent of smoked fish in their nostrils, because that is what my father produced, I am committed to making sure that we have the best protection. Only last week, I visited H. Foreman & Son, who now enjoy a designation as providers and producers of London cure smoked salmon. As we have just discussed, we will have the opportunity outside the EU to ensure that British food can be more effectively branded as British and best.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the thought that must sit in his head as he plans a new management system for our fisheries is that it has to be on an ecosystems basis? That will allow him to ignore the simple blandishments of so many people who claim that there is a one-size-fits-all approach to fisheries management, which was the big failing of the common fisheries policy.

Michael Gove: My right hon. Friend is right. He was a brilliant fisheries Minister, who was responsible within the EU for ensuring that the common fisheries policy, imperfect as it is in so many ways, was reformed to deal with discards and to develop our fish stocks on a more sustainable basis. Outside the EU, as an independent coastal state, we can do even more, but he is right that conservation must be at the heart of our policy.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): May I return to the issue of animal welfare? The Secretary of State will recognise that the use of antibiotics in farming is part of an animal welfare regime. However, there is massive concern that overuse of antibiotics is destroying their effectiveness, both for animals and humans. What can be done to reverse this trend?

George Eustice: The Veterinary Medicines Directorate and our chief vet have been working very closely with the Department of Health on plans to reduce the use of antibiotics. Great success has been achieved in sectors such as poultry, where there has been a substantial reduction of some 40% to 50% in antibiotics use. Often it is about adopting different approaches to husbandry to reduce reliance on antibiotics, but although a lot of progress has been made, there is more to do.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

The hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South, representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, was asked—

EU Referendum Campaign

1. **Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab):** What discussions she has had with the commission on allegations of illegal funding during the EU referendum campaign. [900612]

Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South): The commission has published two reports that include its assessment of the rules on campaign funding for the

EU referendum. The commission has also completed investigations of issues with a small number of campaigner spending returns, none of which related to impermissible donations. It is continuing to consider issues with some campaigners' spending returns, in line with its published enforcement policy. The commission publishes the outcome of all investigations on its website once investigations have been completed.

Mr Bradshaw: Can my hon. Friend confirm—or, if not, ask the Electoral Commission—whether it has received allegations of illegal financial funding from Russia to elements of the leave campaign?

Bridget Phillipson: The commission is aware of media reports that allege that there could have been Russian involvement in the EU referendum. These cover a wide range of alleged activities that are beyond the commission's remit. Any allegation with evidence that a registered campaigner accepted impermissible donations from Russia would be investigated in line with the commission's enforcement policy, but I am sure that officials from the commission would be more than happy to meet my right hon. Friend to discuss this matter further.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Does my hon. Friend—and she is a friend—agree that not only is illegal funding wrong, but so is electoral fraud? May I invite her to ask the commission to conduct a proper inquiry into having a national voter register, to ensure that people do not double and triple vote in general elections and other elections?

Bridget Phillipson: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. He will know that the 381 electoral registers are maintained by different electoral registration offices across the country, and it is not currently possible to interrogate them collectively in order to identify duplicate entries or voting in more than one area. The commission will be happy to work with the Government to consider potential solutions to reduce this risk.

Election Expenses and Political Donations

2. **Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP):** What recent assessment the commission has made of the effectiveness of the regulation of (a) election expenses and (b) donations to political parties. [900613]

Bridget Phillipson: The Electoral Commission continues to regulate the rules on UK political finance in a way that is fair and proportionate, focusing on helping parties to comply with the law. Since 2013 the commission has been calling for changes to improve enforcement and sanctioning of the political finance rules. It has recommended increasing the maximum penalty it can impose and extending its enforcement responsibilities to some candidate spending rules. The commission will publish a report in the autumn on the regulation of election expenses and donations to political parties in the 2017 general election.

Martyn Day: There has been significant media coverage of the 2015 general election expenses issue, with the Tories being fined the maximum £70,000, and with an hon. Member reportedly having been charged. In March, the Electoral Commission chair, Sir John Holmes, said:

“There is a risk that some political parties might come to view the payment of these fines as a cost of doing business”.

Might it be worth making fine limits proportionate to the number of candidates standing for a party at an election?

Bridget Phillipson: The hon. Gentleman is right to make it clear that the Electoral Commission is of the view that the maximum fine of £20,000 could well be seen as the cost of doing business. The commission has called for an increase in the maximum penalty it can impose on political parties and other campaigners. It is of the view that the penalties should be more proportionate to the income and expenditure of larger and well-funded campaigners.

Emergency Proxy Voting

3. **Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): What assessment the commission has made of the suitability of the rules on emergency proxy vote applications for people who have suffered a family bereavement. [900614]

Bridget Phillipson: The commission has recommended changes to the qualifying circumstances for appointing an emergency proxy since 2011. It recommends extending the qualifying circumstances to include those who have unforeseen caring responsibilities or who have experienced the death of a close relative. In its September 2016 response to the commission’s statutory report on the 2015 general election, the UK Government confirmed that they had no plans to extend the qualifying circumstances for appointing an emergency proxy.

Kevin Foster: I thank the hon. Lady for her answer. My constituent Ruth Jones was unable to vote at the recent election following a family bereavement. She was attending her grandmother’s funeral at the time. However, had she been called away for a work emergency, she could have qualified for an emergency proxy vote. Can the hon. Lady reassure me that the Electoral Commission will continue to push for changes to enable a family bereavement to be seen as having the same impact on a voter as a work emergency?

Bridget Phillipson: I am sorry to hear about the circumstances that the hon. Gentleman described, and the way in which they affected his constituent. I can assure him that the Electoral Commission is still of the view that there is a gap in the emergency proxy provision, and remains concerned about the need to enhance the accessibility of the process by extending the qualifying circumstances. I am sure that the commission would welcome any support that he could offer in that regard.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Rules and procedures on proxies, emergency proxies and postal votes are good only if they are followed. What action is the Electoral Commission taking to address the shambolic handling of the general election in Plymouth, which resulted in 1,500 postal votes not being sent out, and 6,500 votes not being included in the declaration on the evening of the count?

Bridget Phillipson: The commission is collecting information from returning officers about their experience of the 8 June general election. I am sure that it would

also welcome the views of my hon. Friend, should he wish to share them with representatives of the commission, either in writing or through a meeting, which I am sure they would be happy to attend.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Bearing in mind the questionably massive amount of proxy votes used in some constituencies in Northern Ireland, including Foyle, will the hon. Lady outline the steps being taken to stop the alleged abuse by some parties of this vital voting mechanism, which I, too, believe could be compassionately extended to grieving families?

Bridget Phillipson: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that different arrangements relating to identity are in place in Northern Ireland. However, any concerns about possible criminal activity would be a matter for the police force, and I suggest that he encourages anyone with evidence of criminal activity to report it to the police.

Voter Registration and Boundary Commission Review

4. **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): What discussions the Committee has had with the commission on the effect of (a) recent rises in voter registration and (b) the 2017 general election on the conclusions of the most recent Boundary Commission review. [900616]

Bridget Phillipson: The Electoral Commission this week published a report on electoral registration at the June 2017 UK general election. It highlights that online electoral registration resulted in a record electorate of an estimated 46.8 million people. The commission’s report argues that further modernisation is required to reduce the impact of large numbers of duplicate registration applications, and to ensure that the registration process is more joined up with other public services. The commission does not have any responsibilities in relation to the review of parliamentary constituency boundaries, which are a matter for the UK’s boundary commissions.

Dr Huq: As my hon. Friend points out, 2.9 million new people registered to vote and became part of a record electorate in the recent general election. There was a similar spike before last year’s referendum. Surely we should now heed the Electoral Commission’s recommendation that boundary reviews take place after a major electoral event, to take those new people into account and to ensure that the 2022 election does not hark back to the outmoded situation of 2015.

Bridget Phillipson: The current review of parliamentary constituencies is a matter for the boundary commissions, but the Electoral Commission has previously recommended that Parliament and the Boundary Commission consider whether it would be more appropriate to base reviews on electoral data taken from the registers used for elections, rather than from the register published on 1 December.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): It is perfectly reasonable for students and others to be registered in two places if they are normally resident in both. Does the hon. Lady agree that it would be sensible to check one in 100 late registrations to see whether they are

double-registered and whether double voting has taken place? That would give us more scope to determine whether and how much fraud took place at the last election.

Bridget Phillipson: I am sure that the Electoral Commission will take heed of the hon. Gentleman's suggestion. It takes seriously any suggestion that an individual might have voted twice, but so far there is little evidence of widespread abuse in the recent general election. As he says, it is possible in certain circumstances for people—including students and MPs—to be lawfully registered to vote in more than one place. However, it is a criminal offence to cast more than one vote on their behalf in a UK parliamentary general election.

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): One of the most efficient organisations in recruiting young people to the electoral register is Bite the Ballot. It can register 16 to 18-year-olds for as little as 25p per elector; by comparison, the Electoral Commission's advertising campaigns cost £80 to £90 per download. Will my hon. Friend liaise with the Electoral Commission and ask whether it will develop service level agreements with this excellent organisation?

Bridget Phillipson: I am more than happy to take up my hon. Friend's suggestion. He is a doughty campaigner on this issue, and I am sure that he will continue that work now that he is back with us in this place.

Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): The commission is correct to highlight the discrepancy between the 1 December assessment of our electorate, and the electorate in our most recent election. In my constituency, the difference between the 2015 and 2017 elections was 8,000, which is over 10%. Would the hon. Lady welcome an investigation by the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee into how we deal with such discrepancies?

Bridget Phillipson: It will be for the Committee and its new members, when it is constituted, to consider the best way of examining the issues. We all want to ensure that registers are as complete as possible, that people are not missed out and that there is no reduction in the number of people registered to vote, so that the boundary commissions can consider parliamentary constituency boundaries based on the best available registers.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Fuel Poverty

5. **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): What steps the Church of England is taking to tackle food poverty. [900618]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman): First of all, may I congratulate the hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson) on her appointment to her role representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission? I thought she did a very good job of answering the questions.

Seventy-five per cent. of churches collect food, 38% provide volunteers, 29% help to manage a food bank, and 21% distribute food vouchers. Churches also

work in partnership with organisations such as Citizens Advice and Christians Against Poverty to tackle the underlying causes of food poverty.

Kerry McCarthy: I thank the right hon. Lady for that response. As she will know, the Archbishop of Canterbury is the president of Feeding Britain, and I was pleased to be able to launch its latest pilot in Bristol on Friday. I appreciate the work that churches are doing in providing food banks, and the other work that she outlined. What more can they do to lobby the Government on the underlying causes of food poverty that cause people to resort to such measures?

Dame Caroline Spelman: Christians Against Poverty is proactive in trying to tackle the underlying causes by offering free debt advice and financial education programmes, for example. The charity has just appointed Dickens Heath church in my constituency to provide those courses over a wide region, so I suggest that the hon. Lady may like to approach it about doing the same in Bristol.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating June Osborne, the Bishop of Llandaff, who was consecrated in Brecon cathedral on Saturday, becoming the second female bishop in the Church in Wales?

Dame Caroline Spelman: I am quite sure that the Bishop of Llandaff will focus on the needs of people who may suffer from food poverty in her diocese, but I of course congratulate her on her appointment.

Mr Speaker: Very deft.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): The right hon. Lady will be pleased to hear that food banks in Stroud are run largely through the churches, but they are under huge pressure due to the number of volunteers they need and the amount of food that they have to collect. Will she have a word with the Government about the sanctions regime, which is one of the major causes of the increase in food bank usage?

Dame Caroline Spelman: As Members of Parliament, it is important that we address the underlying causes. I had a letter from the Trussell Trust just last month, which said that people

"may be reassured to hear that, on average people are only referred to Trussell Trust foodbanks two times in a 12-month period",

and that the model is

"designed to help people in a crisis".

As Members, we need to address the nature of the crises that make it necessary for people to get help.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

The hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South, representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, was asked—

Electoral Regulations (Compliance)

6. **Wayne David** (Caerphilly) (Lab): Whether the Commission is undertaking a review of political parties' compliance with electoral regulations during the 2017 general election. [900619]

Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South): Prior to the general election, the commission produced detailed guidance for political parties to help them comply with their statutory reporting requirements. The commission also engaged with a number of parties to discuss our arrangements for compliance. Its advice service for parties was available and well used throughout the campaign. The commission will publish parties' spending returns for the general election as soon as is practically possible once the deadlines for submitting the returns has passed.

Wayne David: I thank my hon. Friend for her response. She should be aware that serious allegations have been made about the use of a call centre in Neath by the Conservative party during the general election campaign. I want to tell the House that I have heard from the Electoral Commission, which has stated in writing that South Wales police are formally considering the allegations.

Bridget Phillipson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that. He will know that political parties that spend over £250,000 at the general election have six months to send audited spending returns to the commission, and they will need to include details of all party spending on campaigning at the election.

It is a potential offence under the Representation of the People Acts for there to be paid canvassing on behalf of the candidate, and any allegations would be a matter for the relevant police force to consider.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Rural Parish Growth

7. **Victoria Prentis** (Banbury) (Con): What funds the Church of England makes available for rural parish growth. [900622]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman): Rural parish funding is primarily the responsibility of the individual diocese, but the Church Commissioners have made available national support under the strategic development fund. To date, the fund has provided £34.6 million for 32 projects in 25 dioceses.

Victoria Prentis: As you know, Mr Speaker, I talk a lot about my worries regarding the recruitment of obstetricians in Banbury, but I am equally concerned about recruitment to the rural Church. Can my right hon. Friend help me by explaining what more the Church can do to encourage the right sort of ordinands to apply, and what sort of training can we give them when they apply?

Dame Caroline Spelman: The Church is committed to doubling the number of people entering training by 2020, and it has made very good progress with the push on training ordinands. Since 2014, we have seen an increase of 14% in the numbers training for priesthood, and my hon. Friend may be interested to hear that there has been an above-average number of women—14%—and that 25% of that cohort is under the age of 32.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): But would not growth in the Church of England be easier if it moved on from its cruel and outdated approach to both clergy and laity who are in same-sex relationships? Will the right hon. Lady tell the bishops that simply kicking this issue into the long grass for another three years, as the General Synod agreed last week, is just not acceptable?

Dame Caroline Spelman: It is important to see in balance the progress that has been made by the Church. At the Synod, important decisions were made, including on tackling homophobic bullying in Church of England schools—the Church is the largest provider of education in this country—and on taking steps to ban trans and conversion therapies; that was voted on in the Synod. The fact that the Church is making progress in this area is hopefully an indication of more to follow.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Rural parish growth is being handicapped by the fact that the clergy are responsible for six, eight or even more parishes. What efforts are being made to ensure that more people are recruited to the clergy, and that they are directed towards rural parishes?

Dame Caroline Spelman: As I said, the Church has set itself a target—that is the important thing—of doubling the number of people entering training by 2020, and it is making progress by increasing the numbers coming into training.

It is perhaps worth noting that the Church has changed the ways in which people can train for the priesthood. They can train by residential course, as is traditional, but they can also train on the job and through peripatetic learning, which makes it generally easier for a much wider range of people to train for the priesthood, if they feel called to do so.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con) *rose—*

Mr Speaker: Oh, very well.

Michael Fabricant: On the subject of training, does my right hon. Friend not also think that training in human resources and personnel is important? She will know that the Dean of Peterborough, Charles Taylor, was sacked from that cathedral and given only 24 hours' notice to leave the deanery. Does she think that that was not only unprofessional on the part of the chapter, but very unchristian?

Dame Caroline Spelman: Obviously, I have sympathy with anyone who loses their job, but with the greatest respect, those facts are not quite correct. On 2 October 2016, the dean announced his retirement, and he did not leave the deanery, and was not asked to leave it, until the following February, giving him six months' residence—

Michael Fabricant: No, he was not. That is wrong.

Dame Caroline Spelman: Those are the facts I have been given.

I think we should try to leave this term on a happier note, so I conclude by wishing all colleagues a very welcome recess.

Mr Speaker: I join the right hon. Lady in that. She was typically gracious in her comments about the hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson), whom I warmly welcome to her new responsibilities, which, as has been said, have been very effectively discharged today. I also thank the right hon.

Lady, who is always courteous, fair and comprehensive in responding to inquiries. I hope that both Members can take a rest from their onerous duties—both their constituency duties, and their duties in respect of the matters about which we have heard this morning.

Contaminated Blood

10.35 am

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the responsibility for establishing an inquiry into the contaminated blood scandal.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jackie Doyle-Price): I begin by adding my personal apology to those who have previously spoken in this House about the tragedy of contaminated blood, and by reiterating that the Government recognise the terrible impact contaminated blood has had on many thousands of lives.

The Government recognise that previous inquiries into the events that led to thousands of people being infected with HIV and/or hepatitis C through NHS-supplied blood or blood products did not go far enough. That is why, on Tuesday 11 July 2017, the Prime Minister committed to establishing a further inquiry so that the causes of this tragedy can be fully understood.

Once established, we want the inquiry to be fully independent. Before it is established, however, there is a need to define its scope and format so that terms of reference may be set by the relevant Secretary of State. Given the tragedy's impact on so many lives, it is vital that we get this right and that we get it right from the start. I am aware of the concerns that have been raised this week by those affected, by campaign groups and by Members of this House. Indeed, I spoke to the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) on Tuesday about this very issue.

I reassure the House that the Government have as yet made no final decisions on the scope and format of an inquiry, or on its leadership. I have newly taken on this policy area, and I am keen to make sure that all those affected are given an opportunity to give us their thoughts and opinions. I understand it is normal practice for public inquiries to be sponsored by the relevant Department. However, we are keen to listen to the concerns that have been raised and ensure that they are addressed, which is why we are in discussions with the Cabinet Office and colleagues across Government to ensure that this inquiry does its job, and does it well, under appropriate leadership.

That is why an early consultative meeting was scheduled for today, hosted at the Cabinet Office, and the Secretary of State and Ministers hope to understand further the important views of those affected on the shape and establishment of an inquiry. This is the first of several meetings that the Government would like to offer over the coming weeks. I strongly encourage anyone affected to give us their views. Our door is open to anyone who wants to discuss the inquiry or raise any concerns they may have.

It is important to note that, whatever arrangements are agreed for this independent inquiry, safeguards will be put in place to ensure independence—for instance, by ensuring that the secretary to the inquiry has never worked at the Department of Health or any of its agencies. I reiterate that we are absolutely committed to a thorough and transparent inquiry, and we want to establish the best format and remit. That is why we want

to hear as many opinions as possible, and we will work with those affected and Members of this House to do so.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am grateful to the Minister for the clarity of what she has just said. I should emphasise that this is not an occasion for a general debate on the contaminated blood scandal. We have had that on many occasions, and I have also granted urgent questions previously to the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) on this matter. The issue is very specifically the locus, the responsibility and possibly, at a stretch, the scope. If Members can tailor their questions accordingly, it would be greatly appreciated.

Diana Johnson: Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker.

Although I welcome last week's announcement of an inquiry into the contaminated blood scandal, the vast majority of people affected by this scandal, their families, campaign groups and legal representatives, plus many cross-party parliamentarians, are, like me, dismayed to see the Department of Health leading on the establishment of this inquiry. The Department of Health, an implicated party at the heart of so much that has gone wrong over the past 45 years, must have no role in how this inquiry is established—in my view, it is akin to asking South Yorkshire police to lead an inquiry into the Hillsborough disaster. I regret that the Government have not been able to understand that putting the Department of Health in charge at this time immediately undermines their excellent decision to call a public inquiry last week. In consequence, contaminated blood campaigners boycotted a meeting organised by the Department of Health at 10 am today in protest. Another Department must surely now take over the responsibility for consulting on the remit of this inquiry.

I am pleased that the Government acknowledge the overwhelming and unanimous opposition to the Department of Health consulting on the inquiry, including from more than 250 campaigners and 10 campaign groups, the Haemophilia Society, and the law firms Collins Law and Leigh Day, which together represent 716 claimants. Nevertheless, the Minister needs to address two questions urgently. Why, on Tuesday 18 July, did the Department of Health call a meeting for 10 am today, with just two days' notice, in central London, and at a time that is most difficult, inconvenient and expensive for people affected to attend? When I spoke to the Minister, she told me that the Government plan to update the House by September and get the inquiry up and running as soon as possible. That had not been made clear to campaigners or MPs, and I wondered why.

I still believe that the case is even more pressing for another Department to take over the work of establishing this inquiry now. That Department must then have a true and meaningful consultation with everyone affected, so that they can be fully involved and have confidence in this public inquiry.

Jackie Doyle-Price: As I mentioned, no firm view has been taken as to which Department will run the inquiry, but as the Minister with responsibility for this area the

[Jackie Doyle-Price]

House would consider it amiss if I were not having meetings and discussions with those affected about the inquiry's remit. When the Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne), made the statement to the House about the inquiry, we made it clear that we wanted to progress as soon as possible. The Secretary of State called this meeting because we want to hear directly from the victims about what they want from the inquiry. We are very much in listening mode. A decision has not yet been taken as to which Department will run the inquiry but ultimately, as a Minister, I am accountable to Parliament for what happens in the Department of Health in those areas for which I have responsibility, and I want to be leading from the front, having those discussions.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I thank the Minister for saying that no decision has yet been taken about which Department will run the inquiry. Does she agree that perception is as important as reality in this matter, and therefore will she gain from this occasion a mindfulness of the weight placed by hon. Members, on both sides of the House, on the idea that the inquiry perhaps would be perceived to be more objective if some other Department took the lead?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I say to my right hon. Friend, and I have repeated this in other discussions as well, that the Cabinet Office is very closely involved in this, and this opportunity has given me the time to make that clear to the House. The Government are listening; we want to consult as widely as possible. No decision has yet been taken, but the Cabinet Office is closely involved in all the consultation we are currently having.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is disappointing that we are here again today, so soon after last week's announcement. A week ago, this House united in agreement to finally facilitate justice for those tragically affected by this scandal. Yet, as we have heard, in recent days Ministers have reneged on last week's promises and run roughshod over the affected community.

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne) *indicated dissent.*

Mrs Hodgson: The Minister of State may shake his head, but that is how the community feel; we have spoken to them. There are three key questions that the Under-Secretary before us this morning must answer, and I hope she will be more forthcoming with much-needed answers than she was to my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson).

Understandably, the community have deeply held suspicions when it comes to the Department of Health, so why are Ministers ignoring these concerns and the demands to facilitate an inquiry through another Department, such as the Ministry of Justice? This concern has been well documented in the letter to the Prime Minister by my hon. Friend, the Haemophilia Society, the 10 campaign groups and the law firms Collins Law and Leigh Day. Why does the Minister think the Government can so easily disregard all these people?

Events over the past few days have shown that last week's promise to consult, engage and listen to the community was simply warm words. The audacious move to hold a roundtable meeting this morning with so little notice to potential attendees from throughout the UK has hindered many from being involved in the process of setting up the inquiry. Will Ministers explain why the meeting was held at such short notice? Who did they plan to invite so that the meeting was properly consultative? In the end, who was scheduled to attend following the mass boycott by many of those invited, who felt that the offer of a meeting was a slap in the face?

It is important that the inquiry is held sooner rather than later, but not at the risk of jeopardising justice. Will the Minister publicly outline, now, the timetable for the inquiry? Do the Government intend to initiate the inquiry in September? If so, why has that not been made public? Why is it that we must bring Ministers to the House again to make this clear? Does that not go against everything we were promised last week? The Minister must remember the promises made just last week and ensure that consultation is central to the whole process; otherwise, the Government will fail this community, who must have the justice they so rightly deserve.

Jackie Doyle-Price: It is in taking forward the consultation that we are delivering on the commitments made last week. We made it clear then that we wanted to get the inquiry going as soon as possible because, frankly, these people have waited long enough for answers. We have not ignored the concerns expressed by many about the role of the Department of Health in the inquiry. I repeat: no decision has yet been made and the Cabinet Office is closely involved in taking the matter forward.

As for the complaints about the short notice of the meeting organised by the Secretary of State this week, it is because we want to hear directly from the people affected as soon as possible that such a meeting was arranged before the House rises for recess. This is just the start. We want there to be good, effective dialogue because, as the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) and the rest of the House will appreciate, it is important that we all inspire confidence in this process. Given the cross-party support we had when the inquiry was announced, it is disappointing that we are now getting bogged down in the process.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Like others in the Chamber, I welcomed the Prime Minister's announcement last week of a public inquiry. I am encouraged by what the Minister is telling us this morning. One of my constituents who was affected has raised the issue of which Department should take the lead in the inquiry. Will my hon. Friend the Minister confirm what role victims, families and campaigners will play? How can they best engage with her and the Department at this stage?

Jackie Doyle-Price: We obviously want to hear from as many of the affected people as possible, and we will reflect on their representations. If they want to be very clear and blunt about the role of the Department of

Health, we need to hear those representations so that we can make the best decision about who takes forward the inquiry.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for asking this urgent question and pay tribute to her for continuously pushing on this important subject to ensure that we get justice for those so tragically affected. The inquiry must get the right answers, and it must command the confidence of those affected. Will the Minister confirm when a decision will be made as to which Department will lead on the establishment of the inquiry? Does she think it is right for the Department of Health to lead it? Will she confirm that the inquiry will include the families and victims, so that it is sensitive to what they want to know? Will the Government ensure that the inquiry will have to look at all matters, including documents, patient records and things that were altered and hidden, and that the things hidden behind public interest barriers will be opened up, so that light can be shed on this matter, as was the case with Hillsborough?

Jackie Doyle-Price: To be clear, the Department of Health is the sponsoring Department for the inquiry, which will be entirely independent. It is yet to be determined who will oversee it. Clearly, having made the statement and expressed our intention to hold an inquiry, we need to consult to make sure that that inquiry reflects on and answers the hon. Gentleman's questions. Central to that will be the need for it to be seen to be transparent, open and fully independent. Once it is established, the inquiry will be entirely removed from the Department of Health. That should be enough to inspire confidence, provided we get the consultation right so that we get the remit right.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Two of my constituents who were affected by this terrible tragedy have already contacted me with concerns about the Department of Health's involvement in the inquiry. This is a unique situation, especially with respect to the time it has taken to bring forward the inquiry, and credit should go to the Government for announcing it. Nevertheless, it is incredibly important that justice is seen to be done, so will the Minister consult members of the all-party group on haemophilia and contaminated blood with regard to who she determines are the right people to oversee the scope of the inquiry?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I am keen to hear from all Members of the House and members of the public on how they feel the inquiry should be taken forward. That is the spirit in which we are embarking on this consultation.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I welcome the Government's decision to hold this inquiry in response to the campaign led by my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson). I know that the Health Minister is acting in good faith, but over many years Department of Health officials have advised there is no need for the inquiry and no problem at the heart of the issue. Will she recognise that because of that it would have much greater credibility for many of those who have campaigned on this issue if the sponsoring Department were another

Department—be it the Ministry of Justice or the Cabinet Office—if all the staff did not come from the Health Department, and if one of the other Departments could be involved in the consultation, the establishment and the remit. This is no criticism of her—I know she takes this very seriously—but I advise her to hand this one over to another Department and let them run with it instead.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I understand the right hon. Lady's point and I repeat that the Cabinet Office is closely involved with this at this stage. I think she would consider it most remiss of me were I not to take a close interest as this consultation is taken forward. I cannot say this enough: it is essential that the way in which the inquiry is established inspires confidence in the people affected, and that is what we are trying to achieve through the consultation. As I say, we want to hear from them and we are completely open-minded as to which Department takes responsibility. For now, I want to have those conversations because I want to understand their concerns with what has happened with the Department of Health. As a Minister, I need to give that challenge.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): The letter from the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) started by expressing gratitude to the Government for the progress made so far. That would have been welcome decades ago, but it is right to acknowledge it now. The letter included three practical points that it put perhaps slightly better than the shadow Minister. The machinery of government cannot work overnight normally and the questions and answers today will help the Government and the Prime Minister decide whether the right solution is, as has been suggested, having another Department or the Cabinet Office take on the consultation with the Department of Health helping as far as it can. The one point for the Department of Health now is whether it can guarantee the third point in the hon. Lady's letter, which is that no records will be destroyed and that they will all be available to the inquiry.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I can certainly give my hon. Friend that commitment. Let me reiterate that we have made many documents available in public, all published, and I can give him every assurance that nothing will be destroyed. Having now taken the decision to hold an inquiry, we must get it right. I am happy to hear from hon. Members at any time if they have any specific concerns about whether they think evidence is being withheld, so that I can satisfy myself that that is not the case.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): This is not a matter of challenging the Minister's personal integrity; that is not in doubt. What is in doubt is the wisdom of the decision to have a Department that is majorly implicated in the concerns about what happened in the past involved at any point in the consultation and in taking the inquiry forward. I hope that before we go into recess an urgent statement can be rushed out advising that the Cabinet Office or the Ministry of Justice will now lead, not only on the outline of the inquiry but on the consultation. Then we can have trust from those who have been involved.

Jackie Doyle-Price: It is quite without precedent at this stage—so shortly after announcing an inquiry—for such a decision to be made. It is normal practice for the sponsoring Department to embark on the consultation, and I repeat that the Cabinet Office is closely involved from the perspective of propriety and ethics and the Department of Health is not working alone.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I warmly welcome the fact that the inquiry is now happening, and that the Government made the decision to undertake it, given the decades that have gone past since this issue first came up and the scandal occurred. Will the Minister reassure the victims that, in terms of any judicial involvement, which is almost certain in this case, the identity of the judge concerned will be selected by the Lord Chief Justice, and not by any Government Department?

Jackie Doyle-Price: That would be the normal procedure, so yes, I can give that commitment.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Will the Secretary of State assure us that, in the responsibility of this inquiry, there are real powers, which will enable the inquiry to ensure that it has proper access to all the witnesses and documents necessary? That will be vital to developing a just settlement for all those affected and their families. Can we also have an assurance that a fair financial system will be in place to support them, because this could take some time?

Jackie Doyle-Price: We are really looking to settle that question in this consultation. One decision that needs to be taken is exactly what shape the inquiry should take. Clearly, we would normally do this through a statutory inquiry, which would have the powers to which the hon. Lady referred, but equally, Members of the House have made representations that we should have a Hillsborough-style inquiry, which, by definition, would be more fleet of foot. One reason why we are pushing forward with this consultation is to get exactly that feedback, so that we put together an inquiry that inspires confidence among those who have been campaigning for this for so long.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Far from being negative, the Government should be applauded for their very swift action—recently, not in the past. They are listening and have already committed extra compensation, sorted out the complex system that we had before, and announced an inquiry. Can the Minister give an assurance, particularly to my constituents, that the right Department will be chosen, because we do have to give them confidence that we will not all be here again discussing this? We have the chance to sort it out now.

Jackie Doyle-Price: The purpose of the consultation is to allow people to make their points about which Department should be chosen to oversee the inquiry, and then we will respond accordingly. All I can say is: please encourage people to participate in this consultation.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): If the consultation with interest groups unanimously says that the inquiry should be held by another Department, will the Minister respect that view?

Jackie Doyle-Price: We need to understand exactly what the concerns are and we will only achieve that through dialogue. I can reiterate that we are here to listen to those concerns. Now that we have decided to go ahead with the inquiry, I want to make sure that we get it right.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): May I put on record how pleased I am, for my constituents and their families, about the commitment to hold this inquiry? I thank the Minister for listening to me on this yesterday. Does she agree that it is only by listening to those most affected that we can finally get the answers that the victims and their families are seeking?

Jackie Doyle-Price: We can only gain from having dialogue. It is in that spirit that we want to have as many conversations with those people affected as possible. It is disappointing that this morning's meeting was not attended, but I hope that, in the future, we will have some meaningful dialogue.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): May I ask the Minister to reflect on the fact that it is not reasonable to ask campaign groups from Scotland to attend a meeting at two days' notice? May I also point out that there is a distinct legal system in Scotland? Has there been any thought about that or any discussions with Scottish campaign groups and/or the Scottish Government?

Jackie Doyle-Price: As I have said, that was the first of what I hope will be many conversations. Arrangements were made for the campaign groups in Scotland to dial into the meeting, so that they could participate. I have already started discussions with the Scottish Government about how this inquiry will play out and affect the position in Scotland. I am pleased to say that we are having those discussions in a spirit of healthy co-operation. In particular, we are looking at how we can make use of what has already been gone through with the Penrose inquiry. We will continue to have dialogue, and we are very sensitive to those issues.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): At the weekend, I saw my constituent, Sue Wathen, whose case I raised in the debate last week. She was delighted with the Government's commitment. The one issue that she particularly wants to see considered is that of access to appropriate treatments for victims. For most victims, that is the most important issue. Will my hon. Friend feed that back?

Jackie Doyle-Price: My hon. Friend makes a good point. That is exactly the sort of thing we need to hear from this consultation when we are setting the scope, and clearly access to treatment is very important. I encourage him to ask his constituent to write in and make those points.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I think there is a consensus across the House, because everyone has made the point very clearly that they do not have confidence in the Department of Health running the inquiry. I expect an announcement from the Minister soon. If the Cabinet Office is appointed, it does have a track record of taking rather a long time with inquiries,

so quite often that is used to kick things into the long grass. Can she assure us that it will be a speedy but thorough inquiry?

Jackie Doyle-Price: The speed at which the inquiry reports will be determined by the chairman, because it will be independent—that is the point. At the moment the Department of Health is leading on conversations, but the inquiry will be independent; it will not be run by the Department of Health.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Health is a devolved matter, so can the Minister give the House a commitment that there will be maximum co-operation with all the devolved institutions across the UK?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I can give the hon. Gentleman that commitment. I have already discussed this with the Welsh Minister. It is a UK-wide inquiry and health is a devolved matter, so obviously we will need to work closely to ensure that we all respond to what the inquiry finds.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her statement and commend the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for her tenacity on this issue. Although only last December the Northern Ireland Health Minister allocated funding for contaminated blood victims to put us on a par with compensation paid on the UK mainland, it is essential that any UK investigation includes the Northern Ireland victims—I am speaking on their behalf—so that it is not done on an England-and-Wales-only basis. Can she confirm that that will be the case?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that we are very sensitive to the facts as they apply to Northern Ireland, and we will by all means ensure that the requisite dialogue takes place so that we can deal with it sensitively.

Fox-Sky Merger

11.2 am

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the Fox-Sky merger. Three weeks ago, I came to the House to set out my initial decisions in relation to the proposed merger between 21st Century Fox and Sky plc. Having referred the bid for a phase 1 investigation by Ofcom and the Competition and Markets Authority in March, the decision before me was whether or not to refer the merger to a fuller phase 2 investigation by the CMA.

I told the House then that, following Ofcom's advice, I was minded to refer the merger to the CMA on the grounds of media plurality, and minded not to refer on the grounds of commitment to broadcasting standards. At the same time, I confirmed that I had received a set of undertakings in lieu of referral from the parties and was minded not to accept them.

I also set out the steps that I would follow for the next phase of the decision. I said that, as required by legislation, I would allow the parties to the proposed merger the opportunity to make representations on my position on media plurality. In the interests of transparency and ensuring that all the evidence had been considered, I would allow all interested parties, including the public and parliamentarians, to have their say, particularly on the question of commitment to broadcasting standards. I set last Friday as the deadline.

As the House knows very well, decisions by the Secretary of State on media mergers under the Enterprise Act 2002 are made on a quasi-judicial basis. That means that I must take my decision only on the basis of evidence that is relevant to the specified public interests. I must act independently and follow a process that is scrupulously fair and impartial. I have sought throughout this process to be as transparent and open as possible, and I have kept the House informed at every available opportunity. In keeping with that spirit, I have come to the House today to give as full an update as I possibly can before it rises for the recess.

I can confirm that I have received detailed representations from 21st Century Fox and a letter from Sky, which I will aim to publish, subject to statutory and confidentiality requirements, once I have taken my final decision. I also received a letter from Lachlan and James Murdoch on Friday last week, and a further letter from 21st Century Fox this Monday, which it has since published.

The detailed representations from 21st Century Fox raise a number of points on Ofcom's public interest test report and the analysis underpinning Ofcom's recommendations, contesting Ofcom's view that the transaction raises public interest concerns that justify referral to a phase 2 investigation by the CMA. Neither of the parties has offered any further or amended undertakings in lieu of referral. I have received a substantial number of responses in relation to my referral decision.

In coming to my decision on this case, I must take account of all relevant representations made to me. As a result, my final decision on referral can be made only after I have fully considered all relevant evidence on both the plurality and the commitment to broadcasting standards grounds. Given that the consultation closed

[Karen Bradley]

only on Friday, there has not been time to consider all the representations, and I am not in a position today to make my final decision on referral.

What I can do, however, is confirm to the House that, having carefully reviewed the parties' representations, and in the absence of further proposed undertakings, I am currently still minded to refer on the media plurality ground and still minded not to accept the undertakings in lieu of a referral.

To be clear, as I have said, I must fully consider all relevant representations before reaching a final decision, and I will take the time I need to look at the many I have received, balancing the need for careful consideration of relevant evidence with the merger parties' legitimate need for a prompt decision. However, I have prioritised considering the parties' representations and the detailed points they have made to me. While some of the points they have raised may benefit from closer examination by the CMA at phase 2 in the event that the merger is referred, there was nothing in their representations that, at this stage, has led me to change my mind about the appropriateness of referral. Unless new evidence from other representations changes my mind in the coming weeks, the bid will therefore be referred to a phase 2 review on at least one ground—media plurality. I thought it would be helpful to set out my current view to the House, given the public interest in this case, and also to the parties so that they can be as clear as possible about my intentions and the likely next steps for this bid.

Bearing in mind the obligation to act promptly as part of this quasi-judicial process, I expect I will be in a position to come to a final decision on referral, including in respect of the broadcasting standard ground, in the coming weeks, and potentially during summer recess. Should this prove to be the case, and as I did previously where stages of the merger have taken place outside of the House sitting, I will write to the parties informing them of my decision, as well as to the Leaders and Speakers of both Houses, to the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson) and to the Chair of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, whom I was pleased to see reappointed last week.

As I have said previously, I trust that making this statement to the House gives another welcome opportunity to discuss this important issue, and further cements my undertaking to ensure openness and transparency. I commend this statement to the House.

11.7 am

Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): Mr Speaker, good morning to you. As this is the last day before the recess, I thank you and your staff for the welcome you have given my new colleagues who were elected in the general election.

I thank the Secretary of State for her statement. I am grateful to her for returning to the House before the recess to update us on progress—even if there is not much progress to update us on. The last day of term is sometimes called “Take out the trash day”. Well, this appears to be “Keep the trash in the office day”. Nevertheless, this is one piece of Government indecision that we welcome. It is right that the Secretary of State has taken her quasi-judicial responsibilities seriously.

She will be aware that, whatever decisions she makes, there is a strong possibility of judicial review by one side or the other. No doubt that has influenced her decision to tread carefully and slowly, and we respect her for that.

The lawyers at 21st Century Fox have already written a somewhat intimidating letter to the Secretary of State, trying to bounce her into a decision. We know that that aggression is the Murdochs' modus operandi; we have been on the receiving end of it in this House, and we urge the Secretary of State to keep standing firm. In particular, there is absolutely no need for the Secretary of State to announce a decision during the summer recess. Parliament must have the opportunity to scrutinise any decision she makes. It is not her job to operate to 21st Century Fox's corporate timetable; it has to abide by the parliamentary timetable. She should demonstrate to the company that she, as an elected representative of the people, is in charge, not 21st Century Fox.

Last time the Secretary of State came to this House, she said that she was minded to refer the bid to a phase 2 investigation on grounds of media plurality, as she said again this morning, but that she was not minded to refer on grounds of broadcasting standards. She then said that she had invited representations on both grounds by last Friday. It is right that a phase 2 investigation on media plurality grounds goes ahead, but the broadcasting standards investigation should go ahead too. Compelling arguments for that have been made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable), and the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke). Does the Secretary of State agree that that is as distinguished a cross-party alliance as anyone can imagine? Does she also agree that it is absurd that Ofcom is currently refusing to meet my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North so that he can share his concerns with it?

The truth is that the Murdochs have a history of regulatory non-compliance and of corporate governance failure, and that calls their commitment to broadcasting standards into serious question. Ofcom itself says that there are significant concerns about Fox's approach to ensuring Fox News content compliance with the broadcasting code. We saw in the phone hacking scandal that senior employees and executives at News International failed to comply with the criminal law, with acceptable standards of journalistic conduct, and, frankly, with basic human decency. We see the ongoing sexual and racist harassment at Fox News in the United States, where very senior employees behaved appallingly over decades and nothing was done—evidence of what Ofcom calls “significant corporate failure”.

Of course, the best way to get to the bottom of this corporate failure would be to proceed with the inquiry that has already been promised and that is specifically intended to look into it—part 2 of the Leveson inquiry. Will the Secretary of State undertake today to get on and just do it? I note that, although the Conservative manifesto promised not to go ahead with Leveson 2, a recent parliamentary answer to me indicated that the Government are still considering the consultation on it. I hope that this is another of the Prime Minister's many dropped manifesto commitments. It is not too

late for the Secretary of State to do the right thing, and if she does go ahead with Leveson 2, she will have our full support.

The influence of the Murdochs on this Government is still a matter of serious concern. Only this week, in a letter to me, the First Secretary of State refused to deny that Rupert Murdoch had asked the Prime Minister to put the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) back into the Cabinet. I expected the allegation to be denied. It was not denied. We will be drawing our own conclusions from that. I have consistently—persistently—asked the Secretary of State to publish the minutes of the meeting between the Prime Minister and Rupert Murdoch in the US in 2016. Will she commit to do that now?

The Secretary of State now has the opportunity to demonstrate that we live in a democracy, not a Murdochcracy. Will she now undertake to prove who is in charge by not making any decision until the House returns in September?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Gentleman asks a number of questions and I will attempt to address as many as I can in the time that we have; there were a number of questions there—I am sure he would agree.

I think it is worth my repeating that I am acting in a quasi-judicial basis under the Enterprise Act. We are also reflecting, in our behaviour as a Government, the recommendations of Sir Brian Leveson in his part 1 report, where he was very clear about the way in which Government should operate in relation to media mergers. We have been cognisant of those recommendations throughout.

One of the things that I am required to do under the Enterprise Act is to act without undue delay, in the interests of all parties. That is why I am here today to say that nothing I have seen so far has changed my mind, but I am going to look at all the representations that I have received, which are in the tens of thousands. Many of them are identical, I have to say, but they all need to be looked at, and I will do so in order to see what evidence they provide.

I was also clear that the Ofcom report on the commitment to broadcasting standards test was clear. It was unequivocal. There were no grounds on which I could refer. I am therefore looking at whether new, substantive evidence comes to light following my statement. I will ensure that I consider all the representations. However, in the interests of all parties, I will have to make sufficiently speedy progress in making a decision to ensure that we can deal with these matters in line with the Enterprise Act. That may mean I have to make a decision before Parliament returns, which is why I am in the Chamber today being as open and transparent as I can be. I want to ensure that I am as clear as I can be with Parliament and with colleagues about the situation.

The hon. Gentleman asked a question about the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), whose letter I had sight of this morning. As I understand it, the right hon. Gentleman has asked for a meeting with Ofcom to discuss its report on the fit and proper test, and I am surprised that Ofcom is not able to meet him to do so. The fit and proper test is not part of what I have to look at—the test under the Enterprise Act is different: it is about the commitment to broadcasting

standards, not the fit and proper test. Ofcom has to undertake an assessment of whether a company is fit and proper on an ongoing basis. I am surprised that it is not willing to meet the right hon. Gentleman and other parliamentarians, but I am sure it will have heard my comments on that matter in the House.

All Ministers' meetings with journalists are minuted—sorry; recorded—and the meetings that they have had are in the public domain.

I will be as open and as transparent as I possibly can be, which is why I am in the Chamber today. I had hoped it would be possible to announce a firmer decision today, but the quantity and volume of the representations received mean that that simply has not been possible.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): May I commend my right hon. Friend for not becoming a party to the socialist vendetta against the Murdoch family? When considering media plurality, will she bear in mind that there were four channels when Sky launched, but that there are now hundreds, and that the real opponent of media plurality is the bloated—taxpayer-funded—BBC, which likes to give millions of pounds to presenters some of us have never heard of?

Karen Bradley: I know you do not want me to stray on to the BBC, Mr Speaker, so I will not respond to that point. The report that I asked Ofcom to prepare as part of the phase 1 inquiry found firm grounds for concerns about media plurality. In the absence of further representations with evidence that might change my view, it is important to say that I am still minded to refer the merger on the grounds of media plurality. Should I make the final decision to refer the merger for a phase 2 investigation, the Competition and Markets Authority will be able to flush out the evidence on all those points.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I want to join colleagues in wishing you, Mr Speaker, and your excellent staff in the House a very good summer recess. All SNP MPs wish you well for the summer recess. I also want to congratulate England's women on their resounding win over Scotland last night. The 6-0 result was excellent. We put up a good fight, but unfortunately it was not enough on this occasion.

I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of her statement. She will be aware of my specific constituency concern, given that Sky is the largest private employer there. My constituents who work at Sky will want to know that any deal is properly scrutinised and that their jobs will be secure.

Three weeks ago, the Ofcom report stated that the public had serious concerns about the concentration of media ownership in fewer and fewer hands. We share the public's concern about that and about the dilution of the diversification of media content. At the time, we welcomed the fact that the Secretary of State was minded to refer this to the Competition and Markets Authority on the grounds of diminishing plurality in the UK media. We still believe that that would bolster public confidence, and we very much believe it should happen.

We welcome the fact that the Secretary of State has come to the House and delivered her statement, but we are very disappointed that there has been no final decision. We understand the need to examine

[Hannah Bardell]

representations from all parties, but the fact that a decision is likely to be made during the summer recess speaks to a developing pattern. As we saw during the election, there is a developing pattern in the making of major decisions, and it is not good governance. The decision has been kicked into the long grass, and Members of this House will not get an opportunity to scrutinise it. The Committees of the House have yet to sit, and there should be an opportunity for the relevant Committees to scrutinise any decision made. Plurality and transparency within the media should be one of the Secretary of State's key motivations, but it seems that a decision will not be subject to maximum transparency when it comes to telling the House. Given that it looks as though she is running away from scrutiny, will she commit to making a decision when the House is back from summer recess so that we can properly scrutinise the deal?

Karen Bradley: I join the hon. Lady in congratulating England's women. I am disappointed for her sake that the wearing of a football shirt did not produce the luck for which she hoped for Scotland's women, but as an England woman I am delighted by the result.

The hon. Lady has a constituency interest, with Sky being the largest employer in her constituency. I, too, want to make sure that the merger is properly scrutinised and dealt with so that we have certainty for employees such as her constituents. She says that we have shied away from taking decisions with full scrutiny, but that is simply not the case. For example, I originally asked Ofcom to report to me on Sky in May, and I delayed the date of the report until after the election campaign so that I could come to the House. I had hoped to be here today making a final decision, but the sheer volume of representations—all of which I need to go through, even though a large number of them are identical campaign emails—means that I cannot make that decision today. I have to make the decision with due consideration of time, because it is important for the parties to the merger and all concerned that a decision is taken.

Mr Speaker: It is, I think, the Secretary of State's first appearance at the Dispatch Box since the Wimbledon final last Sunday. I am sure she will want to congratulate the great Roger Federer on his new record—the latest of many records established by the great man over the last 14 years.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for the openness and transparency at the heart of the statement. Media plurality is vital, and transparency is vital. On pay within the media, would she like to remind all employers that we have equal pay laws which state that people from all backgrounds doing the same job should be paid equally?

Karen Bradley: Of course I will join you, Mr Speaker, in congratulating Roger Federer. I was lucky enough to see him play on Friday, and I know you were there as well. I should also congratulate Lewis Hamilton. I was, unfortunately, not able to be at the Wimbledon final because I was at the grand prix, where I was able to congratulate Mr Hamilton personally on his great success. Four British grands prix in a row is a fantastic achievement. I am sure the whole House will join me in celebrating

what is turning into the most incredible summer of sport for Britain and British athletes—and Roger Federer. I think he is almost an honorary Brit at this stage.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies); I think Wimbledon is one of the places that have equal pay for men and women. I want to see gender disparity removed from all employers, and I was as surprised as she was by yesterday's annual report.

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): The Culture Secretary has just shown us why she has an enviable job in Government. She is the Minister for tickets, as well as for many other things. May I wish you—and your staff, as seems to be the fashion—a happy summer, Mr Speaker?

I welcome what the Secretary of State said about plurality and the fact that she is minded to refer on plurality grounds. I welcome what she said to Ofcom about meeting me and colleagues regarding the fit and proper issue. She needs to make the decision on broadcasting standards in a timely way, but she needs to look at some detailed issues. When she invited representations, she said in her statement to the House that she wanted new evidence, or evidence on Ofcom's approach. My argument, and that of my right hon. and hon. colleagues, is that Ofcom's approach is flawed and that she needs to do what it did not, which is to look at the evidence—including the evidence about Fox and the *News of the World*—on the basis of the right legal threshold; look at the evidence about James Murdoch, which she asked it to do and it failed to do; and, indeed, look at the wider concerns about Sky News becoming like Fox News. I think that that will take a bit of time.

On those grounds, as well as those of parliamentary accountability—she has shown a desire all along to be accountable and open to Parliament on this issue—the Secretary of State can come back at the beginning of September, after having a good summer and scrutinising these issues, and tell us her decision. That is the right thing to do, and she should not, as my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East has said, give in to the old tricks of the Murdochs, which are to bully people into making wrong and rushed decisions.

Karen Bradley: I should wish you a happy summer, Mr Speaker, as it appears that that is the order of the day. [Interruption.] And Roger, of course.

I have been as transparent as possible. As I said in my statement, I may make a decision over the course of the summer recess, but it may take longer. I am taking the time to consider all representations, including the right hon. Gentleman's, those of the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) and those of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), who is not in his place. I will look at the evidence and make a decision on that basis.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): In my right hon. Friend's previous statement, she emphasised that it was indeed the evidence that she would look at, and she mentioned quality not quantity. She has said in today's statement that part of the reason for the delay is the volume of communication she has received; she mentioned tens of thousands of items. What percentage of those tens of thousands of items were roughly original evidence and what was simply 38 Degrees or similar emails, which are all identical and not original?

Karen Bradley: I am not able at this stage to give precise figures, but of the more than 10,000 responses that have already been coded and looked at, a very large number were identical. I said in my previous statement that I would look not at those who shouted loudest but at those who provided the evidence. It is a shame that I opened my inbox one morning to find 10,000 unread messages on this matter, almost all of which were identical. That gets in the way of my being able to be a constituency MP; constituents' messages could simply get lost in those many tens of thousands. Clearly, however, I have to look at all those representations, but it is a shame that people who, in good faith, want to have their voice heard get drowned out by those who simply press a button and send an automatic message.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): Can the Secretary of State reassure the House that she will not proceed to a decision until she has received a report from the Information Commissioner that the 13 million datasets that will be handed over to Fox as a result of the takeover cannot be misused or misapplied for political purposes? She will know that that concern was raised recently by senior Members of another place.

Karen Bradley: I am aware of those concerns. The right hon. Gentleman will know from his previous role as Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, which has been replaced by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the terms of the Enterprise Act 2002 on the pieces of evidence I can look at. On the public interest test, it is very clear about what evidence I can look at.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that British broadcasting regulations mean that even a hypothetical Fox News UK would be a very different broadcaster from the US version?

Karen Bradley: Broadcasters in the United Kingdom have to comply with the broadcasting code. There are very strict rules and regulations. They are regulated by Ofcom and the broadcasting landscape is very different from that of other countries.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): This is the second urgent question today in which the issues have been openness, transparency and trust. The importance of obtaining that public trust and buy-in to the decision that the Secretary of State is going to make means that it is absolutely essential that it comes back to Parliament. May I also remind the House that the BBC has never been investigated for phone hacking or other breaches of honesty and decency?

Karen Bradley: Just to be clear, I have come here of my own volition—this is a statement, not an urgent question—to be as open and transparent as I can. I wanted to be able to make a decision before the House rose for the summer recess, but it simply has not been possible. I will now take time to look at the representations and ensure that we make the right decision. However, my “minded to” decision, about which I came to talk to the House three weeks ago, has not changed.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement. Does she appreciate the great concern about the supposed impartiality of the media, which is fostered by independent news stations? That

concern is felt by many, if not all hon. Members. Will the Secretary of State take the opportunity to allay those fears about impartiality in the media?

Karen Bradley: All broadcasting, including the BBC now, is regulated by Ofcom. There is an obligation on all broadcasters to be impartial. I suggest that the hon. Gentleman alerts Ofcom to instances in which he feels that that has not been the case, and I would be happy to be copied in so that I am aware of his concerns.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): There is a great deal of disappointment that the Secretary of State has not yet committed to come back to the House to explain matters to Parliament and allow the scrutiny and transparency that she says are so important. The need for speed should not undermine the democratic process, so will she reassure us that she will not allow that to happen?

Karen Bradley: I have been as transparent as I possibly can within the confines of the parliamentary calendar. However, the parliamentary calendar cannot be allowed to dictate what I do in my quasi-judicial role as Secretary of State. I will continue to be as open and transparent as I can and I will ensure that Parliament is fully informed of any decisions I make. I am always happy, when Parliament is sitting, to come to the Chamber and for my decisions to be scrutinised.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State, certainly for the first part of the statement, which was about deferring the decision to refer. If she is having problems with her emails, such as getting 10,000 from 38 Degrees, I will happily take her ticket for Wimbledon so that she can spend more time in the office.

I echo the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband). The issue is very serious for us all, and certainly for the public. There is clear evidence of significant corporate failure and—dare I say it?—systemic operational problems with corporate governance. That takes much more time to tackle. Given the gravity of the matter, we cannot rely on just receiving a summer postcard notifying us of the decision. I urge the Secretary of State to wait six weeks and have the decency to announce the decision to the House.

Karen Bradley: As I have said, commercial decisions, a quasi-judicial process and the terms of the Enterprise Act 2002 are not defined by the parliamentary calendar. If I make a decision before Parliament returns, I will go through the process, as I have done previously, of notifying the Leaders and Speakers of both Houses, the Chair of the Select Committee on Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and the hon. Member for West Bromwich East. It may be the case that I make the decision when we return; I simply do not want hon. Members to expect one thing or the other.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): If the Secretary of State had to make the decision today, what is in her mind? Is she for it or against it?

Karen Bradley: First, I should have welcomed the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) back to the Chamber—my apologies for not doing so. My decision so far is that I am minded to refer on the basis of media plurality. I have not moved on that, but I have not yet made a final decision.

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): Although I appreciate the Secretary of State's offer of sending me a letter during the recess if she makes a decision, I am sure that she understands that it is never the same as seeing her in person. Will she commit to making herself available to appear before the Select Committee, perhaps in September if it is formed, to discuss her handling of the matter if she has made a decision by then?

Karen Bradley: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his re-election as Chair of the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee. Of course, I am always happy to be called by the Select Committee to give evidence.

Business of the House

11.34 am

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): With permission, I should like to make a statement about the business for the week commencing 4 September.

MONDAY 4 SEPTEMBER—The House will not be sitting.

TUESDAY 5 SEPTEMBER—Consideration in Committee and remaining stages of the Telecommunications Infrastructure (Relief from Non-Domestic Rates) Bill.

WEDNESDAY 6 SEPTEMBER—Motion to approve ways and means resolutions relating to the Finance Bill.

THURSDAY 7 SEPTEMBER—Second Reading of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill (day 1).

FRIDAY 8 SEPTEMBER—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 11 September will include:

MONDAY 11 SEPTEMBER—Conclusion of Second Reading of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill (day 2).

I should also like to inform the House that the business in Westminster Hall for 7 September will be:

THURSDAY 7 SEPTEMBER—Debate on the transparency of the BBC followed by a debate on 16-19 education funding.

I congratulate all Members from across the House who presented their private Member's Bills yesterday. I know that many of them are on subjects that Members care deeply about, and I wish them well. I can confirm that, through the usual channels, the Opposition have been offered an Opposition day in the short September sitting, and we also plan to provide further Opposition days in October and November.

Finally, as this is the last business questions before the summer recess, may I send my best wishes to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and colleagues across the House for a productive, and also a restorative, summer break from Parliament? I also thank the hard-working staff of the House, whose efforts in supporting us are greatly appreciated by colleagues on both sides of the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I am sure the whole House will join the Leader of the House in thanking the hard-working staff who look after us so well and wish them a restful time over the summer without us.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for giving us the forthcoming business. I am afraid I have not been informed of any Opposition day—not even a careless whisper. Let me make it clear again: the Opposition had to call a debate on Monday because there was no discussion with the Government on our right to have those Opposition days. The Government need not have had that debate; they could have said, "Yes, have your Opposition day on Monday."

This is a Government struggling to get a grip. Back Benchers are calling for the sacking of the "donkey Ministers", with Tory grandees describing them as ferrets in a sack. The EU knows that the current Government are without authority, with the Prime Minister having to call for calm. Is this the image of the country that we want to present to the world?

The Conservatives do not want to debate major policy issues; they would rather discuss the leadership crisis than debate or appoint to their Select Committees. We already have our Chairs in place and have decided our membership of the Committees. The Chairs could have called a meeting this week to set out their programme, and then had a meeting in the next sitting. The public cannot even present their petitions.

In the excellent speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones), he said:

“I have found a group of middle-aged men protecting their egos in a bid to take over from a lame duck Prime Minister.”—[*Official Report*, 17 July 2017; Vol. 627, c. 628.]

The Leader of the House in her subsequent point of order confirmed that she is one of the group trying to take over, and did not even support her Prime Minister by saying that she was not a lame duck Prime Minister: still the nasty party. This obviously is a Portillo moment: not putting in the phone lines, but a run on SIM cards. I would contrast that and seven years of a Government who are not working for the many with our vision for all stages of life spelled out in 124 pages of a manifesto that is on its third reprint. [*Interruption.*] I have five minutes.

The electorate believed us, not the robotic tautological mantras. That is why we need an Opposition debate to clarify some myths. Let me list some. Who actually is responsible for the financial crash? Not the Labour party. [*Interruption.*] Listen. The United States investment bank Bear Stearns collapsed in March 2008. In September 2008, Lehman Brothers collapsed. The problem was cheap money, house price bubbles, financial deregulation and sub-prime mortgages—remember those?

May we also have a debate on the NHS, please? Last week, a point of order was raised suggesting that my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) had described the NHS as a Labour institution. What she actually said was that it was a Labour-created institution. I refer hon. Members to the excellent book, “Nye: the political life of Aneurin Bevan” by my hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), and to chapter 10, page 133, which deals with the creation of the NHS. Let us contrast that with the book written by the Secretary of State for Health, who wants to privatise the NHS.

What about a debate on that other myth—namely, that the deficit is larger under a Labour Government? The deficit is the difference between what the Government spend and what they receive. According to House of Commons Library information based on Office for Budget Responsibility and Office for National Statistics figures, the sum of all annual deficits between 1997 and 2010 was £437 billion, or £506 billion after adjusting for inflation. However, the sum of all annual deficits between 2010 and 2017 was £690 billion, or £728 billion after adjusting for inflation.

As women seem to be in the news at the moment, I want to mention some notable women who have passed away recently and to whom we have not yet paid tribute. Simone Veil was born in France and sent to Auschwitz. She carried the camp number that was tattooed on her arm. As a result of her experiences, she was passionate about peace in Europe and became the first female president of the European Parliament and established a woman’s right to choose in France, in very difficult circumstances. Sheila Michaels promoted the use of the

title “Ms”. Maryam Mirzakhani became, in 2014, the first woman under 40 ever to win the Fields Medal for mathematics. Mary Turner was a trade unionist who fought for all of us to have a better life. She started her working life as a dinner lady and became president of the GMB, president of the TUC and chair of the Labour party. She was a giant of the Labour movement. She was formidable, and I can only ever remember her smiling. She will be sadly missed.

Those women’s inspiration lives on in the six schoolgirls from the Afghan robotics team who beat the Trump ban and took silver in the first global robotics event, as well as in England’s cricket team in the world cup final and our football team in Euro 2017 this Sunday. I think that the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) played alongside some of the Scottish team. Maybe she should have been in the team! This month we also celebrate 100 years of the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps. And not only can we drive trains, but we are now driving the Tardis.

I want to thank everyone from the Speaker’s Office, the Speaker and all the Deputy Speakers, the Office of the Clerks, and the Doorkeepers, all of whom make our lives very easy. I also want to thank *Hansard*, the House of Commons Library and of course all our staff. I say to every hon. Member on both sides of the House that we had a very difficult time during the lockdown and we then went straight into the general election. I know that it has been very difficult, and I wish every Member, new and old, a peaceful and restful summer.

Andrea Leadsom: I join the hon. Lady in celebrating the achievements of women, not least yourself, Madam Deputy Speaker and the shadow Leader of the House. I also welcome the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) to her position as the new shadow Deputy Leader of the House. I wish her every success and look forward to working with her. I want to add one other great lady to those on that lovely list, who I am delighted to join in celebrating. It is Jane Austen, who will feature on the new £10 note. She is one of our greatest living authors—[*Laughter.*] Greatest ever authors! I think many of us wish that she were still living; I absolutely share that sentiment. It is fantastic that we are at last starting to recognise this.

It has been a problem that the Opposition have sought to criticise process at a time when in fact there has just been business as usual in a new Parliament. The general election took place in June, and we have had 18 sitting days so far. Six of them were given over to the Queen’s Speech debate, whose topics for debate were selected by the Opposition. That leaves 12 sitting days, during which we have had three debates under Standing Order No. 24, 10 urgent questions, 17 Adjournment debates, 19 oral statements and 21 departmental oral questions sessions. In addition, this is our fifth—hopefully feisty—business questions session in the Chamber. I am sure that the shadow Leader of the House will look forward, as I do, to the normal Committees of the House getting up and running as soon as we get back in September.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): May I thank the Leader of the House for her efforts to get business on track as quickly as possible? Connected to that, as Select Committee memberships will finally be

[Dr Julian Lewis]

settled on the first day back, which is the Tuesday, may we have an assurance that the relevant motion will be tabled at the earliest possible opportunity, namely the Wednesday, so that we can have meetings in the first week back? That would enable us to get approval, possibly even for public hearings in the normal way, in the second week back, rather than having to wait until October.

Andrea Leadsom: We all share my right hon. Friend's desire to get the Select Committees up and running. He will be aware that the 1922 committee has some say in holding elections for the Conservative Committee members. We are all keen to see those elections, and I am sure that they will be held as soon as possible.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for the start of the *Daily Mail* fortnight. We break for the long summer recess in a matter of hours, but the Select Committees are still not up and running and we still do not know the arrangements for Standing Committees. Every single piece of business has had to be taken on the Floor of the House. Regardless of what the Leader of the House said, we could have done all that—we have always done it. I have never known a Parliament so lax in putting together the normal structures and arrangements of the House, so the Leader of the House should vow and pledge that one of her priorities for when we come back in September will be to get this House back working properly.

At least we made it to the summer recess pretty much intact and with a Prime Minister in place. I do not know a group of people more in need of a summer holiday than this beleaguered Conservative party and its Government. A couple of weeks in the sun might quell their feuding desires and put a stop to the leadership contests. With their daiquiris and margaritas in hand, they might even agree to a temporary ceasefire to some of the briefings and counter-briefings across Whitehall. However, this might be the last summer bar one for the ordinary freedom of movement right across Europe. All sorts of special arrangements might be put in place for our constituents in 2019 as they try to enjoy their time on the costas and the playas but, as the repeal Bill comes forward, we see the reality of the hard Brexit as we move closer to it. We should therefore ensure that we can enjoy our summer holidays unburdened by having to worry about freedom of movement.

I wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and all in the Speaker's Office the best possible summer recess. I extend that sentiment to the Leader of the House, who has been kind and courteous to me since she became the Leader of the House, and to my friend the shadow Leader of the House. We have not done too badly as a team over the course of the past few weeks. I also extend that to staff right across the House. We have become so accustomed to being looked after so diligently and so well, and they have kept us safe. It has been one hell of a year, so I wish my colleagues all the best over the next few weeks.

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his remarks. We all share that desire to come back ready to go, having had a break, and with a new vigour to make the most of leaving the EU in a way that works

for the entire United Kingdom. The negotiations will obviously be tough and will require us to work together to achieve success. As I have said both privately and in the Chamber, I am keen to work across the House to enable ways of improving the legislation and to ensure that we get the best possible deal for the United Kingdom.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): Thanks to the Prime Minister's insistence that the salaries of those who earn over £150,000 working for the BBC ought to be declared, I learned today that a gentleman called Derek Thompson, who apparently plays Charlie in "Casualty", earns up to £400,000 a year, and yet real nurses earn around £23,000 a year. There is a double—*[Interruption.]* I am getting to that. There is a double injustice when somebody who makes real life and death decisions on a daily basis earns a fraction of the salary of an actor playing somebody who makes such decisions. May we have a debate as soon as possible about top-slicing £1 billion from the BBC's taxpayer licence fee revenue and giving it to the national health service and people who really deserve bigger salaries?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point. We have had a lot of discussions about public sector pay and about people who are just about managing. It has been a difficult number of years in which this Government have been trying to deal with the deficit and the debt that we were left in 2010, and it has been a case of trying to balance giving decent pay rises to our public sector workers, who do such a good job for us, with trying to make sure that we live within our means.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right about BBC pay, the pay of actors and so on, and about the Government urging transparency in pay. We were successful with boardroom pay and now with BBC salaries, and all Members will want to see more clarity around what is fair, both between women and men and between different public sector workers.

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation this morning delivered a major speech to a think-tank, Reform, setting out major developments in the Higher Education and Research Bill. He did that not having made an oral statement in this House, not having laid a written ministerial statement in this House and not having spent any time in his 32-minute speech yesterday on this area alluding to those developments.

Madam Deputy Speaker, you might think, I might think and many of us might think that that is a contempt and abuse of this House. It is the second year running that this Government have tried to make major statements about higher education on the last day of term, with the intention of evading scrutiny. Will the Leader of the House prevail upon the Universities Minister or another Minister to come to the House today and explain why, for example, the Government will make major changes to the teaching excellence framework, for which they are laying material today, and the Office for Students? *[Interruption.]* The chuntering Whip says from a sedentary position, "It is far too long". We have had far too little from—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. We do not need "chuntering" Whips. I know that the question is too long; I am sure the hon. Gentleman will now conclude.

Gordon Marsden: May we therefore make sure that the Universities Minister or some Minister actually turns up today to say something about that speech and those developments this morning?

Andrea Leadsom: In the hon. Gentleman's "speech" on the subject, he made a number of very important points. On his substantive point about a speech that the Universities Minister has given, there was, of course, a three-hour debate in this Chamber yesterday, so he will be aware that the Universities Minister talked about current policy.

The Government's record on universities has been exemplary, with more students going to university, particularly from disadvantaged backgrounds—up by more than 40% since 2010.

The hon. Gentleman criticises the number of written statements brought forward at the end of term, so I just point out that in 2007 there were 30 written statements; in 2008, there were also 30; in 2009, there were 33; and today I believe there are 22. Of course, as he will appreciate, it is vital for many Departments that they bring forward important—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Gentleman asked a serious question. The Leader of the House is answering it. It is simply rude to shout.

Andrea Leadsom: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. The point that I was trying to make was that, as the hon. Gentleman and indeed all hon. Members will know, it is important that hon. Members get the chance to see the last update possible before the House rises, so that they have the latest information, Department by Department.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Early-day motion 189 on Krishna Maharaj's federal evidentiary hearing in Florida has the support of many Members.

[That this House recalls parliamentary support over 20 years for Florida and the US' reviews of the 1987 murder convictions and sentencing of British citizen Krishna Maharaj, born on 26 January 1939, including asking for the overturning of the initial death sentence, for an appeal on the grounds of innocence and defects in the investigation, of ineffective defence representation and of significant concerns in the prosecution, including critical non-disclosures and of questions about the conduct of the original judges; welcomes the recent Federal Appeal Court order for a full evidential hearing by the Federal Court in the state of Florida; notes the helpful initiative by hon. Members and Members of the House of Lords for the Amicus Brief in support of Reprieve and its director Clive Stafford Smith who are making the case for the issue of innocence to be sufficient reason for Krishna Maharaj to be released after 30 years of imprisonment; and trusts that the evidence and arguments for innocence will now be considered effectively and fairly.]

May I suggest to the Leader of the House that the Foreign Office be encouraged to work with Clive Stafford Smith of Reprieve to help the Americans to decide that innocence is a sufficient ground to release Krishna Maharaj after 30 years, after they have had the hearing?

On early-day motion 207, can we have a debate on leasehold and commonhold legislative reform and sector regulation? We need to make sure that responsibility for

commonhold moves from the Ministry of Justice to the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, that the abuses of the leasehold sector are stamped out and that effective advice is given both to those who are doing the abuse and to those who will benefit when that abuse has ended.

Andrea Leadsom: I am not completely aware of the issues that my hon. Friend raises, but he will be aware that there is a pre-recess debate this afternoon. He might want to raise those issues then.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): Dangerous driving is a blight on the roads of my Bradford South constituency. The consultation of the Ministry of Justice on strengthening the punishment for drivers who kill or seriously injure others on our roads closed on 1 February 2017. Is the Leader of the House aware of when the outcome of that consultation will be published? Will she commit to making parliamentary time available to debate that important matter?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a critical point about dangerous driving. She is right that many of us have experienced the awful tragedies and outcomes of dangerous driving. On her behalf, I will look into when we can expect to see a response.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): The United Nations Human Rights Council special rapporteur on Sri Lanka published a report following his recent visit to that country, in which he described progress on fulfilling resolution 30/1 as "slow" and the use of torture in Sri Lanka as "endemic". Can we have a debate in Government time on the human rights situation in Sri Lanka in the lead-up to the next session of the UNHCR in the autumn?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend has done a lot of work in this area, and I congratulate him on his new position as chairman of the all-party parliamentary group. The Minister for Asia and the Pacific, my right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mark Field), has registered our serious concerns about the special rapporteur's findings with the Sri Lankan high commissioner this week, and the FCO's annual human rights report, which is published today, sets out our full assessment of the situation. I assure my hon. Friend that we continue to encourage the Sri Lankan Government to deliver against all their UN Human Rights Council commitments.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): News has recently emerged that the patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church has been released after 10 years' incommunicado house detention. He appeared at a mass on 16 July, following an alleged reconciliation with the Eritrean Government. The mass was billed as a celebration of that reconciliation and as an indication of his release from detention but, according to local sources, Patriarch Antonios was surrounded by guards, did not speak at the event and has made no statement about the supposed reconciliation. That has led many human rights organisations to believe that Patriarch Antonios has not been released but, rather, that his sudden reappearance is an attempt by the Eritrean Government to alleviate international pressure. Will the Leader of the House

[Jim Shannon]

allow for a statement on the discussions between the Government and the Eritrean Government on how Patriarch Antonios's detention still continues?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman, as he often does, raises an important human rights issue, which I urge him to take up at the next Foreign Office questions as a very specific issue to which those Ministers will be able to respond.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Although I welcome the clarity we now have on phase 2b of the High Speed 2 rail project, I am sure my right hon. Friend will agree it is unacceptable that my residents, some of whom have lived in the same home for more than 40 years, are being offered just two thirds of the value of their property. Will she therefore consider a debate in Government time immediately after the summer recess to scrutinise the property compensation schemes that are now on offer?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises the important issue of compensation for those affected. I have taken up a number of cases in my South Northamptonshire constituency, so I am very sympathetic to her. I am aware that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport has said that he will take up individual cases, and I urge my hon. Friend to contact him about her specific points.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Two women a week are murdered at the hands of their current partner or ex-partner, many of whom have had previous histories of abuse and stalking. The Home Office produced a consultation paper last December, recommending introducing new legislation, including a stalkers register. In this year's Queen's Speech, the issue of domestic violence was mentioned, yet we have seen no legislation about this issue nearly a year after the consultation. Is it not about time the Government found time for us to debate this issue and allowed the House to vote on it, because we face a very serious situation?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that this is an incredibly serious issue. He will know that tackling the horrors of domestic violence and domestic abuse is an absolute priority for the Prime Minister, and that the Queen's Speech mentioned that we intend to introduce legislation on this issue in this Session.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I know that the Leader of the House agrees with me that strengthening families and giving every child the best start in life are very much the business of government, given the cost of family breakdown and the impact that the early years and family relationships can have on children's mental health and life chances. A number of Conservative colleagues will be producing a families manifesto in the first week of September, immediately after the recess, providing the Government with practical and realistic policies that could make a significant difference in this area. Could parliamentary time be found to debate this important issue in the days after the recess?

Andrea Leadsom: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend, and I commend her on the work she is doing. She and I share a passion for ensuring that all children have the best start in life, and I would love to

see her families manifesto when it is published. She will be pleased to know that all Departments are committed to making progress, including the Department of Health, which has committed an additional £1.4 billion for mental health services for children, young people and new mothers for this Parliament. That will make a huge difference to families.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): We are now too late for the implementation of the draft Value Added Tax (Refund of Tax to Museums and Galleries) (Amendment) Order 2017, which was announced as a provision in the Budget in March 2016. Glasgow Women's Library in my constituency applied for this and was informed in September last year that it was successful, but it is still waiting for the Government to act. This measure was supposed to come into force in June. The library stands to lose tens of thousands of pounds if it cannot claim back and backdate under this provision the VAT for capital works it has carried out. Will the Leader of the House give some certainty as to when this statutory instrument will come before the House and when other galleries and museums listed under early-day motion 224—about 30 across the whole UK—will actually be able to make use of this provision?

[That this House notes that the draft Value Added Tax (Refund of Tax to Museums and Galleries) (Amendment) Order 2017 has not yet been laid before the House; understands that the draft Order was announced in the Budget on 16 March 2016, the consultation closed on 21 April 2017 and that the Order was due to come into force under the negative resolution procedure on 1 June 2017; believes that the Order will provide revenue that is vitally important to many museums, including the Athelstan Museum, Burns House Museum, Callendar House, Cumbernauld Museum, Dean Castle, Dick Institute, Elgin Museum, Glasgow Women's Library, Kilsyth Heritage, King's Own Royal Regiment Museum, Kirkcaldy Museum and Art Gallery, North Lanarkshire Heritage Centre, the Pier Arts Centre, Pittencrieff House Museum, the Regimental Museum of the Royal Highland Fusiliers, Shotts Heritage Centre, Stirling Smith Art Gallery and Museum, Stockwood Discovery Centre, Summerlee Museum of Scottish Industrial Life, the Fergusson Gallery, Wardown Park Museum, the West Highland Museum, the Library and Museum of Freemasonry, the Royal Academy of the Arts, the Royal College of Music, the Perth Museum and Art Gallery, Towner Art Gallery, the University of Nottingham and the Yorkshire Sculpture Park; and calls on the Government to lay the Order for the approval of Parliament prior to the Summer recess.]

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is raising an important point, which clearly has significant relevance in her constituency. If she would like to write to me about it, I will be able to look into it further for her.

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend consider a debate on electoral fraud, including double voting? Understandably, all MPs have a personal interest in this, especially if their constituency is a marginal one. I realise that the Electoral Commission watches us carefully, but such a debate just might concentrate minds a little.

Andrea Leadsom: This is a very important point. We have one of the oldest and proudest democracies in the world, and it is important that we continue to have

rigorous electoral processes that cannot be fraudulently abused. I am sure my hon. Friend will find a way to have that debate and I encourage him to do so.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The Leader of the House will doubtless be aware that today the Transport Secretary has issued a written statement saying that electrification of the line between Cardiff and Swansea will now not be taking place. That has huge significance—not just for my constituency, but for constituencies right across the south Wales belt. Will she find time when we come back for the brief period before the conference recess for the Transport Secretary to come to the Floor of the House to explain why this promise to the people of Wales has been broken, despite multiple promises having been made by him and the Welsh Secretary?

Andrea Leadsom: Our decisions on electrification reflect how advances in technology are enabling a different approach that is less disruptive to passengers and to communities. Specifically on the Cardiff-Swansea route, although we are not proceeding with electrification at the present time, we are working to build a better and bigger railway for Wales so that passengers in Wales will see the benefits of electrification sooner, when brand new and more spacious—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) is clearly not listening. Perhaps he does not want to hear the answer, but there is a clear answer: there will be benefits for passengers in Wales as a result of brand new and more spacious bi-mode, intercity express trains, which will begin to be introduced in October 2017. These state-of-the-art trains will make journeys faster along the whole route sooner, without the need for wires and gantries and the disruption involved in erecting them. So the advantages for passengers will be felt sooner, and that is as a result of changes in technology.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): My right hon. Friend will agree that the safeguarding of democracy is vital at all levels. Will she therefore please make time for a debate about the dangerous antics of Taunton Deane Borough Council and its leader, John Williams? His council is trying to force a merger that has not been properly consulted on and certainly does not have universal approval. Frankly, this is municipal rubbish! May we please have time for a debate, because this sort of carry-on cannot be tolerated? We are proud of two levels of government and we are proud of the job they do. This is being run through roughshod, so Government time should be made available to discuss this important issue.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend again raises an important local constituency matter; he may well wish to seek an Adjournment debate to explore it further.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): Further to the question of my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore), may we have an early debate about rail transport? The rail system from Rochdale is grossly inadequate—the quality and quantity is not acceptable for a town such as Rochdale. We need an early debate so that the Secretary of State for Transport can explain the Government's strategy for not only Wales but the north of England.

Andrea Leadsom: I am sure the hon. Gentleman will recognise that the Government have put billions into new road and rail projects, and we continue to do so. He and his Front-Bench colleagues may wish to choose an Opposition day opportunity to debate that matter, but I have tried to explain to the hon. Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) that we are looking at what improvements technology can offer ahead of the disruption that the installation of electrification would undoubtedly cause for passengers.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I know that my right hon. Friend is aware of the problem with sleep-in shifts for careworkers and of the looming crisis for several of the companies involved because Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs is demanding extremely large payments. There is no time for a debate or statement on this issue, so will she raise it with her colleagues in Government—in the Treasury and, indeed, in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy—to ensure that this crisis is averted?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an important issue. I wish to take this opportunity to pay tribute to all the careworkers who do such a fantastic job looking after elderly and disabled people. He is right to raise this matter and it is certainly something the Department are looking at carefully.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): May we have a debate in Government time on UK relations with Turkey? The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has failed to meet the two-month deadline for responding to the Foreign Affairs Committee report published on 25 March, and the Select Committees are not likely to be able to deal with the matter for some time, so it is incredibly important that the Government explain whether they support the mass arrests, purges and arrests of Members of Parliament currently going on in Turkey. They must not hide behind the fact that we have not yet set up the Select Committees.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will no doubt wish to raise that issue at the next Foreign and Commonwealth Office questions. With the House rising today, he may also wish to raise it at the pre-recess summer Adjournment debate this afternoon. Other than that, he can of course write to the Department and seek their specific advice.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): The staff of Parliament have quite rightly been thanked by many Members today, but I have heard a rumour that the police officers who serve us so well and are part of the parliamentary family may be moved after a five-year stint. Many right hon. and hon. Members value enormously the continuity of service that we get from the police constables, so will my right hon. Friend use her influence and make every effort to ensure that those who have served us for a long time are able to stay?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is exactly right to mention the police and how well they look after us in this place. Our thanks and gratitude extend to them. On the other hand, he will appreciate fully that how the police operate on the Palace grounds is an operational

[*Andrea Leadsom*]

matter. Although we are involved as an interested party, it is nevertheless for the police to decide how to manage their operations.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): I have repeatedly sought clarity on rail electrification to Swansea. A succession of Transport Secretaries and Secretaries of State for Wales responded that I had only to look out of the train window to see that electrification was on its way. Today, sneaked out in a statement, came the news that my worst fears have been realised and rail electrification is not coming to Swansea. Will the Leader of the House ensure that the Transport Secretary comes before the House to explain to my constituents and the people of Wales why he has misled them on this issue?

Andrea Leadsom: I say very gently to the hon. Lady that there is no such thing as sneaking out a statement. It is a statement; it is designed to inform the House. Statements come out before the House rises because all Secretaries of State and Ministers are conscious of the need to keep the House informed as far as possible while it is sitting.

On the hon. Lady's substantive point, as I have said to the hon. Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) the point is that as technology changes there are ways to improve passenger services earlier for Welsh train users, so it is vital that we seize those opportunities to deliver improvements earlier in a more cost-effective way and with less disruption to passenger services.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): Many of my constituents were delighted to see the Queen's Speech and the announcement of trade, agriculture and fisheries Bills, as were many constituents across the west country. However, the Question Times for the Departments for Transport, for Exiting the European Union and for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs have been some of the shortest in this Parliament. Given that she is the former Environment Secretary, will the Leader of the House consider extending the time allowed for those questions during this important time as we leave the EU?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend shares my passion for the success of the agricultural and fishing sectors as we leave the EU. There are huge opportunities there and he is certainly a keen advocate for them. All the timings for oral questions are kept under review and they are adjusted as demand changes, so I can assure him that that will be considered in due course.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): The Leader of the House has already heard from my colleagues about the fury there is in south Wales and Rochdale—and also in the east midlands, in Nottingham—about the Government's renegeing on promises that were made about rail electrification. Clear promises were made: it was not just, "Oh, it might happen."

Communities were promised, rail communities were promised and MPs were promised and the Secretary of State should come to this House and explain to each and every one of us why he has gone back on that promise. I urge the Leader of the House to speak to the

Secretary of State for Transport and tell him that he needs to make a statement at the earliest opportunity. We have had investment denied us; it is not good enough. The Government have broken their promises and they should stop it.

Andrea Leadsom: I am slightly astonished that Opposition Members do not seem to appreciate that the decisions on electrification reflect how advances in technology are enabling a different approach that is less disruptive to passengers and communities. In particular, bi-mode train technology offers seamless transfer from diesel power to electric that is undetectable to passengers and means that we no longer need to electrify every line to achieve the same significant improvements to journeys. Opposition Members should welcome the fact that technological advances mean less disruption to passengers and that improvements can be delivered sooner in the same way as those offered by electrification.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I was disappointed that Monday's debate on abuse and intimidation during the recent general election did not happen as we ran out of time, not least because I wanted to raise the issue of graffiti on bridges and walls in my constituency. Will the Leader of the House update us on whether we will have another opportunity for a debate in Government time?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this matter. It was a very important debate and it was disappointing that the Opposition chose to squeeze it out earlier this week. The vile abuse that candidates suffered during the election is unacceptable and a threat to our democracy. We will look to reschedule the debate as soon as possible after the summer recess, possibly as early as September.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): On rail electrification, it is clear that the Transport Secretary has broken the word of the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, who gave us an assurance that there would be electrification. Larger, heavier diesel trains will now run to Cardiff and switch on their diesel engines there, which is not environmentally friendly.

Will the Leader of the House admit to the House that the Public Accounts Committee has the solution to the problem? The project is £2 billion over budget and has been delayed by a year because the Department for Transport bought the trains before laying the track and did not anticipate that there were bridges in the way. The incompetence of the Transport Secretary has led to a slap in the face for the people of Swansea and Wales. Will the Leader of the House admit it and will she get her colleague to answer questions in this Chamber, rather than pushing out, under the cloak of darkness, stupid press releases that mislead people?

Andrea Leadsom: I do not for the life of me see why the hon. Gentleman thinks that earlier improvements for passengers with less disruption can possibly be a slap in the face. The Department for Transport is acknowledging that technology is enabling it to deliver less disruption and earlier improvements for passengers.

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Growing public anger at the BBC is made worse by the fact that the public know that the BBC is funded by a highly

regressive television tax. May we have an early debate not just on the accountability of the BBC but on its funding, with a view to getting rid of the television tax, which at the moment results in 10% of all cases in the magistrates courts and particularly impacts on women? Some 70% of the victims of that tax are women.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that as a public service broadcaster funded by the licence fee the BBC has a responsibility to set an example for others and lead the way in promoting equality in the workplace. He might well wish to have a further debate on how the licence fee is working, and he will be aware that the recent debates on the BBC charter took up that very issue. If he wants to seek further discussion, he can do so in Westminster Hall or through an Adjournment debate.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): My 18-year-old constituent is severely diabetic and has been battling for a much-needed personal independence payment for more than two years. He has won two appeals, but the Secretary of State is challenging the decision in court. My constituent wants to live an independent life and experience university, in common with his peers. May we have an urgent debate in Government time to address the effect of this Government's unfair practices towards those with disabilities?

Andrea Leadsom: That sounds like a very sad case. All Members have cases that they take up on behalf of their constituents, and from this Dispatch Box I urge people with similar problems and challenges to talk to their MP, because we can often help in individual cases. I am sure that the hon. Lady is taking this up with the Department separately. As for the bigger picture around disability, the hon. Lady will be aware that Conservatives are absolutely committed to supporting disabled people, and spending on disability benefits will be higher in every year to 2020 than it was in 2010. We spend more than £50 billion a year on benefits to support disabled people and people with health conditions, which is up more than £7 billion since 2010. I think we have a good track record, but I absolutely accept that there are always individual cases that we as representatives need to take up on behalf of our constituents.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): Like all hon. Members, I care passionately about the future of my local hospital. The hospital trust in Telford has spent four years deliberating over plans to invest in the future of hospital services, but, regrettably, the trust has been paralysed by indecision, bureaucratic incompetence, and a complete failure to communicate with my constituents. The proposals have descended into disarray, with local MPs, councillors, and clinicians losing confidence in the management's ability to deliver. Can we please have an urgent debate to consider this important issue?

Andrea Leadsom: I know that that matter has been of great concern to my hon. Friend, and I commend her for raising it. I believe that, recently, she met the senior responsible officers of NHS Future Fit to discuss progress and a revised timetable. I understand that the Future Fit programme board will meet on 31 July to hear the outcome of the independent review and the work relating to the women and children's impact assessment. The Joint

Committee will then meet on 10 August to consider the recommendations made by the board and the next steps, including public consultation. She is absolutely right to keep raising this matter.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Can we have a debate on nuclear disarmament? My constituent, Brian Quail, is currently being held at HMP Low Moss, and his colleague, Angie Zelter, in HMP Cornton Vale after they took part in a peaceful protest against the nuclear weapons store at Coulport. Does the Leader of the House recognise the moral outrage against weapons of mass destruction that drives campaigners to these lengths? Can this House be given the opportunity urgently to reconsider the immoral and unjustified renewal of Trident?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that, in this place, we absolutely do not interfere with matters of criminal justice. If someone is involved in breaking the law, it is very important that it is the police who decide what happens to them. On the substantive point about nuclear disarmament, I do not share his view. My personal view, and the view on the Government Benches, is that a nuclear deterrent is exactly that—a deterrent. It is an ultimate insurance that protects our people, and the security of the people is the first duty of any responsible Government.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I am sure that Members on both sides of the House are aware of this behaviour, but, over the past year, I have had to dial 999 three times in my surgery to remove people. I have had death threats—a gentleman was convicted of harassment. Only a week ago, walking down a high street, someone swore at me. What really has annoyed me, though, is what happened last Friday. I had a surgery in which three people were being disruptive. I asked them to leave. One stood face to face with me, like a prize fighter, threatening to hit me, and he called me a monkey. That sort of behaviour is not acceptable. What would have happened if a Member of Parliament had done that to a constituent? I absolutely urge the Leader of the House—I know that Members on both sides suffer from this—to ensure that we have this debate on abuse. In the general election, I was assaulted when defending a female Conservative candidate. This sort of behaviour has to end.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; this has gone beyond any reasonable level of disagreement. The intimidation, death threats, violence, abuse and disgusting acts, as well as the lower level anti-democratic pulling down of posters and putting graffiti on them and so on, were at unprecedented levels in the recent general election. As my hon. Friend knows, we scheduled a debate for Monday. Unfortunately, it could not take place because of an emergency debate on procedure that was called by the Opposition. It is fully our intention to reschedule that debate as soon as possible, because I know that many Members on the Government Benches, and some on the Opposition Benches, have suffered utterly unacceptable abuse. We need to have that discussion. The problem needs to be aired, and if people are involved in criminality, they need to be prosecuted.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): Currently, it is taking a minimum of 48 weeks for people appealing Home Office decisions denying them asylum status to have their appeal heard. When they get a date, it is many months ahead. This is completely unacceptable. During that time, they cannot work or contribute to the UK economy, as many of them are capable of doing and wish to do. Can we have a debate in Government time, as soon as we return from recess, to discuss this serious issue?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a very important point. As all hon. Members know, we are often asked to take up cases on behalf of constituents, and it is right that we should do so, as we then have some success in improving the speed of the process. Since the end of 2014, we have consistently met our ambition of deciding 98% of straightforward cases within six months. If she is seeing some very bad examples, then of course she should raise them directly with the Home Office.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I am sure that the Leader of the House is aware that there are Conservative MPs who believe that cutting corporation tax somehow increases tax take. Lines have been parroted to that effect all week, with some dodgy analysis provided to prove it. If it does increase tax take, why does the last Budget show that the measure to cut corporation tax to 19% will cost the Treasury £23.4 billion? Will she make a statement, outlining where the magic money tree Budget lines are that offset the £23 billion and show the massive increase in tax take?

Andrea Leadsom: We on the Government Benches have been absolutely focused on ensuring that we get our economy back on track and that we start again to live within our means. Let us be absolutely clear about this: when we came into office in 2010, we had the highest ever peacetime deficit of £150 billion a year more being spent than we take in in tax revenues. Under this Government, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs has massively improved its ability to take in tax revenues from avoidance measures, and from companies and individuals failing to pay. Significant billions of pounds of taxes have been gathered. What we have sought to do is to make the UK highly competitive so that companies come here to start businesses and people in this country start businesses. This has been a remarkable success story. Our deficit each year is now down by three quarters as a percentage of GDP. Not only that, but we have the highest employment figures ever and the lowest unemployment since the 1970s. Youth unemployment is down, and people are doing considerably better than they were in 2010. There is a lot more to do, but we are determined not to leave the next generation with the problems of this generation.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): The Government have shaken the magic money tree bare to buy their majority. Is that not the reason why, at midnight on the last day of Parliament, they had to sneak out a statement on the cancellation of a long-established promise to the people of south Wales and then deny the House a proper debate on the subject? That is a disgraceful way to behave. When can we debate the other promises they made during the election, including the one to scrap the Severn Bridge's toll. Will they rat on that promise as well?

Andrea Leadsom: Let us be clear about this: it is the Conservatives who have always said that there is no magic money tree. Labour Members talk about a magic money tree, but it is their tuition fee promise that was going to shake the magic money tree to find £100 billion. That was a false promise, which they immediately retracted after the general election. On the Government Benches, we are looking at measures to make our economy a success. I have answered the question on the electrification of trains four—possibly five—times. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman did not hear me. We are trying to bring forward improvements earlier that cause less disruption so that passengers and communities can benefit sooner.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): I am not going to make any progress with an inquiry into bimodal, back-to-the-future trains for south Wales, so I will ask for something else. May we have a public inquiry into the recent report by Her Majesty's inspectorate of probation on community rehabilitation companies, their inability to provide through-the-gate service outcomes for offenders, such as settled accommodation, the rise in reoffending, the rise in recalls to prison, the unrealistic workloads and the stressful working conditions? Is it not time we admitted that this experiment is an absolute disaster and looked at it again?

Andrea Leadsom: That is an incredibly important topic. Probation officers do a very difficult job, and they do very well in very trying circumstances. I understand that the hon. Lady intends to raise the matter with the Justice Committee so that it can consider it carefully once the Select Committees are up and running in September.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): Only a week ago the Secretary of State for Transport told me that "electric trains will arrive in Cardiff and Swansea this autumn"—[*Official Report*, 13 July 2017; Vol. 627, c. 410.],

so I am not going to ask a question on that. The Government are renegeing not only on their commitment to reducing pollution from diesel engines, but on their commitment to reducing carbon emissions, by delaying a decision on the Swansea bay tidal lagoon. This false promise shows that they have no interest in Wales. May we therefore have an urgent statement when the House returns after the recess on the Government's plan to secure the Swansea bay tidal lagoon?

Andrea Leadsom: I welcome the hon. Lady to her place and look forward to working with her in the Chamber. The Swansea bay tidal lagoon, as she will know, is an enormous, incredibly ambitious and very expensive project. When I was an Energy Minister it had already been discussed for many years. There are challenges, from the perspective of value for bill payers' or taxpayers' money. Charles Hendry carried out a review, and the Government's response will be brought forward as soon as possible.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): Many individuals who convert to another religion or renounce faith altogether face being ostracised by sections of their community and even by family members, making them more vulnerable to hate crime. May we have a statement or a debate in Government time on what is being done to tackle crimes motivated by anti-apostasy?

Andrea Leadsom: I think that all Members across the House would respect the right of any individual to choose to worship as they wish, so I think the hon. Gentleman would have a lot of support if he applied for a Westminster Hall debate and there would be a lot of interest.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): As the House rises for the summer recess, many of my constituents are today mopping up properties that have once again been flooded, 18 months after Storm Desmond hit Lancashire. During that time the Government applied for EU emergency funding to support communities and flood resilience, but my local authorities, Lancashire County Council and Lancaster City Council, have been prevented from bidding for that money. May we have a debate in Government time on how we can improve flood resilience and flood defences in communities affected by flooding?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a very important point. When I was Environment Secretary I visited Lancashire and other parts of the country that had been flooded. It is absolutely devastating, and we have seen yet more examples in recent days. She will be aware that we have a six-year commitment of £2.5 billion in flood defence projects to better protect an additional 300,000 properties by 2021. There are a number of projects and a number of sources of funding for them. I am sure that she will want to raise the specific case in her constituency at the next Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Question Time.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I point out to the Leader of the House that bimodal trains are not some modern technology; they were first patented in 1989. I am sure that she will know that Crossrail is costing £202 million per mile to complete and that High Speed 2 is now estimated to cost £403 million per mile. By contrast, rail electrification between Selby

and Hull would cost only £3.2 million per mile. May we please have a debate on why Conservative Ministers blocked the Hull scheme, even though it was privately backed with funding, lower in cost and much better value?

Andrea Leadsom: The level of interest in this topic from the Opposition Benches suggests that it might be a good candidate for an Opposition day debate. I have answered this question six times now. The Department for Transport is spending billions on road and rail infrastructure, and delivering early wherever possible, and with the least disruption to communities.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): And the prize for patience today goes to Dr David Drew.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I wish you a happy recess.

On the subject of abuse, will the Leader of the House take up the situation in Gloucestershire County Council, where a couple of weeks ago the Conservative Councillor Lynden Stowe referred on his Facebook page to the Leader of the Opposition as being comparable to Hitler and likened the Labour party's campaign to attract younger voters to national socialism and other allied movements. Mr Stowe, who is also a cabinet member, has removed the comments but refuses to refute them. Given that abuse is a big topic on the Conservative Benches, would she like to have a word with the high command in Gloucestershire and get rid of him?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a very specific case that I obviously know nothing about. Let me say again that abuse and intimidation is completely unacceptable, from whoever it comes and to whomever it is directed. Certainly, many colleagues on the Conservative side of the House have been subjected to vile abuse, and it is something that the House definitely needs to consider. We all need to work together to put a stop to it.

Grenfell Tower

12.36 pm

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement on Grenfell Tower and fire safety.

Five weeks have now passed since the tragedy at Grenfell Tower. Nothing that has happened in those five weeks will have diminished the grief of those who lost loved ones. Nothing will have negated the trauma of those who lost their homes. But across the public sector, in local and central Government, in the emergency services, in hospitals, in schools and more, dedicated public servants have been doing all they can to deal with the aftermath and help the community recover.

Over the past five weeks the Government have endeavoured to keep the House up to date with these developments. This is the third oral statement that I have made on the subject. The House has also heard from the Prime Minister and the Housing Minister, who also answered questions in Westminster Hall before Parliament formally returned. There has been a full debate in the Commons, four written statements and a number of letters that have been sent to all Members. My aim today is to provide an update before the House rises, and another opportunity for hon. Members to ask questions. I would also like to let the House know exactly what action we will be taking over the summer.

¹The police continue to list 80 people as either dead or missing and presumed dead. Thirty-nine victims have so far been formally identified, with 39 inquests opened by the coroner and adjourned pending the public inquiry and the police investigation. Two adults remain in hospital. I know that some local residents remain concerned that the number of people in the tower that night has been underestimated. I continue to urge anyone with further information to come forward. We have been very clear that we do not mind if those affected were subletting or have immigration issues; all we care about is getting to the truth.

Turning to the re-homing programme, everyone who lost their home in Grenfell Tower and Grenfell Walk has been made at least one offer of good-quality, fully furnished temporary accommodation in the local area. As of 10 o'clock this morning, 35 of these have been accepted and 10 families have moved in. Those numbers are slightly down on the figures published recently, as some people have changed their minds, as they are perfectly entitled to do. Where residents have turned down an offer, we are finding them suitable alternatives. Where residents are not yet ready to engage in the process, because they do not want to make a decision right now or they would rather wait for a permanent home to be offered, we will of course respect that.

At Communities and Local Government questions this week, the quality of the accommodation being offered was raised. I repeat the Housing Minister's offer to those on the Opposition Front Bench to visit some of these homes so that they can inspect them for themselves. I do not believe that they have taken us up on that offer so far, but it still stands.

In the long term, we are continuing to seek out and secure suitable permanent accommodation. The first such homes for Grenfell families will be ready within days, and specialist teams are ready to start matching them to families and to start making the offers.

At the town hall, we are continuing preparations to return control of the recovery effort from Gold Command to Kensington and Chelsea Council. I have spoken at length with the new leader of the council and been very clear that Gold Command will not hand over the reins until it is clear that the council is ready and able to cope. We saw last night the raw anger that some in the community still feel towards the council. That is entirely understandable; as the Prime Minister herself has said, the initial response from the local authority was simply not good enough.

There is not a lot of trust there, and not a lot of confidence, and that is why, when Kensington and Chelsea Council takes over the recovery operation, it will do so under the supervision of the independent Grenfell recovery taskforce. It is important to stress that the role of the taskforce is not to investigate the causes of the fire or to apportion blame—that is for the public inquiry and the police investigation. Rather, the taskforce is there to provide advice and support and to see to it that the council does the job that is required of it. We are in the process of finalising the taskforce membership, and I hope to make an announcement soon. I can confirm that the handover from Gold Command to Kensington and Chelsea will not happen until the taskforce is up and running.

Away from Kensington, the fire safety testing programme continues. We now believe that no more than 208 local authority and housing association residential blocks over 18 metres tall have been fitted with aluminium composite material cladding. Some 189 of these have had cladding samples tested by the Building Research Establishment, have been tested by proxy or have already had their cladding taken down. None of them has passed the limited combustibility test. Samples from a further 12 towers have been submitted this week, and they are now being tested. The BRE has yet to see samples from seven towers, all of them managed by housing associations. A month after the tests began, that is simply unacceptable, and I expect to see all those housing associations submit samples without any further delay.

On the advice of the independent Expert Advisory Panel on Building Safety, the BRE is now undertaking system testing, which will help establish how combinations of different types of ACM panels with different types of insulation behave in a fire. An explanatory note setting out the process and the timetable for further advice will be published shortly. It has taken a short time to design and set up the test, but we expect the first results to be available next week. As soon as results are available, we will share them first with the local authorities and housing associations that have confirmed that their properties are clad in the same combination of materials that were used in the test. We will also, of course, inform the local fire and rescue service. The results will provide further information that building owners and their professional advisers can use to take decisions about what, if any, remedial action is required.

Although legal responsibility for fire safety enforcement lies with local authorities, I do have the power to direct an authority to consider these test results as part of its duty to keep housing conditions under review. If necessary, I will not hesitate to use this power, which could lead to enforcement action being taken against a landlord if a fire risk is not dealt with. I do hope it will not come to that.

Moving on to the public inquiry, Sir Martin Moore-Bick is continuing his preparatory work. I welcome his decision to extend by two weeks the consultation period for the terms of reference. While we are all anxious for the inquiry to get under way, it is important that the remit is appropriate, and that everyone affected has had an opportunity to share their views.

With the House due to rise later today, this is the last statement I will be making before the summer recess, but work on the recovery effort and the testing regime will obviously continue at pace while Parliament is not sitting. My Department will be writing regular letters to all Members to keep them abreast of progress.

Finally, I pay tribute to the many Members on both sides of the House who have assisted with the emergency response and the recovery effort so far. They have provided insight, support, scrutiny and a voice for their constituents, both in public and behind the scenes. The weeks, months and even years ahead will be unimaginably difficult for those who were caught up in the fire and those who have lost family and friends. There is nothing that any of us can do to bring back those who died or to erase the trauma of that terrible night, but I am sure the whole House shares my determination to take care of those who have been affected by the fire, to make sure that the truth comes out and that justice is done, and to see to it that a tragedy like this never, ever happens again.

12.45 pm

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for the advance copy of his statement.

This is the fourth time in less than four weeks that we have had to encourage the Secretary of State or his Ministers to make a statement on Government action following the Grenfell Tower fire. He praises the scrutiny provided by Members on both sides of the House, but how will he keep Members informed over the next six recess weeks? More importantly, how can we get answers to the continuing, serious concerns we have from our constituents and from the Grenfell Tower families and survivors? Round-robin letters are simply not sufficient.

The Secretary of State calls today's statement an update on progress, but in truth there has been next to no progress. After this truly dreadful fire, the Secretary of State had two urgent, overriding responsibilities: first, to ensure that everyone affected from Grenfell Tower had the help and rehousing they needed; and secondly, to reassure all the people living in tower blocks around the country that their homes were safe or that the work necessary to make them safe was being done. More than five weeks after this fire, he is failing on both fronts.

We have learned today that 169 families lost their homes in Grenfell Tower, but that only 10 have moved out of emergency hotels and hostels, while 25 more have been offered a temporary home they feel they can accept. I accept that the reasons may be complex, but I am still getting reports of residents being told they will be made intentionally homeless if they refuse an offer, despite the Government's word that this will not happen; residents being offered accommodation with damp, leaks and a lack of full furnishing; residents being shown somewhere with too few bedrooms for their children; and residents being made an offer, but then being told that the details will follow only afterwards.

As for the Government's fire safety testing programme, the more we are told, the worse it gets. The Secretary of State's statement raises more questions than it answers. The Prime Minister said:

"We can test over 100 buildings a day".

So why have only 259 tests been done? Why can councils and housing associations not get non-ACM cladding, or insulation, tested? Why is the Secretary of State ignoring the views of fire safety experts, landlords and residents, ignoring the potential fire risk in thousands of other tower blocks, and only narrowly testing ACM cladding? How many of the 259 blocks that have failed have had their cladding removed? Where blocks have failed the first, samples test but passed the second, systems test, is the cladding still safe to leave in place?

Have the Government agreed any financial support for any council or housing association to help with the costs? Has the Secretary of State persuaded the Treasury to agree access to the Government's Contingencies Fund, or will any costs have to come from within the Department's existing budgets?

We know from the report on the Lakanal House fire—I suspect we will see the same with Grenfell Tower—that the problem was not just cladding. The Government's testing programme is simply too slow, too narrow and too confused. It is simply not fit for purpose. Ministers must therefore act. They must widen the testing programme to reassure all high-rise residents that their homes are safe; fund the necessary work on cladding and on fire safety to make them safe; review the system of approved inspectors for building control checks, starting with all the cases where the cladding has failed but had been signed off previously; and start the overhaul of building regulations, which the coroner reporting on the Lakanal House fire recommended to Ministers four years ago, and which can later incorporate any findings from the fire investigations or the public inquiry into Grenfell Tower.

The Secretary of State talked about the pace of what is being done. In truth, Ministers have been three steps off the pace in responding to the tragedy of Grenfell Tower at each stage. I fear that without the scrutiny of Members on both sides of the House that he praised, the Government's pace will slacken over the recess weeks at the very time when it is clear that he needs to do a great deal more to deal effectively with the complex problems and consequences of the Grenfell fire tragedy.

Sajid Javid: So far, the right hon. Gentleman has taken a fairly constructive approach to this very, very important issue. I would urge him very much to maintain that in the weeks and months that lie ahead, and not to adopt the approach of his right hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor, who has shown just how out of touch he is on this issue. That is not what the public want to see.

The right hon. Gentleman asked how I can make sure during the recess period that all hon. Members in all parts of the House are kept in touch or informed and are able to ask questions. Obviously he knows that because Parliament will be in recess, some of the usual channels will not be there. However, I am determined to ensure that we make use of what is available, whether through regular communications with all Members of Parliament or through my Department's own operations in issuing press releases and explanatory notes. In addition, my colleagues and I will be available during the summer

[Sajid Javid]

recess to meet or talk to any hon. Member who has any questions. I have already planned to meet the hon. Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) next week. I will be happy to talk to the right hon. Gentleman at any time, or to meet to discuss with him any of the issues pertaining to Grenfell Tower and this terrible tragedy.

On housing, the right hon. Gentleman will know that huge efforts have been made by Gold Command, by my Department and by Kensington and Chelsea Council to make sure that the needs of all the residents are met and that their wishes are respected in terms of temporary accommodation and permanent accommodation, whether they were social tenants or leaseholders. Very shortly, within just a matter of days, Kensington and Chelsea Council, with the support of the Government, will issue a fresh document to every resident that will make it very clear how this process can work going forward, answer a lot of the questions that residents will naturally have, and make sure that all the information is in one place. A lot of that work has been put together after consultation with many of the residents to try to make sure that all the questions they would naturally have are answered, including some of the key questions around the allocation policy of some of the permanent housing that has been identified.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about the testing process. This is a very comprehensive, detailed and, by its very nature, complex process. At every stage, we have been led by advice from the independent expert panel. These are the people we should all rely on to give the best advice on how testing should be prioritised. The clear advice, right at the start, was to prioritise testing of cladding that may be similar to that which was on Grenfell Tower. I think it was right to prioritise that. That does not, of course, preclude tests on other types of cladding. The BRE facilities are not the only test facilities available in the country. Landlords, whether they are local authorities, housing associations or private landlords, have a legal responsibility to make sure that their buildings are safe. That is why, on the back of the advice and explanatory notes that we have issued, landlords—I know of this happening in many cases—are already taking further action to make sure that even if their buildings do not have ACM cladding, they have still done everything they can to re-check that they are safe. With regard to the systems tests, I mentioned that we will be publishing an explanatory note that will go into much more detail about exactly how those tests will work, and how their results will then be used.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about funding. I have made it clear from the Dispatch Box a number of times that if any local authority or housing association has to take any action to make sure that its buildings are safe, we expect them to do that immediately. If they cannot afford it, they should approach us, and we will discuss how to make sure that they have the support that they need. To date, as far as I am aware, not a single local authority or housing association has approached me or my Department to ask for any assistance. If they did, of course we would take that very seriously. If he is aware of any local authority that has a funding issue, then he should encourage it to contact me.

On the building regulations, the right hon. Gentleman again rightly said that we need to learn the lessons from this terrible tragedy—whether they come from the public inquiry, the police inquiry, or the fire inspection work that has happened—and make sure that where changes are required in the building regulations or the enforcement of those regulations, they are made as swiftly as possible. There will be further news on that in due course.

I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his interest. I repeat that he can approach me at any time during the summer recess period.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement and congratulate him on keeping the House up to date with progress thus far.

My right hon. Friend is right in saying that there is a lack of confidence in the local authority in Kensington and Chelsea. The taskforce that he is going to nominate, hopefully later today or tomorrow, is vital to restore confidence. Will he update the House on the exact powers that the taskforce has? Clearly, if control is passed back to Kensington and Chelsea Council, that raises the question of who can direct the council to do things, and what happens if there is a dispute over what is done. For example, the shadow Secretary of State mentioned individuals almost being blackmailed into accepting a property that they do not want. Does the taskforce have the power to direct the local authority to take certain actions, and will my right hon. Friend personally intervene if it needs extra help?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise the importance of the taskforce and the work that is required of Kensington and Chelsea going forward. As I said, there is a very low level of confidence among the residents—perfectly understandably so. We saw that last night at the local council meeting. The taskforce will comprise experienced people independent of the council to provide the council with strategic advice, particularly on rehousing and community engagement, and it will report independently to me. I have made it very clear from the start that, if it believes that the council is not up to the job, I will not hesitate to take further action.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. I have confirmed in response to previous statements that the Scottish Government and Scottish local authorities have in hand the safety of Scotland's high-rise flats, and that the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service is undertaking fire safety and incident planning visits to all high-rises in Scotland.

I am sure that many hon. Members will, like me, have received intimations of concern from constituents about a number of aspects of this terrible disaster. One question that I hear over and over again is, "Where was the infrastructure in the borough to deal with such a disaster, and where was the plan for dealing with its aftermath?" Constituents and members of the public ask me what was going on in such a wealthy borough that it did not seem able to cope with such a disaster on its doorstep. Was this just a failing of one out-of-touch Tory council, or is it an endemic problem? What steps are the UK Government taking to ensure that such an inept and incompetent response to such a terrible disaster could not happen again in what is really a very wealthy area?

Another concern to all our constituents, I am sure, is the BBC report earlier this week saying that less than £800,000 of the £20 million donated has been disbursed in the past five weeks. That is leading to growing scepticism among residents, with the chair of the residents group saying recently that she feels that the public's generosity "is being betrayed". Can the Secretary of State assure us that there will be full transparency with regard to how the funds donated by the public and business are being put to use, and that any administrative and bureaucratic obstacles that are preventing that money from being distributed promptly are removed, so far as is reasonably possible?

Sajid Javid: The Scottish Government and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service have done a commendable job in responding to this tragedy and in ensuring that the lessons are learned in Scotland, too.

On the hon. and learned Lady's wider questions, it is fair to say that, with a tragedy on this scale, of this size and proportion, almost any local authority in the country would be overwhelmed. Despite that, however, there are certainly things that any reasonable person would have expected of Kensington and Chelsea Council. As I said earlier, there were failings, and that is why there is a need for an intervention of the type I have described. There are longer-term lessons to learn not just for boroughs in London, but more widely to ensure that, as a country, we are better prepared for civil emergencies of this type. That work, led by the Cabinet Office, has already begun.

The hon. and learned Lady talked about charity funding. It is great that so many people have contributed to help the people hurt by this tragedy. The Charity Commission has been working with a number of charities to ensure that there is a co-ordinated response. All of them are working together to get the maximum benefit from the donations that have been made, and I think that is right. We were asked to make it clear that any donations through the co-ordinated response of charities—funds raised by the *Evening Standard*, the Rugby Portobello Trust and others—would not have an impact on benefits. We have done what was asked of us. We were asked to disregard donations from the point of view of benefits, and we have done exactly that.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): The residents of Grenfell Tower have of course been very badly affected by this terrible tragedy, and they need help in a number of areas, such as financial help—immediate financial assistance—as well as rehousing and emotional support. Would it help if individual caseworkers were deployed—or has the Secretary of State already deployed some—to provide one-to-one support through this process to ensure that residents get the assistance they need?

Sajid Javid: Yes. Right at the start, Gold Command very quickly brought in key workers for every family affected, whether they were in Grenfell Tower, Grenfell Walk or other nearby housing. One part of the transition process—this has already begun—will be making sure that Kensington and Chelsea Council puts in place permanent key workers for each family for as long as the families require that support. That is essential, and it has been supported by the Government.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): This morning, I met a number of local government leaders, who said they were completely in the dark about the circumstances in which central Government would help them to pay for essential work on tower blocks. The Secretary of State has said that local authorities should go ahead and that, if they cannot afford to pay for such work, the Government will help in those circumstances. The Secretary of State knows that the funding comes out of housing revenue account. Rents are capped and borrowing is capped, so for many authorities the only way in which they will be able to pay for extra work on tower blocks is by stopping important work on other properties. Does he accept that, in those circumstances where work on tower blocks would mean not doing important work elsewhere, central Government will pay to help local authorities to do the necessary work?

Sajid Javid: Of course we want other essential work, such as on maintaining social housing, to continue. The clear starting point, however, is that it is the legal responsibility of local authorities and housing associations to ensure that their properties are safe. They should already be doing that work. Where they have found that that is not the case and they need to take action, they should take such action. As I have said, if they need help because they cannot afford it, they should approach us. So far, however, I am not aware of a single local authority that has done so.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his detailed statement, and for having kept the House so fully apprised of recent developments. I am horrified to hear that some housing associations have not yet, despite requests to do so, sent in samples for testing. Is the Secretary of State considering taking any further action? Perhaps the time has come for naming and shaming, for example.

Sajid Javid: If such action is required, I will not hesitate to take it. In the past few days, since we have been a lot more public about pushing those that have not come forward with the relevant information, I must say that information has flowed in very quickly, especially during the past 48 hours. I believe we are still waiting for information on seven buildings managed by housing associations. I understand that all those properties are privately owned but managed by housing associations, so I recognise that they may be different from and more complex than others, but we still expect the information to come in right away.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I commend the Secretary of State for coming to the Chamber again, and indeed the Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma), for being very accessible to colleagues on this issue. However, they still seem to be in denial about the review of approved document B, the fire guidance for building regulations. Ministers have been promising a review since 2011, and the Lakanal House coroner recommended it in 2013. As recently as 2015, the then housing Minister said that work would start in 2016 and that it would be published in 2017. One can only assume that either the independent panel of experts is telling them not to do it because it is not necessary, or the Government believe

[*Jim Fitzpatrick*]

that the public inquiry will conclude that we do not need to do it. Which is it? The work will take time, and the Government could get ahead of the curve by starting the work now, so that when the public inquiry recommends doing so—many of us expect the inquiry to recommend it—they can say, “Here’s the work.”

Sajid Javid: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. As usual, he has raised a very important point. The purpose of the independent expert panel is to provide any advice that might require emergency action. If it does so in terms of building regulations or enforcement, we will certainly do that. As I said in response to the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), I accept that there are clear issues around building regulations and enforcement and that, to make perhaps longer-term changes, we should act more swiftly and not necessarily wait for the outcome of a public inquiry, because with an independent inquiry the Government do not control the timing of that. I am looking at what further steps we can take to ensure we learn the lessons very quickly.

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): This terrible fire has affected not just the people who were unfortunate enough to live in the block itself, but the residents living around Grenfell Tower. They must have been horribly affected by seeing the fire and by its aftermath. What support is being given to local residents to help them to live with this tragedy?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise that point. The immediate support was to provide emergency accommodation in hotel rooms for all families who required it, and that has been done. Many of them are still in hotel rooms; that is what they decided to do. The council has designed an offer for people in many of the nearby blocks. Specific offers have been made to families in three of them—Barandon Walk, Hurstway Walk and Testerton Walk—to allow them to return to their homes and to provide them with the support they need.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): The Government intervened in housing providers’ budgets by imposing a rent cut that reduced their income. Because of that and other factors, we already know that repairs and maintenance budgets have fallen by almost a fifth since 2010. If tenants and residents are not to fear that fire safety will be compromised by budgets or that repair and maintenance budgets will not be compromised by fire safety, will the Secretary of State assure us that all housing providers will know that they do not have to squeeze further other essential repairs and maintenance work in order to install sprinklers and carry out other remedial fire safety work?

Sajid Javid: I have been clear that it is clearly the legal responsibility of all local authorities and housing associations to ensure that their residents are safe and that they are meeting all safety regulations, including fire safety regulations. If there are instances where they cannot afford such work, they should approach us.

James Cartledge (South Suffolk) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his detailed statement. This fire is a terrible tragedy that will have a huge impact on many aspects of future Government policy. I have always been a passionate believer in the important role of urban regeneration in a holistic housing policy. Will he confirm that, for schemes that are brought forward in future and in our wider housing policy, we have to learn all the lessons of what happened at Grenfell Tower and ensure that we have the most robust possible fire measures in place?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There are many lessons to learn from this terrible tragedy. We have talked already about a number of them in the House, and one certainly concerns our wider and longer-term approach to social housing.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State’s willingness to keep us all updated over the next few weeks. Does he agree that local authorities and housing associations have a real duty to keep the residents and tenants in those blocks updated? Some local authorities are better than others, and there is huge concern about times when testing has not been reported back or results have not been received. It is absolutely crucial that local authorities report back over the summer.

Has the Secretary of State agreed that the Fire Brigades Union should be a main participant in the inquiry, to which it can bring all its expertise, knowledge and willingness to help to get to the bottom of this terrible tragedy?

Sajid Javid: The decision on the FBU’s role in the public inquiry will be for the judge. With the extension in the terms of reference, he is keen to ensure that he speaks to all interested parties, but the decision will ultimately be his to make. I agree 100% with the hon. Lady that all local authorities and housing associations must do everything they can to keep their residents informed. Many residents will, naturally, be worried and have concerns. I have seen good examples of local authorities and housing authorities keeping their residents up to date, but, as she says, there are some not-so-good examples. If she or any other hon. Member is aware of councils or housing associations that are not doing a good job, please make me aware of that.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s clear, informative statement, but I wonder whether he might give us a little more indication of what progress has been made in the provision of temporary accommodation for those who have lost their homes in this tragedy. It does seem as though some are still facing difficulties. Could he give me an assurance that all efforts are being made, especially when it comes to replacing homes on a like-for-like basis?

Sajid Javid: The initial response was to provide emergency accommodation and to ensure that people were offered temporary accommodation within three weeks, and that certainly happened. More than 200 units of temporary accommodation, all of which were of high quality and fully furnished, were identified in the local area. As I have mentioned, some families have taken up the offer. Others wish to move straight to permanent accommodation, and others say that they are not ready. We will respect

their wishes. This is one of the biggest jobs for Kensington and Chelsea and for the Government, who are working together to ensure that all the families affected have accommodation available that is of high quality and, importantly, on the same terms as that which they had before. That is certainly what we are pursuing.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Electrical safety is of paramount importance in rented accommodation, particularly when it is high rise, and it appears as though the Grenfell Tower incident was caused by a fire in a fridge freezer. Will the Secretary of State commit to introducing mandatory electrical safety checks in rented properties, bearing in mind the fact that the Department for Communities and Local Government working group that was looking at the matter has concluded?

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend the Business Secretary is looking at product electrical safety, including product recall, and I will ensure that he knows about the right hon. Gentleman's concerns.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): I get the impression from previous answers that I have received from my right hon. Friend that local authorities have been very good at meeting the different requests that Government have made of them, but can any specific pressure be applied to non-compliant housing associations? We simply cannot take any chances with safety.

Sajid Javid: Local authorities have generally been good in their response. Of the buildings mentioned earlier that have had their cladding tested or proxy tested, 46 are local authority buildings. Some local authorities have been very helpful in working with housing associations, but where that can help, we will certainly look at it further.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): The West Midlands Fire Service has recommended that extensive work be carried out on 213 tower blocks in Birmingham containing 10,000 households. That work must be done as a matter of priority, but it will be very challenging indeed for the city, given the pressure on its budget. May I ask the Secretary of State, therefore—having spoken with the leader of the council, John Clancy, this morning—whether he is prepared to receive an all-party delegation from the city, consisting of Birmingham's Members of Parliament and the leadership of Birmingham City Council, so that we can say to tenants in Birmingham, "Everything necessary will be done to ensure you are safe"?

Sajid Javid: Whether in Birmingham or in any other part of the country, we expect local authorities and housing associations to do any necessary work. If their local fire and rescue service says that such work is necessary, of course they should pursue it. I know the leader of Birmingham City Council well already, and if he wants to approach me, he should do so.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for giving us an update. I also thank the Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma), who has responsibility

for housing, for his assiduous attention in the aftermath of the tragedy. People in Chaucer House, one of the two council-owned tower blocks in Sutton, have rightly been asking questions after the failure of the sample that was tested. In particular, they were not quite sure what the grading of 1, 2 or 3 meant. Residents in Balaam House nearby will also be asking questions when their results come back. Can the Secretary of State give me further details about the systems testing procedure that the Government have introduced?

Sajid Javid: It is perfectly reasonable to ask such questions. Because the tests are being done on the back of expert advice, some of them are naturally complex and require proper explanation. That is why we have already issued an explanatory note on the tests of the core material of the ACM cladding, and it is why I have also decided to issue an explanatory note on the new systems test, which will be available very shortly.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): In Plymouth there are three tower blocks with combustible cladding. Plymouth Community Homes has acted quickly in fire testing and installing additional safety upgrades, but it needs additional information from the Government about the technical specifications of new cladding, if it is to be installed. Plymouth Community Homes and Conservative-run Plymouth City Council have written to the Government asking for financial assistance to enable them to do that. When will the Government be able to give them clarity about the technical specifications of new cladding and assistance with funding?

Sajid Javid: Two weeks ago, we issued clear guidance on what the limited combustibility test results mean and what action should be taken. As I said a moment ago, an explanatory note on the next set of tests—the so-called system tests—will be coming out shortly, and it will no doubt help Plymouth to make decisions. On funding, Plymouth should absolutely be getting on with any necessary work. If it has an affordability issue, it should approach us.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend assure the House that the safety of tenants in the private rented sector will also be taken into account in the independent expert advisory panel and in the Government's future actions? Tenants living in private rented homes also deserve to feel safe.

Sajid Javid: Yes, I can absolutely give my hon. Friend that assurance. The testing facilities have been made available for free to the private sector, and a number of landlords have used those facilities. The housing Minister, other Ministers and I have met many representatives from the private sector to ensure that they are fully informed and that they receive all our guidance.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend advise us what engagement his Department has had with the many charities looking to support survivors of the Grenfell tragedy?

Sajid Javid: As I mentioned earlier, a number of charities have set up dedicated funding efforts to provide help and support to the victims of this tragedy.

[Sajid Javid]

The Department has been working across Government; for example, we are working with the Charity Commission to help to co-ordinate the use of those funds as they are distributed, and with the Department for Work and Pensions to ensure that they are disregarded for benefits purposes. Over the next weeks and months, we will continue to do what we can to help those charities to help the victims.

Points of Order

1.19 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. On Monday night we had the face of the Secretary of State for Transport being dragged to the Chamber to face questions about HS2. Today, the last day of the Session, a written statement has been sneaked out which is of massive economic detriment to the country. It lays waste to any semblance of industrial strategy; it totally conflicts with what was said about electrification at the Dispatch Box on Monday night; and it smashes to bits the Government's promises to the people of the north and the midlands and especially to the people of south Wales. For the Secretary of State to drop this bombshell on the British people without affording Members the opportunity to hold him to account by way of an oral statement before we break for the summer is completely disrespectful to this House. I seek your advice, Madam Deputy Speaker, as to how the Secretary of State can be held to account for his gross omission and explain this disastrous U-turn.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Once again the Secretary of State has made a major announcement outside the Chamber on an issue that affects my constituents in Sheffield. The electrification of the midland mainline has been on and off for a number of years; it was on and then paused, then it was on and now apparently it is off again. A written statement has been sneaked out, but no statement has been made in the House. The Secretary of State's predecessor always came to this House to make such statements. Can you require the Secretary of State to come to this House to explain what is going on with this electrification, which once again has been put on hold?

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Can we have a statement on the impact of this decision on the proposed electrification of the south Wales valley lines? The statement that has been sneaked out today is appalling.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Hon. Members know that the matter of when a Minister comes to the House is not for me, Mr Speaker or any other occupant of the Chair. The matters that were just raised in three points of order were raised many times during today's business questions and answered by the Leader of the House, who is once again in her place. I am sure that she will have conveyed the feelings of the House to the Secretary of State. The hon. Gentlemen know very well the methods by which Members can try to insist on a Secretary of State coming to the House, and I am sure that they will pursue the matter in that way. I can do nothing further from the Chair, but I am certain that the Secretary of State for Transport knows the opinion of hon. Members.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Government are required by the High Court to publish an air quality strategy next week because they are in breach of European Union air quality standards, which has led to 40,000 premature deaths and costs £20 billion a year. Yesterday

some 60 MPs wrote to me in support of a clean air Bill asking the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to incorporate those provisions in such a strategy. When will we have a chance to debate those matters, and why has a statement not been made today on the issue, given that the House will not have an opportunity to debate it before the deadline imposed by the Court? We knew this would happen and it has such deadly consequences for British people.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Again, the hon. Gentleman knows that I cannot require someone to come to the House on the back of a point of order. Of course, if the hon. Gentleman wished to ask a question about the timetabling of business matters, he should have asked the Leader of the House when she was at the Dispatch Box earlier.

Geraint Davies: I asked her about another matter.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I know that and have every sympathy for the hon. Gentleman. He has drawn his concerns to the attention of the Leader of the House, who is in her place. It is not a matter for me.

Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards

1.24 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I beg to move,

That Kathryn Stone be appointed Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards on the terms of the Report of the House of Commons Commission, HC 294, dated 19 July 2017.

The motion is in my name, as spokesperson for the House of Commons Commission, and those of other commissioners and of the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Sir Kevin Barron), the recently re-elected Chair of the Committee on Standards.

In 2003 the House decided that the office of Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards should be held for a non-renewable term of five years. As the House will be aware, the commissioner's principal responsibilities include maintaining the Register of Members' Financial Interests and other registers; monitoring the operation of the code of conduct and proposing possible modifications to the Committee on Standards; and receiving and investigating matters relating to the conduct of Members and reporting findings to the Committee where appropriate. The appointment of the current commissioner, Kathryn Hudson, comes to an end on 31 December and the House therefore needs to appoint a new commissioner.

I should begin by expressing the appreciation of the House of Commons Commission for the work Kathryn Hudson has done during her tenure as the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards. During that time she has handled a wide range of complaints against Members and has also contributed to the development of the standards system as a whole, including through instituting greater opportunities for training Members and their staff, and working on the respect policy and review of the code of conduct and guide to the rules.

Kathryn Hudson took up her post at the same time as the first lay members arrived on the Committee on Standards, and she has played a full part in ensuring the success of those new arrangements in addressing standards issues in the House. Throughout her time in office she has demonstrated great integrity, resilience, patience and persistence, and she will be remembered for her real dedication to public service. I am sure that the House would wish to join me in thanking Ms Hudson for her work.

The recruitment process for her replacement was rigorous. Advertisements were placed on the websites of *The Sunday Times* and *The Guardian*, and a range of other web-based methods were used to attract applications. In total, 81 applications were received. The process included the right hon. Member for Rother Valley, Dr Jane Martin, who was an external member of the recruitment panel and is a member of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, and members of the Commission. Full details of the recruitment process are available in the Commission's report.

Kathryn Stone is currently the chief legal ombudsman of England and Wales, a post she has held since January 2016. Prior to that, Ms Stone held posts as an independent police complaints commissioner and as the Commissioner for Victims and Survivors for Northern

[Tom Brake]

Ireland. The Commission is confident that Ms Stone has the necessary experience and skills for the role, and that she will bring to it the authority, independence, discretion and strength of character required.

Ms Stone's appointment will commence at the beginning of 2018, if the House approves the nomination. I am confident that Ms Stone will fulfil her responsibilities to the same high standard as her predecessors, and I commend this nomination to the House.

1.28 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom):

Let me begin by putting on the record the gratitude of the House for the work undertaken by Kathryn Hudson since her appointment in 2013. She has played an important role in the work of the House. New Members will be able to testify to her valuable advice on their conduct and responsibilities. She has investigated and reported on complaints with all the diligence that we and the public would expect of her. She has also, of course, ensured transparency through the operation of the Register of Members' Financial Interests and the other registers.

I would also like to make it clear that we owe a debt of gratitude to the staff of the House who support the commissioner in delivering standards, and to the Chairman of the Standards Committee for his work.

Although I have not personally been involved in the recruitment process, I am encouraged by the remarks of the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake). We are all grateful to the selection board for sifting the candidates. Kathryn Stone will no doubt serve the House with the same diligence as all her predecessors. On that basis, I hope that the House will endorse the motion.

1.29 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): I welcome the comments of the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) and the Leader of the House. On behalf of Her Majesty's Opposition, I echo the thanks to the outgoing Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, Kathryn Hudson. From my personal experience of meeting Kathryn when I was a new Member, I know just how important the role is in supporting all hon. Members. I thank her for her work.

I also thank all those who sat on the interview panel for following a robust process and selecting a successor, Kathryn Stone. Her Majesty's Opposition welcome and endorse the appointment of Kathryn Stone and wish her well in her new role.

1.30 pm

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): As a member of the Commission and, for some time, a member of the Committee on Standards, I support the motion. I endorse the positive comments about Kathryn Hudson, who worked extremely hard. She arrived at a difficult time, when the Standards Committee first had lay members; there was a steep learning curve for the lay people and for Kathryn Hudson. She faced problems because every time she was perceived to have slipped, the press were

after her. It is a difficult role, which she played exceptionally well. I wish her well in her retirement and thank her on my behalf and on behalf of the Standards Committee. I suspect that the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Sir Kevin Barron) will support the motion shortly.

As has been said, applicants were extensively sought, and 81 were reduced to six. Those six appeared before a small panel for interview. It included two Members of Parliament—the right hon. Member for Rother Valley and me. It was chaired by the Principal Clerk of the Table Office, whom I thank for her exceptional chairmanship. All interviewees were put through their paces gently—and sometimes not quite so gently. All their advantages and, indeed, some foibles, were drawn out. The panel's final decision on the two who went forward for final selection was unanimous and solid. I endorse Kathryn Stone's appointment. Having been part of the interview process, I believe that she will prove an excellent choice and I look forward to her joining us in due course.

1.31 pm

Sir Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): I am very pleased to support the motion to appoint Kathryn Stone as the next Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards. As the former Chair, and now the Chair-in-waiting of the Committee on Standards, I was involved in the appointment process during the initial selection stage and the first round of interviews, when we greatly benefited from the help of an external member of the board, Dr Jane Martin. I would like to record the House's appreciation of Jane's wise advice.

We recommended two highly able and appointable candidates for the final stage interviews so the Commission could not go wrong, but I am very pleased that Kathryn Stone has been put forward. I believe that her experience in some very sensitive situations and her personal qualities will form the foundation for a successful and effective term of office as Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards. I wish her well in the role, subject to the House's approving the motion today.

I also take this opportunity to pay tribute to another Kathryn, the outgoing Commissioner, Kathryn Hudson. Kathryn was the first Commissioner to be appointed after the establishment of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority. She has, we hope, overseen the last of the legacy cases from the expenses scandal and has helped guide the House into calmer waters on standards.

There have been major changes, such as the introduction of lay members to the Committee on Standards and some major challenges, from inside and outside the House. Kathryn has acted throughout with great integrity and exemplary fairness and thoroughness. She has played a full part in developing the standards system and addressing the culture change needed to embed standards in everything we do and win back the confidence of the public.

I know that Kathryn will be sorry if the Committee on Standards cannot complete its work on the new code of conduct and guide to the rules before she departs in December. The general election has made that timetable very tricky, but whenever the new code and guide emerge for the House's approval, we will all appreciate the thoughtfulness and dedication that Kathryn put into

making it more relevant, more clearly expressed and more user-friendly than previous versions. Perhaps I could take this opportunity to ask that the Committee be re-formed as soon as possible to continue this work. My understanding is that it does not need a Committee of Selection to sit for that to happen. I hope that it can happen quickly.

The standards system has changed for the better in recent years, and no doubt it will continue to evolve as the equality of numbers between lay and elected members on the Committee on Standards makes itself felt. Some outside the House continue to call for the regulation of standards to be taken out of the hands of Parliament altogether; others question the multiplicity of regulators involved in overseeing the conduct of MPs.

Some 20 years after the first Commissioner arrived in the House, it may be time to start thinking about how the system as a whole works, but I am clear that the Commissioner's independence is something of great value, which has proved its worth. For the system to be effective we need a strong, fair Commissioner, whose integrity is beyond doubt. Kathryn Hudson has fulfilled that brief and I look forward to the new Commissioner continuing the tradition.

1.35 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I, too, recognise the important role of the Commissioner for Standards in building and maintaining public confidence in the House and in Members' conduct. The public sometimes understand the phrase, "an hon. Member" to be some sort of honorific or title that Members enjoy, but I often reflect to constituents or visitors to this place that it is an injunction to us as Members to conduct ourselves honourably and to live up to the highest standards in

public life. Kathryn Hudson certainly impressed that responsibility on me and my colleagues on our election in 2015. On behalf of the Scottish National party, I pay tribute to her work over the years. The right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) mentioned some of the effective innovations, such as training. I thank Kathryn Hudson for all the help and support that she has provided to colleagues in her time as Commissioner and wish her all the very best for the future.

Kathryn Hudson's successor is recommended by the House of Commons Commission. I thank our outgoing Member of the Commission, my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie), for his work in recent years. This may be my best chance in the Chamber to pay tribute to my predecessor as SNP Chief Whip, Mike Weir. I thank him for all his wisdom, support, advice and friendship before and since the general election. I am conscious of having big shoes to fill and I am glad to have my hon. Friends the Members for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) and for Glasgow East (David Linden) to help me.

I join other Members in warmly welcoming the appointment of Kathryn Stone, who was clearly a very well qualified and highly respected candidate. She met with the approval of the interview panel and the House of Commons Commission, and we wish her all the very best for her term of office. I hope that, if we as Members live up to the standards that are expected of us, her case load will be appropriately light.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Kathryn Stone be appointed Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards on the terms of the Report of the House of Commons Commission, HC 294, dated 19 July 2017.

Summer Adjournment

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That this House has considered matters to be raised before the forthcoming Adjournment.—(*Craig Whittaker.*)

Madam Deputy Speaker: Before I call the first colleague to speak, I draw it to the House's attention that a great many people wish to speak, that we have a limited amount of time and that, if colleagues wish to be courteous, it would be helpful if they spoke for no more than seven or seven and a half minutes. If everybody takes about seven minutes, all colleagues will have a chance to make the points that they wish to make. I realise that it is not fair because the first speaker has not had previous warning, but I am sure that he can tailor his remarks accordingly. I call Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger.

1.38 pm

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): Madam Deputy Speaker, I saw the way you looked at me and I realised that I was front runner on this one. First, I wish you and all colleagues a happy recess.

This debate is always important. It is the one time of the year when Members can say pretty much what we like to try to get the points across. I will try to keep within the time limit, but I will fail dismally. Please forgive me, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I appreciate the chance to address the House on a matter of considerable concern to 35,000 of my constituents in West Somerset. Our local district council is in mortal danger. Three years ago, it was lured into a relationship with Taunton Deane. Now West Somerset could lose all its staff, its offices and above all, its pride. The relationship with Taunton is starting to turn abusive. I am sorry to say that that was predictable. Taunton Deane has a very bad reputation. It was always a grubby and unsuitable partner, and it has wanted only one thing. I am sorry that my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) is not in her place—I understand that as she has a lot to do. Yesterday, however, she was singing the praises of Taunton Deane at Prime Minister's questions, including talking about its house building record. There are certainly thousands of houses and plans for thousands more, but there is nothing in the way of infrastructure, schools or surgeries—there are just houses.

Taunton Deane is actually run by a builder, God help us, who offers a friendly nod and a wink to any other builder he knows. Left to his own devices, Councillor Williams would lay concrete all over Somerset. The suspiciously close relationship between the leadership and certain big players in this industry is legendary. When I first mentioned the names Summerfield and John Williams in Parliament some months ago, I got a quick response from both of them. It was a co-ordinated denial; they had obviously talked and responded in unison. Actually, they could almost be brothers with a genuine family connection—perhaps they are. They are certainly brothers in aprons, not that being a mason is a crime.

But it is curious how many big projects in Taunton Deane go Summerfield's way. It builds a new premises for Taunton Deane's direct labour force—a nice little

earner. The latest wheeze is Nexus 25, next to junction 25 of the M5, designed to be a business park. Summerfield owns the land, which prompts the question: why did it buy it? For years building anything on that side of the M5 has been considered out of bounds; a very small amount of social housing was possible, understandably, but nothing else. Back in 2007 Summerfield bought the social housing arm known as My Home and applied to Taunton Deane to build an estate of affordable houses near Henlade. Then an upright planning officer looked at the plans and put his foot down: "Too big," he said, "Too many houses. Make it smaller." Oh dear. Summerfield refused to downscale; instead, it walked away.

It was not until around 2012 that a different housing association secured permission for a smaller development in the same area. But Summerfield probably never surrendered its interests in the land, and recently paid £1 million for a large plot of land near Henlade—which could never, surely, be built upon. It has no obvious access, unless, of course, Summerfield has already taken out options on land that adjoins it. I do not know; I would probably need to talk to a very well-connected land agent to find out. I wonder if, perhaps, my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane knows of one.

Anyway, this Summerfield land is surely safe from housing unless a big dual carriageway ever gets built—and, abracadabra, yesterday my hon. Friend was on her feet going all gooey-eyed about the investment in the A358. I know that Highways England has proposed a scheme to upgrade the A358, and I also know that my hon. Friend has been publicly saying that it is the wrong scheme. She also mentioned Taunton's record on unemployment; actually, it is a record regularly beaten by Sedgemoor. Yesterday the hon. Lady unfortunately failed to tell that to the Prime Minister, but never mind. I have seen the true face of Taunton Deane and its leader, and I do not like what I see. Why West Somerset fell for Councillor Williams and his smooth patter, I will never fully understand.

The leadership of my council would not consider taking help from any of our neighbours, including its nearest, Sedgemoor, which happens to be one of the best run councils in the United Kingdom. Sedgemoor has very healthy finances and would have helped sort out West Somerset's problems and treated it with the respect my constituents deserve. But the old guard preferred to deal with Taunton. Now West Somerset risks being raped.

"Rape" is a strong word indeed, but it accurately describes what is happening in the relationship with Taunton Deane. The people of West Somerset have not been properly consulted, so Taunton can never claim it has had meaningful consent. Taunton Deane has muscled in like the bully that it is, and West Somerset has had to lie down and submit to a full-blown merger.

West Somerset is, I am proud to say, the smallest authority in England. The council has always found it hard to balance its books, because there are not enough people to pay the bills—I am one of the taxpayers. However, with intelligent planning and skilful cost cutting, West Somerset has made a budget that works—which is a great accolade to some of the councillors. They are on target for the budget to be properly balanced this year and probably next year, too. They do not need an abusive, aggressive partner.

Taunton Deane was—and still is—desperately short of money. It is squandering huge sums on a worthless head office and this week started procuring millions of pounds-worth of new computer equipment. It does not need either. Its mismanagement of money is a standing joke in local government. In the long term, I believe that Taunton Deane wants to get its greedy hands on the Hinkley Point business rates. For West Somerset this is rape followed by robbery, all planned by Taunton's dodgy leader, Councillor John Williams.

Councillor Williams has a long and undistinguished record for getting everything wrong. He was an enthusiastic supporter of Southwest One, an appalling IT project that cost the taxpayers of Somerset £80 million and saved nothing. The regime he runs smiles on developers and reeks of shady deals. My constituents will not have the wool pulled over their eyes. They are not stupid; they can smell a rat—they know what one looks like, and, if they were given the chance, I am sure they would reject this half-baked scheme.

My hope is that the Secretary of State will opt for a sensible option and allow thorough independent scrutiny by the Boundaries Commission and a proper consultation with the public. My constituents want to keep their council—and so they should.

1.45 pm

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger) and I eagerly want to visit his constituency to meet all these house builders with whom he is in dispute. I do not think they stand much of a chance, being up against the hon. Gentleman.

I welcome the presence on the Labour Front Bench of the new shadow Deputy Leader of the House, my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth), who will be making her maiden contribution in this debate, and, of course, the ever-present Deputy Leader of the House, who will be winding up. I have to apologise for the fact that, unfortunately, I have an unbreakable commitment in Leicester and might not be able to be here for the winding-up speeches. However, I will read *Hansard* with great care. I also had no idea I was going to be called so early.

I make no apology for starting this debate by talking about the situation in Yemen. Despite the catastrophic situation within the state, we are currently experiencing an even worse crisis. In the course of Yemen's civil war there have been well over 10,000 civilian deaths, 19.4 million Yemenis are without access to healthcare, 3 million are now suffering from acute malnutrition, and over 3 million are internally displaced. One child dies every 10 minutes.

Last week the United Nations announced that there were 300,000 cholera cases in Yemen countrywide, in 22 of Yemen's 23 provinces. If current rates of cholera stay the same, from the time we enter recess to when this House returns on 5 September, up to 225,000 extra cases will be added to that number. The United Nations calls this the worst cholera crisis in the world.

Along with the spread of the disease, there has been the chronic destruction of medical infrastructure caused by the civil war, which has exacerbated the crisis. Despite the assistance given by organisations such as Médecins sans Frontières, Islamic Relief, the Yemen Safe Passage Group, the UNHCR, and the Red Cross, the situation

in Yemen is getting much worse. We heard only today that a number of journalists had been prevented from landing in Sana'a.

While we go to our constituencies to do the work that all Members have to do during the recess, we must not forget what is happening in Yemen. I hope that a message from the Front Bench will go back to the Foreign Office that we expect to see Ministers fully engaged in the crisis that continues to unfold.

This week I was elected chair of the new all-party group on immigration and visas, and I am delighted to see the vice-chair of the group here, the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman). I am also very pleased that the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) was elected as the secretary. The group's purpose is to raise, on an all-party basis, issues of concern about the way in which our immigration and visa system operates. We all have critical constituency cases involving people who wish to travel, or whose relatives are not allowed to come into the country. For instance, the wedding of a constituent of mine is taking place at the end of August, but the best man is not being allowed to come here. Trying to convince officials who are thousands of miles away is extremely difficult.

I hope this group will, in a measured way, explore these circumstances, especially the role of the account managers and the issue of same-day service. I have a case of somebody who applied for a same-day visa, paid the fee of £500 on top of the fee of £1,000 for their visa, and six months later the situation has not been resolved. It is important that we look at these issues in a constructive way.

I hope that, over the summer, Ministers in the Department for Exiting the European Union and the Home Office will be trying to fashion a plan for the 3.2 million EU citizens living in the United Kingdom. We have heard the Prime Minister's welcome assurance that they will be allowed to stay, but the process of issuing the necessary documentation could take a long time. There is now a backlog of 100,000 cases at the Home Office. Some of those citizens arrived here without passports because they could enter the UK with identity cards from EU countries. Getting them processed will be extremely difficult.

I hope that those Ministers will also look into the suggestion of a pilot scheme for allowing EU citizens to register at local level. They could take their passports along to the local authority and get themselves checked and registered. That information could then be handed on to the Home Office. The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons, the hon. Member for Northampton North (Michael Ellis), is a former member of the Home Affairs Committee, and he will be well aware of these issues. I hope that he will pass that suggestion on.

I want to make two quick constituency points before I end. The first concerns the continuing campaign being led by Amy Morgan, a young mother in Leicester whose son, Tyler, was stabbed to death a year and a half ago. Another of my constituents, Isaac Williams, was stabbed to death in April this year. We need to do more to tackle knife crime. I introduced a Bill to increase the length of time people spend in prison for carrying a knife. Statistics show a 24% rise in the incidence of knife crime. That is a huge increase, with 12,074 offences and 2,381 detentions last year. Secondly, I am hoping to organise a meeting in my constituency involving those

[Keith Vaz]

who have control of our theme parks, following the death earlier this year of my 11-year-old constituent, Evha Jannath. It is extremely important that families who visit theme parks should be as safe as possible.

Speaking as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on diabetes, and as someone who has type 2 diabetes, let me end by issuing a challenge to Members. I want to commend the Pioppi diet, and I will write to the 100 Members who have the most diabetics in their constituencies about this. Of course, we all have diabetics in our constituencies, but the Library has provided me with statistics for the top 100. I think that Doncaster might be on that list, Madam Deputy Speaker. I shall ask those Members to take up the challenge of the Pioppi diet, which is named after a village in Italy where people live on average to the age of 97 as a result of their Mediterranean diet. It involves getting rid of sugar, which is a killer, keeping away from potatoes—and, for me, rice—and concentrating instead on the good food that is available around the Mediterranean. We have wonderful farms and food makers in this country, but we do not spend enough time looking at what we eat.

We have a diabetes epidemic in the United Kingdom. There are 4 million people with type 2 diabetes in this country, and 500,000 more—some of whom are in this House today—who do not know that they have the condition. My hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is an officer of the APPG, and I am sure that he will be taking up the Pioppi diet challenge—

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): If it helps me to live to 97, I definitely will.

Keith Vaz: I know that all Democratic Unionist party Members would like to live to be 97, especially in the current climate.

I will be writing to those 100 Members, urging them to take up that challenge. I want to thank Dr Aseem Malhotra, the world-famous cardiologist, and Donal O'Neill, a renowned film-maker from Ireland, for writing the incredible book, "The Pioppi Diet". I want everyone to take it up for 28 days in August and to see, when they come back, whether it has made a difference. With that, Madam Deputy Speaker, I should like to wish you, the Leader of the House, the shadow Leader of the House, all Members and all Officers of the House a happy and peaceful recess. We hope that nothing will bring us back during the recess, as has happened in the past. We want a bit of political stability so that we can enjoy our summer.

1.54 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Before the House adjourns for the summer recess, I wish to raise a number of points. Putting it mildly, the general election was not a great success for the party to which I belong. Against that background, there were also terrorist attacks that affected us all, and when we returned here, the Grenfell disaster happened. I hope that the Deputy Leader of the House of Commons, my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton North (Michael Ellis) will ensure that the recommendations of the all-party parliamentary fire safety and rescue group on the retrofitting

of sprinklers, the reviewing of building regulations and the insistence that sprinklers are put into all new school buildings are acted on.

At the heart of my personal general election campaign was a local row about whether our accident and emergency provision had a future. I told my constituents that, just as I had worked with others 20 years ago to ensure that Basildon A&E did not close, this time I would work to ensure that Southend hospital would not be downgraded. I am pleased to tell the House that at 1 o'clock today, a press release was issued by the Success Regime stating that it was going to develop

"a revised model that would enable all three current A&E departments to continue to treat people who need emergency hospital care, including continuing to receive 'blue light' emergency patients with serious conditions."

I thank all those constituents and others who came to see me in my surgery to make representations about this issue. I know that the news will also please colleagues in neighbouring constituencies. We were pleased to have a visit from the Countess of Wessex to the foetal medicine unit at Southend hospital. That was greatly welcomed.

I have a constituent who is suffering from the effects of asbestos. His health was damaged during his time working for the National Dock Labour Board a long time ago. As his Member of Parliament, I will not give up until we get justice from the board, because his health has been ruined.

Recently a constituent who is a music artist was verbally abused and mugged on a C2C train travelling from West Ham to Leigh-on-Sea. I hope that the Deputy Leader of the House will make representations to the Secretary of State for Transport to ensure that we can have security on local train services.

Another constituent has contacted me about the situation in Venezuela. A Supreme Court ruling in March 2017 saw the Venezuelan Parliament stripped of its democratic powers, and the regime is attempting to introduce a new constitution without consultation. I hope that the House will unite behind the people of Venezuela, whose democracy is being absolutely ruined.

A number of parliamentarians gathered in Paris last month, and we attended a rally hosted by the National Coalition of Resistance to support its leader, Maryam Rajavi, who is asking for justice for the 1988 massacre of Iranian citizens and calling for an end to the ballistic missile programme in Iran. Those are pressing concerns there.

Two months ago, I went on a trip to Switzerland—it seems as though I am travelling the world, Madam Deputy Speaker—where I and other colleagues met representatives of the World Trade Organisation. We learned at first hand how the problems that are being shared among colleagues about the difficulty of our leaving the European Union and being unable to secure good trade deals are a lot of nonsense.

Locally, parents are concerned about primary school catchment areas. I regret the stresses being put on parents at Chalkwell School, in Leigh-on-Sea and in the west Leigh catchment areas. As a Conservative Member of Parliament, I believe that all schools should be able to expand if at all possible, and I hope that the heads and governing bodies will reflect on that. Three wonderful headteachers in Southend are retiring, having dedicated their lives to educating our young people. I pay tribute

to Margaret Sullivan of Our Lady of Lourdes, Jenny Davies of Westborough and Margaret Rimmer of our very special Kingsdown School, where the wife of my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) is the chair of the governing body.

Yesterday at Prime Minister's questions I heard my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) urging the Government to fulfil their manifesto promise to lift the 50% admission cap on free faith schools, so that more excellent Catholic schools can develop in our constituencies. I am delighted that we now have a new school run by the Figure of Eight Education which works with local secondary schools to provide individual, personalised education for young people who are under threat of being permanently excluded.

I and other Members are absolutely sickened by the pay of certain senior employees at the BBC. I am absolutely horrified and would be happy to offer my services on a part-time basis to host any number of shows.

I am delighted to say that the Royal British Legion's "Poppies: Wave" event was a huge success in Southend, with thousands coming to see it. I am also happy to say that Bob O'Leary, the honorary secretary of the local Royal British Legion, successfully applied for heritage lottery funding for a Southend schools festival of remembrance, which will be run by the not-for-profit organisation Blade Education. I know that it will be a great success.

I support local residents who are going to work together to restore our magnificent Grand hotel.

I hope that most people know that Southend is the alternative city of culture. Just before the general election, stilt walkers went non-stop from Southend to No. 10 Downing Street to ask for Southend to be made a city. Why we are not a city already I do not know—it must be an oversight. We had a wonderful fashion show in Priory Park recently, where wonderful models wore garments made from Buckingham Palace's discarded tablecloths, curtains and so on. Southend carnival will be celebrating an event in August, which coincides with the 125th anniversary of the borough. If any colleagues want something to do, come to Southend-on-Sea.

N-Act, a theatre-in-education organisation, is doing a wonderful job providing interactive tours for schools and using drama to explore current affairs. The Kings Money Advice Centre is doing a wonderful job locally in Southend. Carillion has been responsible for providing about 3,000 people with Warm Front assistance, bringing many of them out of fuel poverty. Seetec is also doing a wonderful job of ensuring that young people in Southend secure suitable employment. The Village Green event in Chalkwell Park was attended by more than 15,000 local residents and was a great success.

Finally, I wish Mr Speaker, the Deputy Speakers, all colleagues and the wonderful staff who work in the House of Commons a great summer rest.

2.2 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), who chairs the all-party parliamentary fire safety and rescue group, of which I am the secretary. I am pleased that he managed to mention us in his

contribution. I also welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) to her place on the Opposition Front Bench; it is good to see her there this afternoon. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak briefly in this debate, and I am confident that, like the hon. Member for Southend West, I will be able to finish within the seven-minute limit prescribed by Madam Deputy Speaker earlier. I want to discuss four issues: the Island Health Trust scandal in my constituency; leasehold reform; fire service duties, including approved document B; and the accountability of housing associations and registered social landlords.

Island Health Trust is the landlord for a health centre in my constituency. The trust's main sources of income are the rent paid by the NHS and service charges paid by the doctors. From that, the Island Health Trust has accumulated a surplus of some £1.3 million. Despite those reserves, the landlord is charging the practice an unaffordable service charge, leading it to vacate the first floor of the health centre and a loss of services. The trust was originally managed by local trustees, and any surplus was used to fund local health initiatives through a modest grants programme. That changed on 1 April 2016 when the chair, Suzanne Goodband, appointed a new board of people with no local connection. Serious allegations have been made relating to the governance and business management of the trust, including trustees' personal financial advantage. In 2015-16, the chair was paid £179,176 for consultancy services in a charitable trust with a turnover of just £270,000. Many believe that the health centre, the land upon which it stands and the £1.3 million reserves are public assets, that the trust should be run by local trustees, and that the £1.3 million should be invested to support patients and health services for local people. I have written to Health Ministers and to the Charity Commission asking for urgent meetings to discuss intervention to prevent asset stripping and personal profit by individuals who seem to be more interested in their own wellbeing than that of the NHS and local patients.

The Government have been sending some positive signals on leasehold reform. The housing White Paper and the Conservative party manifesto both refer to greater fairness and transparency for leaseholders. In reaction, several housing developers have voluntarily addressed the rip-off known as the doubling of ground rents and, to their credit, have changed their policies, but regulation is still urgently needed in this area. Other areas that need attention include a fairer land valuation tribunal system, rights for leaseholders against exorbitant service charges, events fees, refurbishment costs and so on, protection for pensioners in retirement homes, and protection against unfair forfeiture proceedings for vulnerable leaseholders. Those and many other matters rightly deserve Government action and the all-party parliamentary group on leasehold and commonhold reform, which I co-chair with the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) and which now has more than 90 members, will welcome some progress. Indeed, the Prime Minister's written statement this morning on "Machinery of Government Changes" included moving commonhold law from Ministry of Justice to the Department for Communities and Local Government, which seems a sensible step.

I commend the hon. Member for Worthing West on EDM 207 regarding commonhold reform, and I encourage hon. and right hon. Members from across the House to

[Jim Fitzpatrick]

support it. I also welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), who is the new vice-chair of the APPG. He has submitted a number of searching parliamentary questions on the topic, and his keen interest, along with that of so many other colleagues, is welcome.

Questions have arisen about the accountability of housing associations and registered social landlords. Accountability and transparency in this growing sector are overdue for examination. The Government's drive towards mergers and takeovers of smaller housing associations is taking social landlords further from their tenants and residents. While there are some good examples of RSLs, especially in my constituency, others are not so good, and I hope to secure a debate with other colleagues after the recess to discuss that with Ministers. Perhaps the Backbench Business Committee will be interested in supporting it. As an example of unwelcome new initiatives, I received an email this morning from a constituent saying that one RSL is now offering loans to residents at 99.9% APR. I am unsure whether that is an appropriate thing for RSLs to do and will explore the matter further outside the Chamber, but I would have hoped that social landlords would be more interested in promoting the credit union movement and helping to set up more local credit unions than becoming loan agents.

The review of the building regulations fire guidance contained in approved document B is well overdue, and the hon. Member for Southend West has been campaigning on that with the all-party parliamentary fire safety and rescue group for some time. I will not bore the House with the history of these matters, which is well documented, but ministerial statements from 2011 promised that a review would be complete by 2017. The Lakanal coroner recommended that that happen, and there have also been more recent recommendations. The review will be required whatever the findings of the public inquiry, so the sooner it can be started, the better.

Finally, I repeat my view that the fire service should be tasked with a statutory duty to deal with floods. They play a key role in every flood that happens, and they should not only have their work recognised, but get resources from the Government to do the job properly.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish you, other colleagues, the staff of the House and those who look after us a very decent break over the recess. We all know that it is not a holiday, but we are entitled to a break.

2.9 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick)—[*Interruption.*] Not right honourable? It is only a matter of time. He gave a typically robust and informative speech, demonstrating the value of these types of debates at the end of a parliamentary term. I want to raise several issues relating to aspects of parliamentary work that I have been and will continue to be involved in.

At the end of the previous Parliament, just before the general election, almost the last Act passed was the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, which I had the honour of piloting through this House; my hon. Friend

Lord Best piloted it through the other place. There are many measures that still require secondary legislation before the Act comes fully into force, which of course will be a revolution in the way homeless people are treated in this country. There is still a lot of work to do, including on statutory instruments that must be put before the House, but I trust that, even with the great repeal Bill and the forthcoming SIs, we will find sufficient time to ensure that the Act is brought to fruition, because many thousands of people up and down this country are desperately awaiting help.

There has been a flurry of annual general meetings of all-party groups in the last few weeks. I will just run through a few of the groups that I am involved with. The right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) referred to one group of which I succeeded in becoming vice-chair, following a hard-fought election. On the other groups, I am delighted, on behalf of the Action on Smoking and Health group, that the Government have at last announced the tobacco control plan. I congratulate the new Minister for public health, my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), on doing something that his three predecessors could not do, namely publishing the plan so that we get control of the tobacco industry, with some very strong targets towards a smoke-free Britain, which will be warmly welcomed by all concerned.

However, there is a deep threat to smoking cessation services across local authorities. Therefore, we should reiterate our call that it is vital that those services continue, and continue to be funded by local authorities. In my own borough, there is a threat to remove funding from the smoking cessation service, despite the fact that in the last four years 1,751 local people have been able to give up smoking. Yet we still have a high prevalence of smoking in my borough and it would not be good enough if the service ceased.

Equally, the all-party group for justice for Equitable Life policyholders met recently. We have 185 members in this House. May I send a strong signal via my hon. Friend the Deputy Leader of the House of Commons that we will not cease in our work until justice has been done for every single one of those individuals who suffered from this scam? We are not going away, and we are not happy that there is still a huge sum of money—£2.7 billion—owed to the victims.

The all-party group on Azerbaijan heard of the dreadful attack that took place in the hotly disputed and illegally occupied territory of Nagorno-Karabakh earlier this month. A two-year-old girl and her grandmother were deliberately killed by Armenian forces. The reality is that that is a war crime, which needs to be thoroughly investigated by the authorities, and the perpetrators should be brought to justice in front of the International Criminal Court.

There are several other issues that the Government need to bear in mind. The UN's Human Rights Council will meet from 11 to 29 September, shortly after we return to this House. There are a number of issues for it to consider. I have mentioned Azerbaijan, but there is also the issue of justice for Tamils in Sri Lanka, and the absolutely outrageous and disgraceful genocide of political prisoners in Iran in 1998, which needs a thorough international investigation. I hope that there will be a debate in Government time before the UN's HRC meets on the UK's priorities for that particular body and its

work, because we need to spread our message that human rights are vital. Under the last Government, it took six months for the Joint Committee on Human Rights to be set up in this House. It is a Government-appointed Committee and it is vital that it starts its work very soon and very quickly on an all-party basis.

When we come back after the recess, there will be an ongoing consultation—the Government have wisely enabled it to be extended—on removing caste as a protected characteristic from our equality legislation. I believe that consultation will now conclude on 14 September, having originally been due to conclude by the end of July. It is vital that the message goes out from this House that British Hindus have an opportunity to input to the Government consultation, so that the Government have the evidence they require to ensure we remove this ill thought-out, divisive and unnecessary legislation.

Keith Vaz: May I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his re-election as chair of the all-party group on British Hindus? I share his concern about that part of the legislation, which is causing concern among the Hindu community, as Harrow and Leicester are very similar in terms of their Hindu population, and I pledge my support for the campaign he has launched.

Bob Blackman: I thank my right hon. Friend—I will call him that here—for that intervention and I trust that he can persuade the members of his own party, not only in this House but in the other place, to support the Government on doing what we want to see happening for British Hindus up and down the country.

The final area I will touch on is the situation in Jammu and Kashmir. I have tabled an early-day motion, which I believe seven other hon. Members have signed, in relation to the attack on innocent Hindu pilgrims in Anantnag by Lashkar-e-Taiba, an internationally recognised terrorist group, led by Abu Ismail. The UK must stand with India to combat this international terrorism and to prevent the situation from escalating still further. There have been attempts in this country to celebrate Burhan Wani, who died last year. He was a murderous Islamic terrorist and the commander of Hizbul Mujahideen. There was an attempt in Birmingham to hold a demonstration about his death, which would have been a direct challenge to the UK's values of harmony and tolerance. I am delighted that that demonstration was shut down before it happened, but the Government must do more to target all those who celebrate terrorists.

Madam Deputy Speaker, may I wish you, your colleagues—the other Deputy Speakers and Mr Speaker—and all right hon. and hon. Members in the House a very happy recess? We will all be working in our constituencies, as has been mentioned, on behalf of our constituents, with—no doubt—a brief holiday in the next few weeks.

2.17 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) and I welcome his support for both smoking cessation and human rights around the world. I also thank Madam Deputy Speaker for the opportunity to make my maiden speech this afternoon.

I pay tribute to my predecessor, Rob Wilson, who was our MP in Reading East for 12 years. He was the Minister for civil society and I thank him for his public

service. I will also mention other former colleagues: Jane Griffiths, the Labour MP, who served before Rob; and Gerry Vaughan, the Conservative, who predated her. Other illustrious MPs from the Reading area include Martin Salter and Labour's Ian Mikardo, who represented Reading in the post-war period. Going slightly further back in history, I am particularly proud to follow in the footsteps of the first Labour MP for Reading, the surgeon Somerville Hastings, who was elected in 1923, and whose ideas about the state funding of healthcare were an early forerunner of the NHS.

During its long history, Reading has changed beyond all recognition. Once home to one of the largest abbeys in England and the burial place of King Henry I, it later grew to become a light industrial town. Many years ago, our local economy consisted of brewing, biscuit-making and horticulture—the “three B's”, as they were then known, with the word “bulbs” replacing “horticulture”.

While the terraced streets and Victorian town centre remain, in the late 20th century Reading became home to insurance firms, and more recently the IT industry. Several international IT and telecoms firms are based nearby and they play an important role, both in the local economy and in the economy of the UK as a whole.

We have a youthful population, with many young people and families moving to our area to make their home in the town. People come from across Britain, from across Europe and indeed from around the wider world.

Several issues loom large for our community, which is young and mobile: first and foremost, the need for properly funded public services; the desire to avoid a hard Brexit; and, as other Members have mentioned, the importance of affordable and safe housing.

Local people rely on and, indeed, expect high-quality provision of public services, and the general election was a resounding vote against austerity and poorly funded services—that was felt and heard very loudly in our part of the world. I remind the Government that parents were angered by the wave of school cuts, and parents in my area remain deeply concerned, despite the window-dressing offered by Ministers last week. Meanwhile, many other residents are fearful of the state of our local NHS, and they certainly have no time for the dementia tax.

Our town is proudly international in outlook, with significant numbers of residents from the EU and, indeed, from the Commonwealth. Reading voted overwhelmingly to remain in the European Union, and many local people oppose a hard Brexit, including many who voted to leave. Our residents are not impressed by the Government's cavalier approach to the negotiation with the EU, and they expect something much better, which I hope we will soon see.

Although it is well known that IT and science workers in the south of England command high salaries, house prices are also high and not all work in our area is well paid. In fact, many people exist on very modest earnings indeed. Reading, rather like London, regrettably suffers from considerable income inequality, which leads to even greater issues with housing affordability. As a result, there is a desperate need for more affordable housing: council houses, affordable homes to buy and, indeed, homes to rent. Our local renters particularly deserve a fair deal.

[Matt Rodda]

The Government's record on housing is extremely poor. In recent times, George Osborne effectively stopped Reading's Labour council building 1,000 new council houses, despite significant need in the area. More recently, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport has allowed developers to reduce the proportion of affordable homes in new developments, which is an important point in an area with a lot of extra building going on. I am proud to say that Reading and, indeed, Conservative West Berkshire Council have taken legal action to oppose that reduction. I hope that hon. Members on both sides of the House will note that, although I wish to work with the Housing Minister, the hon. Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma), I will be holding him to account for matters relating to housing, particularly the local situation in the Thames valley.

As some colleagues may know, I have been campaigning to save a much-loved local secondary school that was threatened with closure, and we have had some good news this week. Chiltern Edge School is in Oxfordshire but, as in many urban areas, many pupils cross our boundaries. Earlier this year, I was shocked to find out that Oxfordshire County Council was planning to shut the school, which would have affected 400 Reading children. I have always believed that its proposal was both irresponsible and misguided, and I cannot understand why any local authority in an area—such as the south of England—with rising school rolls would want to consider a school closure at this time. The only plausible explanation is that selling off the land would have allowed the council to deal with short-term financial pressures caused by austerity.

However, after a great deal of work by campaigners, supported by me and the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell), we have been successful and Oxfordshire County Council has now decided to shelve the plans. I am grateful for that decision, and I thank colleagues who signed my early-day motion opposing the closure and who have supported the “save our Edge” campaign. Although that is one small local campaign, I believe it shows something of great value: it underlines the importance of our public services; it shows how a well-fought local campaign can achieve results; and above all, it shows that real change is possible in our country.

I am honoured to represent my community, and I am grateful for the opportunity to speak this afternoon. I look forward to raising other matters of importance when the House returns in September. I wish all my colleagues a very happy recess.

2.24 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) on his maiden speech, in which he paid tribute to his predecessor—his predecessor was well known to Conservative Members—and to many other predecessors. I am sure we will be hearing much from the hon. Gentleman, perhaps particularly on the key aspects of Reading's regeneration. Those of us who travel regularly through Reading appreciate the work that has been done on Reading station. Anything he can do to keep the station working smoothly will be much appreciated.

Ten years ago to this very day, 12 continuous hours of heavy rainfall downloaded 78 mm of rain in Gloucestershire during what our local paper, the *Citizen*, rightly called

“the worst natural disaster in the county's living memory.”

It followed the wettest June and July since records began in 1766. It is worth recapping what happened, what has happened since and the wider lessons that we should have learned—I hope we have learned them.

I will start by recalling what happened on that day, which is as clear in my memory now as it was on the day itself. Some 10,000 motorists were stuck between junctions 10 and 12 of the M5. I remember afterwards meeting a deaf constituent who had been trapped in his car on the M5, and who did not hear the police when they came to ask everyone to move their vehicles. As so often in a crisis, a combination of accident, the situation at the time and a particular individual's health resulted in a sort of comic-tragic misunderstanding, of which there were many during this extraordinary period of natural disaster.

Some 500 people were stranded at Gloucester rail station. Severn Trent's Mythe water treatment centre lost power, and 350,000 people were without running water for 18 days. The Castle Mead electricity substation was overwhelmed, cutting power to almost 50,000 of my constituents. Some 4,000 houses, 500 businesses and 20 schools were flooded, and three people died.

There was a precedent. Curiously, 400 years earlier, in 1607, there was a great flood in Gloucestershire in which huge and mighty hills of water some 25-feet high swept up the Bristol channel, spread over 200 square miles of land and killed 2,000 people. The great Gloucestershire flood 400 years later, in July 2007, was different and resulted in much less loss of life, but its impact on all of us was huge, and it almost led to a national crisis. I make no apology for saying that what was important then—and is important now in Kensington—was to start with absolute objectivity in looking at what happened, rather than trying to use disaster as a party political opportunity.

The critical moment in Gloucester was when Severn Trent's water was knocked out. The Army came in to deliver water and bowsers, and a number of us got involved in organising volunteers to distribute the water in the supermarket and other car parks. I organised a group of about 25 volunteers, and it all went fairly well. The council then asked me to organise taking water to elderly people at home, which was all set up and ready to start when somebody from the city council asked whether we all had Criminal Records Bureau checks. I said that I had no idea but that I would sign a bit of paper personally guaranteeing that no one in the volunteer group was either a granny basher or a paedophile. That was not good enough, and our volunteers had to stand down. I wondered then, and I still wonder now, at what point exactly in a civil disaster situation comes the moment when organisations drop the normal bureaucratic checks because something has to be done fast and we have to cut corners and accept some risk in order to save lives. Leadership at all levels in natural or other disasters is critical, as we have been reminded since the ghastly inferno at Grenfell Tower.

Meanwhile, down at the tri-service centre at Waterwells in Quedgeley, the then Chief Constable, Tim Brain, as Gold Commander, had powers to organise national and local bodies in one building. For the first time in a long time, the Army got seriously involved, particularly in sandbagging the electrical substation at Walham and delivering capabilities across the area. These Gold

Command structures are crucial, but they work only if residents trust the lead individual and organisation. If that does not happen, the Government have to step in and bring in other individuals and organisations, as we have seen in Kensington.

After the floods, the Pitt review was undertaken to analyse the issue, learn the lessons and make recommendations on how to mitigate floods of the future. The Government of the day were slow to implement those, but much progress has since been made, with brooks and streams cleared; willows cut back; riparian responsibilities better known; Flood Re established to handle insurance issues; and Victorian sewers and drains replaced, notably in the city centre, in the wards of Westgate and Kingsholm, at a cost of some £13 million, absorbed by Severn Trent. Those are huge improvements and there has been no flooding in Worcester Street or Kingsholm Road since, despite two years of considerable new floods, although not on the same scale.

The major Government and county council-financed additional infrastructure is the new diversion lake close to Elmbridge Court, which is on the road towards the neighbouring constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), where surplus water coming down the Horsbere brook is automatically transferred. That has already successfully prevented flooding in Longlevens and Elmbridge twice since 2007, as well as adding a superb walk and birdwatching site to our city's leisure facilities. Lastly, the Environment Agency has improved its mapping, modelling and communications no end, thanks to better technology. Anyone living near the Severn can now get regular email and text alerts, and I encourage all my constituents to do so; they just need to go on to the EA's website and sign up.

There are things still to be resolved, such as the height of the wall protecting homes by the river at Pool Meadow, on the northern side of Gloucester—that has still to be sorted. We also know that, if extraordinary events happen again, such as the 1607 surge or mini-tsunami, Gloucester and Tewkesbury would once again be in the eye of the storm. Therefore, we must ensure that watercourses are kept clear, man-made defences are maintained, crisis planning is kept up to date, structures are reviewed, substations are protected and contingency plans are in place. We also need to be cautious about giving planning permission for homes on floodplains and to consider the remotest contingency, as who could have anticipated the events of 1607 or 2007? We may not have to wait 400 years for the next natural disaster.

It is worth highlighting the role of local media in providing brilliant information during crises of this kind, and I know that today all regional media will be running huge articles and reports on what happened 10 years ago. They will highlight the value of resilience; the power of communities; and the importance of everyone pulling together in a crisis. That is relevant to us all here, as parties, as constituencies and as a country. The Brexit negotiations are different from the Gloucestershire floods or the Grenfell Tower inferno, but for them and for all other crises we still need resilience, leadership and shared purpose, in order to get through the crisis. The word “crisis” translates as “danger opportunity” in Chinese. We have to deal with the danger and realise the opportunity to be much better prepared for the next challenge that life throws at us all. Today, across Gloucestershire, we

will remember what happened, reflect on the lessons and pray that other communities do not face such natural disasters as the one we faced 10 years ago.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I join others in wishing colleagues time with their families and constituents during the recess, and in thanking all staff in Parliament for all their hard work and kindness, not least in looking after our security here.

2.33 pm

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): May I welcome you to your post in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker, as I believe this is the first time I have had the privilege of speaking under your chairmanship? May I also say what a pleasure it is to see the shadow Deputy Leader of the House in her place and welcome her to her position?

It is a pleasure to follow such excellent speeches, including the one made by the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham). Wakefield, too, was hit in those terrible 2007 floods. We had £13 million of flood defences put in and we have so far escaped further flooding. Resilience, citizenship and leadership—the things he mentioned—are all too alive and well in the minds of people in Wakefield today as we remember those floods. It was also a pleasure to hear the maiden speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda). He will be a doughty fighter for his constituents. I certainly learnt something about Reading's history; I thought it was just the prison, but brewing, biscuits and bulbs sounds like a sound base for economic development for his city.

I want to talk about CAPA College, an outstanding school in Wakefield but one that sadly will not be able to take lower-sixth students in September and whose future hangs in the balance after Ministers attempted to move the college to Leeds. What a sorry, sad tale this is.

CAPA College has been the sixth-form provision at Cathedral Academy, a Church of England secondary school in Wakefield, for the past 10 years. It is the only sixth-form in the city of Wakefield. It delivers 28 hours a week of specialist performing arts teaching, and it is unique in West Yorkshire and, dare I say it, in the whole of the north of England, for the standard of performing arts teaching it provides. I pay tribute to my constituent Claire Nicholson, CAPA's director, and the brilliant, sublime production of “West Side Story” by 16-year-olds which I had the privilege of watching a couple of weeks ago. It was the most wonderful performance of that show that I have ever seen.

In September 2015, CAPA College and its sponsor, the Leeds diocese, through the Enhance Academy Trust, received permission from the Minister to open as a free school. A year later, the Department for Communities and Local Government made a conditional agreement for the sale and purchase of a site in Leeds city centre, and the Education Funding Agency agreed to provide two years' interim funding to allow CAPA College to stay in Wakefield until the site in Leeds obtained the necessary planning permissions—the new free school could open in September 2018. However, documents that I obtained from Leeds City Council show that, after the planning application was submitted, it emerged that the building is on the route of HS2. Leeds City Council rejected the planning application because of concerns about road safety and congestion; it is not a

[Mary Creagh]

suitable site for a school. We are talking about the former home of KPMG in Leeds. KPMG obviously got out; it sold it on to a German consortium. That consortium realised that it had perhaps bought a pup and sought to sell it on to someone else—and who better than the UK Government to know what the UK Government are doing!

The Education Funding Agency has rescinded its two-year funding offer to my local school until CAPA College has found a new building. That has forced the trust to inform potential new students that places will not be available to them; in effect, there is no year 12 student admission to CAPA college this year because of this building fiasco. The college has had to issue redundancy notices to staff, whose employment will end on 31 August. I know that the trust is working with Wakefield Council and the EFA to find a new permanent home for CAPA in Wakefield; we made it, we grew it, we developed it and we want to keep it. But why did the EFA continue with a planning application after being told that the site would have a high-speed rail line through it by 2032? Is this seriously a good use of taxpayers' money? Why was another site for CAPA College not identified as soon as it was known that there was a problem with this one? How much has the EFA spent on this site? Has the EFA completed the sale, even though HS2 will run through it and Leeds City Council has refused the planning application? If so, how much has it paid, or has it pulled out of the contract—in which case, how much has it lost?

I wrote to the Education Secretary in March to seek answers to those questions, but I have not received a reply. I hope that the Deputy Leader of the House will take my concerns back. The announcement this week of extra funding for England's schools is based on the fact that money that will be taken from the budget for new free schools, so there may be less money to enable CAPA College to find its new home in Wakefield. The fiasco has left CAPA College on the brink of closure, and dozens of dedicated staff and students unsure about their future. I have received letters from distraught students, alumni, parents and grandparents. The closure of CAPA College would damage the life chances of young people in Wakefield who aspire to go into the arts and would mean the closure of the only sixth form in Wakefield city centre.

The alumni have the chance to go on to perform in west end shows and tour all over the world, and I do not want to see the dreams of young people in Wakefield turned to dust. This September, we will see the opening of the advanced innovation and skills centre in Wakefield to deal with the historically low levels of tertiary education—higher education—in the city. We do not want to see one door opening in Wakefield while another one closes. I would like a substantive reply from the Minister and firm action from the EFA, so that those excellent teachers and that outstanding provision can be kept.

I pay tribute to the headteachers of the four secondary schools in my constituency: Miriam Oakley at Horbury Academy; Alan Warboys at Ossett Academy; Elizabeth Ford at Wakefield City Academy; and Rob Marsh at Cathedral Academy. I also pay tribute to Clare Kelly,

whose Dane Royd Junior and Infant School I visited recently. I wish all GCSE and A-level students good luck with their results when they come out in August.

I conclude by congratulating Simon Wallis, the director of the Hepworth gallery in Wakefield, which was crowned Art Fund museum of the year 2017. I think Wakefield is the only city to have had two Art Fund museums of the year—we also received the honour in 2013 for Yorkshire sculpture park, run by Pete Murray. Should Channel 4 consider a move to west Yorkshire, Wakefield stands ready with open arms to give it a warm, performance-related welcome. I wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, the staff and, in particular, the builders who are beginning to put up the scaffolding on the Elizabeth tower, a safe and productive recess.

2.40 pm

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh), whose contribution highlights how useful these pre-recess debates can be for emphasising the important issues that face our constituents.

I want to highlight two or three constituency issues, but first I wish to raise a point of national concern, although it has sufficiently irritated a number of my constituents over the past 24 hours that they headed for their keyboards and sent me messages. I refer, of course, to the BBC and its somewhat extravagant use of licence-payers' money. We would all acknowledge that talent has to be paid for, but I question some of the figures we have seen. For example, I normally watch "News at Ten" if I am at home. If I am a bit late home, I might watch it an hour or two later on the BBC News channel. It is the same news reports, but there just happens to be a different news reader who it seems earns tens of thousands, perhaps even hundreds of thousands less than his colleague who read the news an hour or two earlier. I question the somewhat unconvincing responses from BBC executives that have been broadcast over the past 24 hours.

The same applies to "Match of the Day", which I watch most weeks. Gary Lineker was an extremely talented footballer and could command enormous salaries when he was on the pitch. His latter-day role presenting "Match of the Day", which he does perfectly well, is fine, but other Members who watch the programme will have noticed that occasionally he has a holiday and someone comes off the subs' bench to present the programme. We see the same football and that person asks Alan Shearer or whoever exactly the same questions; does someone really need to be paid almost £2 million to do that when it is clear from the figures that somebody else is prepared to do it for £200,000 or £300,000, which would be a pretty well-paid job anyway? I have made my point, so I shall turn to some constituency issues.

Every constituency in the country has to contend with the issue of Travellers and their sites. Members from all parties will be well aware of how it irritates our constituents. It is not necessarily about the individuals themselves who, provided that they act responsibly and within the law, are perfectly entitled to their way of life; what annoys my constituents, quite justifiably, is that when they arrive on a site in Cleethorpes or wherever, the authorities leap into action to provide services for them that the rest of the community has to pay for.

It comes down to the simple fact that council tax payers often pay enormous amounts of money for services that in recent years have been cut back for all the reasons of which we are well aware, but councils always find money to spring into action to provide services for those who in most cases are not contributing.

I have no doubt that the Minister will tell us that the Government have made improvements to the legislation over the past six or seven years, and I am perfectly happy to accept that, but I urge the Deputy Leader of the House, when he reports back to other Ministers, to at least draw their attention to what I think my constituents and others would appreciate, which is what I shall call a more robust approach. The Government should not just say, “Oh, it’s up to councils to provide a site and so on”; that is fine, but let those who use that site understand clearly that they must contribute towards the cost.

Having been somewhat critical of it, perhaps I can praise the Government for the northern powerhouse initiative. It may have its faults, and it is concentrated too much on Leeds and Manchester, forgetting some other towns and cities in the north, but a few days ago *The Yorkshire Post* carried a story about a report by the Centre for Economics and Business Research and the law firm Irwin Mitchell that shows that in the past year or two northern cities have been growing faster than London. It praises George Osborne’s northern powerhouse, saying, for example, that the economy in Leeds has grown by 8% since the initiative was launched in 2014. It also mentions that Sheffield, York, Bradford and Hull have performed particularly well.

It is good news that, in the short term at least, our northern cities are contributing more and growing faster, but I urge the Deputy Leader of the House to convey to his colleagues that it is not only the cities in the north but the provincial towns and coastal communities that need help and support to grow. If they had a little extra help, I am sure that the northern powerhouse would be even more successful.

One way to make the initiative more successful for my constituency would be to provide us with a direct train service to London. With local authorities of all political colours, I have been involved in a long-running campaign on this issue. I recently met representatives from Virgin Trains, and I am hopeful that the new appraisal of the benefits to the economy that I hope the local authorities and local enterprise partnerships will produce will contribute to the overall goal. As we all know, better road and rail connections are crucial to the local economy. A little nudge from the Deputy Leader of the House, who is an influential person, could make an enormous difference. With that, Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish you and all staff and Members a happy summer break.

2.47 pm

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship in this summer Adjournment debate, Madam Deputy Speaker. As everyone else has, I wish colleagues and staff all the best for the recess. Of course, many of our colleagues—and their staff—who lost their seats might not have quite such a happy summer, as they face in some cases quite uncertain circumstances. I wish to say a little about the arrangements for non-returning MPs and their staff, and I hope it will command support from both sides of the House.

Before I do, though, I have always taken the view that an MP’s salary should be broadly in line with comparable professions and sufficient to meet the needs of living in two places—including in London, which is one of the most expensive cities in the world—but it should not be so high as to be the prime motivator for anyone seeking to become an MP. By and large, I believe, the current salary does that. The office allowance and travel arrangements are absolutely appropriate, and the allowance for staff should be sufficient to employ the correct number of caseworkers and other staff in our constituency offices. Again, since IPSA has given a rather generous increase to the staff allowance, that has most certainly been achieved.

Of course, the advent of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 has, or rather should have, provided more certainty for people seeking election or to work for an MP when they give up careers, professions and trades to do that. It is also worth noting that the recent salary increase for MPs was combined with changes to the MP pension scheme and the removal of the old resettlement allowance. At face value that is all fair and reasonable and, for the most part, it is. The reality of how easily the terms of the Act were overturned casts a bit of a shadow over what happens in practice, particularly for those who lose their seats, in the event of a short Parliament.

Irrespective of the expectation of a five-year term for Members and staff, the reality in the last Parliament was that many MPs’ staff members were entitled to precisely nothing—zero—by way of redundancy because they were employed for less than two years. That was inevitable, given that the Parliament itself was barely two years old. That simply cannot be right. As one non-returning MP put it:

“My own staff position seems to be typical; I have five in my team of whom four are to be paid no redundancy at all. This is because they worked less than two years (in some cases missing the cut by only a few weeks)...Many staff members gave up jobs, others gave up homes and moved to London, and some took out mortgages”

on the basis of a five-year contract made in good faith. They are now made redundant on terms that he says

“would disgrace the most unscrupulous private corporation.”

Indeed, were there to be another election before 2019, which is certainly not inconceivable, any staff employed by a new MP of any party elected for the first time this June would likewise be entitled to absolutely nothing if the MP lost his or her seat. I would suggest, and I hope that this would command support, that at the very least in future redundancy should be paid to staff as per the contract, in the circumstances of a short Parliament, as if the members of staff had been employed for five years, particularly as the circumstances of a short Parliament are outwith the control of the staff, outwith the control of Members—and, given what we now know, were outwith even the knowledge of half the Cabinet when the Prime Minister called the election.

Likewise, the decision to call an election within the five-year timescale has left a number of non-returning MPs in a very difficult position, with many new ones being entitled to less than £3,000. Although IPSA is right to try to put things on a par with other workplaces, where we have ended up with the terms of redundancy for MPs appears to bear absolutely no relation to any professional contract I have ever seen.

[Stewart Hosie]

To put into some kind of context the combination of circumstances in which ex-MPs and their staff find themselves, I can tell the House what two have told me. One said:

“we are now trying to support staff who are receiving no help from IPSA—while not being paid ourselves to do so”.

He hopes that consideration can be given to finding the means to provide additional support to staff. Another said that he would not

“abandon my staff and former constituents, nor walk away from my responsibilities. But, it seems, that I am expected to manage my staff as their boss full time until the 8th August entirely unpaid. That cannot be right or fair.”

I am not arguing for a return to the old resettlement allowance regime, but the current situation must be changed. I believe it needs to be changed not just to help those who lost their seats in practical terms but to address a more difficult issue. If this situation continues and there is a series of short Parliaments leaving people in this position, massive limits will be placed on those choosing to stand for election or to work here. The huge strides all the parties have made to ensure that Parliament more accurately reflects society could be reversed, and that goes for staff as well as Members. If it is clear to those who might wish to come here that MPs who lose their seats after a short Parliament will come away with less than one month's salary and their staff, in some cases, will come away with literally nothing at all, the only people who might seek election will be the independently wealthy or the kind of zealots who would do it for nothing. Nothing, but nothing, could be more different to society than a Parliament of MPs and staff drawn from such narrow groups.

Urgent action needs to be taken to ensure that staff redundancy is paid on the basis of a five-year contract, irrespective of how long a Parliament lasts, and MPs need to have a comparable professional termination package based on length of service but with a minimum safety net, not merely a few weeks' salary. Let me repeat that I am not calling for the re-introduction of the old resettlement allowance, but the prospect of surrendering one's career or trade to enter Parliament, losing one's seat when it is not one's fault and then being presented with less than one month's salary will be a massive disincentive to others who would seek to do this public service. IPSA needs to be flexible.

Finally, a winding-up allowance of around £50,000 or so is available to each MP, but it appears from non-returned colleagues that there are huge restrictions on how that can be used. My judgment is that, with little imagination, IPSA could easily pay staff redundancy for those who serve less than two years in the event of a short Parliament. I am talking about a modest termination package to allow ex-MPs to fulfil their obligations to those staff and to adjust to life outside Parliament without any significant increase to the funds that IPSA already sets aside. This is not special pleading; it is a matter that can and will affect all parties. It is something that we must review and repair quickly, given that the fixed nature of our parliamentary terms is rather less robust than many of us had expected.

2.55 pm

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): It is a real pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie) who is a tenacious parliamentarian. He has used the opportunity of this debate very effectively and has raised some important issues that must be considered. All Members of this House—both current and former—have an obligation and a duty to their staff.

We have seen lots of variety in this afternoon's debate. I wish to focus on one particular issue that is incredibly important to my constituents in Corby going into this summer recess. I am talking about the Corby urgent care centre, which many colleagues will know, because I have raised it in questions on many occasions in this House. When I went back through my speaking record, I was interested to note down how many times I had raised it in different contexts.

Let me provide some background: the Corby urgent care centre was first opened in 2012 under the coalition Government with a Conservative Health Secretary—I am incredibly proud of that. It is a flagship facility, class-leading, hugely popular and a beacon of best practice. It is also the envy of many other communities across the country. My hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone), who is in his place, would like to have exactly the sort of facility that we have in Corby at the Isebrook site in Wellingborough.

Perhaps most importantly, the biggest advantage of the Corby urgent care centre is the enormous impact that it has in relieving pressure on the A&E at Kettering general hospital, which, as we all know, has been under some strain in recent months and years. The urgent care centre makes a big difference. Let me give Members an idea of its impact. Last year, the urgent care centre in Corby saw more than 70,000 patients. Of all those who came, only 6% had to be referred to Kettering general hospital for further treatment. That shows how many people are dealt with in Corby that would otherwise have to go across to Kettering.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that such great alarm was caused by this press release issued by the clinical commissioning group. Issued on 13 July, it said:

“As has been reported previously, the contract between the Commissioners...and Lakeside +, the current provider of services at the Urgent Care Centre, expires on 30 September 2017.

In order to ensure service continuity and to safeguard the future of the centre, the Commissioners ran a competitive procurement inviting bids to continue the service for a further 12 months. Unfortunately, the only bidder in the process formally withdrew their bid yesterday and so the process has failed to generate any bidder willing to continue to provide the service.

In light of these developments, the Commissioners will be considering what options exist for the Corby Urgent Care Centre.” Interestingly, that runs completely at odds with what I was told earlier in the year by the commissioners. We have known for some time that there has been a contractual dispute between Lakeside Plus and the CCG, and we have always known that the current contract with Lakeside Plus would finish at the end of September, so there has been plenty of time to plan for this.

The earlier reply that I received on 22 March said:

“I can confirm that Corby Urgent Care Centre is not closing. The organisation running the Urgent Care Centre, Lakeside Plus, have given notice that they wish to withdraw from their contract at the end of March, but it is not their role to decide whether the service comes to an end. That decision rests with the CCG as

commissioners of healthcare for the people of Corby, and we will ensure that the service continues—with another provider if necessary. We are now working urgently to make that happen.

We have been expecting Lakeside Plus to continue the service until November, as stated in the contract notice issued by the CCG last year. We appreciate that this sudden announcement will be a cause of some disquiet for the people of Corby, who are always our primary concern. We therefore regret the alarm that is being caused by misleading suggestions that the Urgent Care Centre is to close, and would appreciate your help in putting people's minds at rest."

The statement issued last week is inconsistent with the reassurances that I was given earlier in the year. The current position is much more ambiguous, so I wrote to the commissioners on 13 July, seeking reassurance for my constituents and clarity on what the future might hold. Their reply was equally ambiguous:

"Following withdrawal of the remaining bidder for the caretaker contract, we are urgently considering the options available. It is therefore not possible at this stage for me to say exactly what services will be in place on October 1st, when the existing UCC contract expires. I realise that this does not give you the absolutely clarity you and local people are seeking, but it is very important for me to be honest with you. The CCG is facing an unprecedented situation, with a very challenging timescale and a highly restrictive legal and commercial environment.

As you know, the CCG is also looking at how the healthcare system in Corby can best meet the needs of the community. The CCG is in the process of engaging with the community on this issue."

To my mind, that is wholly unacceptable. I have written again, pressing for reassurance, seeking details about the contingency plans, which earlier this year I was assured were in place should agreement not be reached by 30 September—I was told that it was all in hand—and requesting an urgent meeting. I am currently awaiting a reply.

People in Corby and the surrounding areas are very worried about this. With the summer holidays coming, people are coming together to campaign on the issue. I am going to meet the Save Corby Urgent Care Centre campaign group, which already has a huge social media following. We are working cross-party. Tom Beattie, the Labour leader of Corby Borough Council, and I are dusting off our joint campaigning attire and getting ready to campaign together on this, as we have done a number of times on the steel issue. I am grateful to him for being so willing to work together on this, because it is relevant to all our constituents, regardless of how they vote, or indeed whether they vote at all.

One of the points that Tom raised with me was the challenge of housing growth in our area. Our health infrastructure needs to keep pace. The Corby site is very relevant in the context of the hub-and-spoke model that Kettering General hospital is trying to develop, with a new urgent care hub at Kettering General, a hub in Corby and hopefully a hub in Wellingborough.

What needs to happen? We need urgent reassurance from the commissioners that the current service will be not only protected, but further improved in the years ahead, and that the quality that we have become used to will continue. We must always review our health infrastructure, but to my mind it is unthinkable that the urgent care centre would not be a key component right at the heart of our local health infrastructure. Given that the procurement for the new contract was for only 12 months in any event, surely it cannot be beyond the wit of man to sit down with the current providers and

try to come up with an agreement—I have offered to help facilitate that process—or, failing that, to put in place the arrangements that I was previously told were available. What we need is a bit more dialogue, properly listening to local people, because local wishes are exceptionally clear on the matter. The CCG was set up to advance Corby's cause. It represents only the borough of Corby—it is the smallest CCG in the country—so I would like to think that its key focus would be on listening to local people and putting them first without having to take into account the needs of wider north Northamptonshire.

Therefore, over the summer recess I plan to be—to use a variant of a phrase—a bloody difficult man on this issue. I am going to stand up for my constituents. I really hope that the commissioners will be listening to me this afternoon and to my constituents—please do not let us down.

3.4 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove), who I am very sure could be a bloody difficult man. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) on his thoughtful maiden speech.

I want to take this opportunity to raise three issues. The first is the closure of Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs offices. Last week, we had a positive and upbeat debate in Westminster Hall about the future of the 30-odd new towns across the UK, but as I said then, one massive dark cloud hanging over the future of my new town—Cumbernauld—is the threatened closure of the tax office. It is not just Cumbernauld that is affected, and the situation is the same in towns across the UK. We are not talking about just trimming a small, obsolete office or two; we are looking at an extraordinary degradation in the HMRC estate, taking it from 170 offices to 13 regional centres and a network of many hubs, all with the loss of around 8,000 jobs.

Much has been said on previous occasions about why these plans are, to put it bluntly, absolutely bonkers. That includes the centralising of staff in expensive city centre accommodation, ridiculous assumptions about how far staff can travel, and the complete lack of any assessment of the effect of closing these offices on the local economy. Just prior to dissolution, the Public Accounts Committee published an excellent and comprehensive report on the subject, making not only the points I have made, but many more. Has HMRC listened? Not at all. Without addressing any of the concerns raised by the Committee, it has battered on regardless, even signing contracts for some of the new premises during the purdah period.

We need a halt to this closure programme, and we need an opportunity for this Chamber to debate the Public Accounts Committee report in full, as well as any response HMRC cares to offer. The 1,500 employees in my constituency deserve that, as do the 60,000 across the UK and the communities in which those offices are based.

The second issue I want to raise is the immigration rules relating to spouses, partners and their children. As Members will probably know from their own casework, we have among the most draconian family immigration

[Stuart C. McDonald]

rules in the world, with an extraordinary income requirement, and ludicrously complicated rules and ridiculous restrictions on how that income requirement can be met. Over 40% of the UK population would not be entitled to live in this country with a non-EU spouse were they to marry one; in fact, in some parts, including Northern Ireland, the figure would be over 50%.

The Children's Commissioner for England wrote a damning report about the 15,000 Skype children, as she called them—there are probably more than 15,000 now—who get to see their mum and dad only via the internet, with terrible consequences for their wellbeing.

Back in February, the Supreme Court, while not striking down the rules entirely, did make it clear that applying them in certain cases, especially those involving children, could breach the right to respect for family life. A glimmer of hope perhaps? Actually, for five months, this has caused even more anguish for certain families, as the Home Office has told applicants that their cases are paused while it

“takes time to study the judgement”

Meanwhile, the Prime Minister managed to insert a commitment into the Conservative manifesto to make the rules even more draconian, increasing the financial threshold and breaking up even more families—a strange way to try to win votes.

But today—surprise, surprise—on the last day of term, the Immigration Minister has made a written statement saying that changes to the immigration rules are to be tabled to implement the Supreme Court ruling. The rules were not made available until 2 pm, when this, the final debate of the term, had started, so I have had just the briefest opportunity to look at what really are 22 pages of gobbledygook. At first glance, I am afraid it does not appear that the Government have moved very far. The treatment of these families, and indeed their elected representatives, has been totally disgraceful, and I look forward to returning to this issue after the recess.

The third and final issue I want to raise is the refugee and migration crisis. As Brexit continues to dominate the agenda, it almost seems as if we have forgotten that the search for safety from war and persecution, and for opportunities that cannot be found at home, still drives millions of people to travel to other parts of the world, in many cases towards Europe. Over 2,300 people have already drowned attempting to cross the Mediterranean this year, and over 100,000 have made the crossing successfully.

The SNP will continue to argue for the provision of safe legal routes, the extension of the Dubs scheme, expanded family reunion rights, and participation in EU relocation schemes. Whatever our views, and whatever our thoughts on the best way to tackle this crisis, we can surely agree that this is one of the most pressing and urgent issues of our time, and we should debate and scrutinise the response of the Government and the EU as a whole not just now and again, but week in, week out—otherwise, talk of global Britain will be empty talk.

With that, Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish you, all right hon. and hon. Members, and all the staff of the House as restful a recess as possible.

3.9 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Today I want to talk about how a Conservative Government with a Conservative Member of Parliament in Congleton and a Conservative-led council in Cheshire East are working together to deliver effectively for people in my constituency and the wider Cheshire East area.

Let me give as a first example this week's Government announcement on school funding. I spoke in the Christmas recess debate, on this very spot, of how the Government's proposed national funding formula would not serve well the school pupils in my constituency and the wider Cheshire East area. In January, I took a delegation of headteachers to meet the Minister for School Standards, and the leader of Cheshire East Council, Councillor Rachel Bailey, came with us. The Minister listened and asked what annual amount those headteachers considered would be needed to provide senior school students with the education they need and deserve. The answer they came back with was £4,800—exactly the amount that this week the Secretary of State for Education has confirmed will be provided by Government for our pupils. As she told me, this is a very good settlement for Cheshire. Ministers responded to our concerns, and I want to thank them, just as local headteachers have thanked me for this result, which shows a Conservative Government working with a Conservative MP and Conservative councillors to deliver for local people.

I turn now to planning matters, noting that 27 July is the date scheduled for adoption by Cheshire East of its local plan. This will come after one of the most lengthy and complex examinations in the country. It is true to say that in the past I have not held back in this place from saying that areas in my constituency have been blighted by developers keen to grab green space and agricultural sites for inappropriate development. However, now that the local plan inspector has found that a five-year housing land supply has been identified, that battleground should—and, I believe, will be—a thing of the past. This is a new day. I call on the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government to uphold the inspector's view of a five-year Cheshire East housing land supply, and the terms of the local plan, together with the further several neighbourhood plans in place locally, and to reject any planning appeals to develop further greenfield or green space sites. This should now provide an effective means whereby inappropriate developments are stopped once and for all in my constituency and beyond.

I give credit to neighbourhood planning groups and town councillors such as Mike Benson in Sandbach, who have worked so hard, as I have here, to ensure that neighbourhood plans have a real impact. In Sandbach, where there is no housing need, there should now, in future, be the inference that no additional housing will be permitted other than in accordance with NDP—neighbourhood development plan—policies. Indeed, that is already happening. We need only witness the way in which the former housing Minister recently rejected a planning application for land to the rear of Park Lane and Crewe Road in Sandbach, directly on account of the need expressed in the Sandbach neighbourhood plan for an area of separation. Again, this shows a Conservative Government working together with a Conservative MP and Conservative councillors to deliver for local residents.

I turn now to the many transport improvements in the area. Let me first set the record straight once and for all: it was local Conservatives—MP and councillors—who obtained money to improve junction 17 of the M6, and not any other party or person. I know, because I was there at the very first meeting of the Highways Authority when I requested funding to prevent future accidents—in particular, for the southbound exit of the M6, which, as I clearly identified to the Highways Authority, was becoming dangerous. Action was taken and funding was provided. Similarly, a Conservative MP working with a Conservative council obtained from a Conservative-led Government £46 million for the Congleton link road—one of the highest road grants under that Government—thereby reducing congestion, reducing air pollution, and opening up employment land for new and expanding businesses. Work will start next year, with a planned completion date of 2020.

The same effective joint working resulted in £1.25 million being provided for the Middlewich eastern bypass business case. That extremely convincing business case showing wide economic and wellbeing benefits was produced by Cheshire East Council this spring. I need not go into further detail about that now, as I have spoken about it several times in this House. I am grateful to the roads Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman) for meeting me again this week and listening so carefully as I pressed for funding from the Government towards the construction costs of approximately £56 million. That would unlock employment land for up to 2,000 jobs and support the reopening of Middlewich railway station for passengers, linking it to a Crewe hub for HS2, which, in turn, would be a springboard for wholesale economic development and connectivity across the region.

Cheshire East Council, together with the Cheshire and Warrington local enterprise partnership, is working hard to ensure that the HS2 hub is built at Crewe, but to ensure that it realises its full economic potential we need at least five trains an hour from London to Crewe. My hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Clevellys (Paul Maynard), the Minister with responsibility for rail, is a good listener, and I am sure that he will take that on board, together with my oft-repeated request that the line to Middlewich be reopened to passengers. I thank him for agreeing to meet me and representatives from the mid Cheshire rail link campaign about the matter.

Ease of transport is essential for people's wellbeing, and so Government funding has been provided to improve Cheshire East's roads. No less than £92 million has been invested over the past five years to improve them radically, and they are now among the best in the country. On Monday 24 July, £1 million-worth of improvements in and around the pedestrianised areas of Congleton town centre will begin. Local councillors are delighted that Congleton has two new minibuses after obtaining £50,000 of national funding from the Department for Transport. A Conservative Government, working with a Conservative MP and Conservative councils at both county and town level, are delivering for our residents in real and tangible ways to improve their quality of life.

I finish by thanking the Government for the funding given to our local schools, most recently £1.7 million for improvements at Eaton Bank Academy and more than £100,000 to refurbish Havannah Primary School. Our

schools merit this; 96.2% of them are good or outstanding, and they are in one of the top 20 authorities nationally. A Conservative Government are supporting well a Conservative MP and a Conservative council, working for the real-life benefit of residents.

3.16 pm

Mary Glendon (North Tyneside) (Lab): As this is the first time that I have spoken when you have been in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker, may I congratulate you on your election and wish you well in your new role? I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) on her appointment as the shadow Deputy Leader of the House. It is always an honour to follow the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who is a fantastic advocate for her constituency, as she proved by what she said today. I should also thank my new hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda), who is not in his place at the moment but who made an excellent maiden speech. I think he will be a very caring and determined Member for the people of Reading East.

I want to talk first of all about the soft drinks industry levy that the Government plan to introduce, which is better known as the sugar tax. I have great reservations about the tax, and I believe that my concerns are not unfounded. In his Budget statement earlier this year, the Chancellor admitted that the estimated amount of income from the levy would be half that which was originally predicted. The Chancellor acknowledged the excellent work being done by the soft drinks industry to combat the level of sugar in soft drinks.

In other countries where such a tax has been introduced, such as France, the US and Mexico, the impact has been minimal. In this country, the tax is badly targeted; some of the most sugary drinks, such as milk-based and yoghurt-based drinks, as well as fruit juices, have been excluded. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has suggested that consumers may even substitute some of those other products to get their fix of sugar. The levy does nothing to help to educate consumers on reducing sugar in their diets.

I commend the soft drinks industry—I do not have a soft drinks factory or anything like that in my constituency, but I feel it is important to say this—for the work that it has done so far to address the sugar content of soft drinks. In 2015, it was the only sector in the food and drink industry that had an ambitious plan to reduce calorie intake from its products by 20% by 2020. The sector has been particularly proactive in reducing the sugar consumed in its products through reformulation, promoting diet versions of drinks and smaller portion sizes—actions that have been acknowledged by Public Health England. More than 60% of drinks now have reduced or even zero calorie content.

Independent analysis shows that the levy will lead to more than 4,000 job losses across the UK and a decline of £132 million in the UK economy, predominantly in retail and hospitality, including pubs and corner shops. Although this is planned to be a long-term tax, it is massively unstable and the IFS expects that, by 2021, because of general consumption trends and the work done by manufacturers to reduce sugar in their drinks, there will be a huge black hole in the funding of school health improvement initiatives and sports dependent on income from the levy.

[Mary Glindon]

The McKinsey report on tackling obesity ranked a sugar tax as 12th of the 16 least effective options in tackling obesity. If the Government are serious about their child obesity plan, they must find a more certain and secure form of funding for the many activities it needs to support, rather than the ever-decreasing levy.

There are other ways to tackle obesity. I would like the Government to consider the review of the research on the impact of milk on children's development carried out by Northumbria University, which suggested that milk consumption generally improves children's nutritional status. Children who regularly drink milk have lower body mass indices, lower body fat percentage and lower waist circumferences than children who rarely drink it.

In a Westminster Hall debate earlier this year, I asked the then Education Minister if the review of the standards of the child obesity plan, which is due in September, could include a commitment that children will be guaranteed access to milk in school at least once a day. I ask for that commitment again today.

On a separate issue, I want to refer to four early-day motions that I tabled immediately after the Queen's Speech to draw attention to issues raised by the drugs, alcohol and justice cross-party parliamentary group, which I co-chair. EDM 20 called for the Government to publish their long-overdue drugs strategy, and I am pleased to say that they have finally obliged. Regrettably, however, they have yet to act on EDM 22, which focuses on the funding crisis faced by the drug and alcohol treatment sector. Consequently, they risk undermining the delivery of their new strategy. The strategy gives scant regard to alcohol misuse. Ministers should correct that by following the advice of EDM 18 to publish a bespoke alcohol strategy that protects and promotes treatment services and introduces minimum unit pricing.

Lastly, EDM 21 draws attention to hepatitis C, which is now completely curable, and calls on the Government to publish a strategy to help meet the World Health Organisation target of eliminating hepatitis by 2030. Perhaps Ministers will reflect on that next Friday 28 July, which is World Hepatitis Day.

I will finish by wishing everyone a wonderful recess. I hope we all get some rest, even though we will be quite busy I should imagine.

3.22 pm

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the pop and fizz of the soft drinks speech by the hon. Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon), although I do urge caution. As a type 2 diabetic, I am sympathetic to not having too many sugary drinks, but there are lots of evils in those soft drinks that do not have sugar in them. When walking around my local Asda or another supermarket, I note the paradox that it is still possible to buy fizzy drinks cheaply, despite what the hon. Lady said.

I want to thank not only the staff of the House but all the personal staff in our offices, who do so much work. I have been immensely fortunate in my nearly 13 years in the House to have recruited an exceptional individual, Lucy Paton-Brown, who is sadly leaving me in September. She has done a fabulous job for me. I am particularly conscious that for one year a few years ago

I was either in hospital or in bed at home, unable to do my job properly. Usually when that happens, a neighbouring Member of Parliament takes over the constituency burden and casework while the Member recuperates. Lucy managed to do all that work for nearly a year on my behalf. She will be sorely missed.

I want to talk about some campaigns in Southend. My hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) mentioned the very good news that clinicians have decided that, under the strategic transformation programme for the local hospital, blue-light ambulance services will continue to be directed to local hospitals in Southend, Chelmsford and Basildon to receive the best immediate care. The election came in the middle of a big consultation on the matter, but political campaigners who were more interested in garnering votes than the quality of our local health service used A&E scurrilously.

We were told locally that Southend hospital would close, then that A&E would close, then that A&E would be downgraded and then that there would be nothing more than a nurse with a first aid box. My hon. Friends the Members for Castle Point (Rebecca Harris) and for Southend West (Sir David Amess) and others reassured the public, but that message did not entirely get through and lies dominated the campaign.

Some key organisers in the campaign perpetuated the lies. I feel for Opposition Members who have to put up with some of the more disreputable elements of Momentum. Many decent, honest people were involved in the Save Southend A&E campaign, but it was misused by Momentum, which was aggressive and tried to intimidate. There was a public meeting outside my house, with someone using a loudhailer, to try to intimidate me—the tweets asking people to go there specified that—into backing down from saying that all decisions should be clinically led. The circumstances were appalling. I am sorry for Opposition Members because sometimes the wrath that leads to “red on red” is even fiercer than that which causes “red on blue”.

I want to talk about a train. I will not go all “Thomas the Tank Engine” on hon. Members, but all trains should be like the 7.18 from Shoeburyness to Fenchurch Street, travelling from the sea to the city in under 60 minutes. It gets in after 58 minutes. If it did not stop, the journey could be made in 32 minutes. That would transform the local economy.

When I was first elected in 2005, Southend airport covered one destination and had 40,000 passengers. It now has 30 destinations and 1.2 million passenger movements, which will increase to 2.5 million in 2018, with more than 40 destinations worldwide. That will regenerate the area. We need to do more to work with the surrounding community and business parks to get businesses around the airport.

Time is short, so I thank everybody for brevity in the debate and you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for your early days in the Chair.

3.27 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I am pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) has taken her rightful place on the Front Bench. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) on his maiden speech.

He spoke with great sincerity and knowledge about his constituency and the challenges facing it, particularly pressure on housing and public services.

I wish to raise just one subject—leasehold—which affects not only a number of my constituents, but many other people throughout England and Wales. My hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) has already touched on it. I spoke about it in the Chamber last December, when I described the emerging leasehold scandal as the PPI of the house building industry. However, having seen more of the serial failures, deceptions and obfuscations, I believe I may have understated culpability right across the board. The developers, of course, are public enemy No. 1, but the lenders, the solicitors and even the Government all have to take some share of the blame for a scandal that has the potential to fundamentally destabilise the housing market if it is not tackled soon.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse said, I am now vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on leasehold and commonhold reform, which he brilliantly chairs alongside the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley). They have been superbly assisted by the Leasehold Knowledge Partnership in bringing the matter to the attention of parliamentarians. There now seems to be some consensus across the House that these abuses need to be tackled. I understand that the Government will be coming forward shortly with plans to tackle some of the abuses in the leasehold sector, but it is vital that they create not only a clear and fair framework for new builds, but a strategy to deal with the rotten mess that developers have created.

There at last appears to be some self-awareness by developers that leasehold homes are becoming toxic, with many now pledging voluntarily not to sell any new homes on a leasehold basis. But that will not assist my constituents who have already bought their homes and have been quoted extortionate sums to buy their properties, obtain permission to alter the property, or even ask a question of their landlord, nor will it assist the many who are already trapped because they have onerous leases that purchasers are no longer interested in signing up to, and that some building societies will no longer lend on. It will also not assist us in holding to account the guilty men and women who must have known that creating this second lucrative income stream for developers would ultimately be at the cost of their customers.

Developers are beginning to acknowledge their responsibility. Taylor Wimpey voluntarily announced in April that it was going to set up a process whereby those with the most onerous leases had the opportunity to convert them into new leases where the ground rent would increase by only RPI, instead of doubling every 10 years. Sadly, however, that announcement is where the credit stops, because three months on, progress has been painfully slow. In the intervening period, I have been contacted by at least one constituent whose ground rent has doubled since the announcement was made, which means that if it ever does get converted to an RPI lease, those RPI increases will be applied to a ground rent that is twice what it could have been. This has ongoing consequences should my constituent ever be in a position to purchase the freehold outright, and if she does try to purchase it, she will still have to negotiate

with the owner of the freehold, whoever that is, and navigate the fiendishly complicated and lengthy process currently in place.

The lease may still contain other punitive clauses aside from the ground rent, which, as we have seen from some examples, can include charges of up to £3,000 just to get permission for an extension. This is all before we consider those who are not covered, such as second-generation purchasers where Taylor Wimpey are not the freehold owners. Where do they stand? There is going to need to be an active Government strategy to deal with everyone affected by this scandal.

The Government have a financial interest in sorting this out. At the end of March 2017 the number of Help to Buy purchases on leasehold properties stood at just over 28,000, of which 11,641 are houses. Some 23% of all Help to Buy purchases are on leasehold properties, and given concerns about the drop in value of some of the properties with the most onerous leases, there is a real question whether the Government will get all their money back eventually. To my astonishment, there has not yet been any suggestion of an outright ban on Help to Buy funds being used to purchase leasehold houses.

Let us be clear: sorting out the immediate consequences of onerous leases must be the start of the process, not the end of it. We need to learn the lessons, and if necessary legislate, so that the worst excesses of capitalism that we have seen here are not allowed to infect our society again. There needs to be a much easier, quicker and cost-effective way, so that people can purchase their freehold outright, and then we need to bring in an outright ban on houses being sold on a leasehold basis.

But there also needs to be a long, hard look at how we got into this position in the first place. I would like there to be a full Select Committee inquiry into how this practice developed. At the moment, we do not even know the extent of it. Developers must be required to give evidence about why this systematic duping of their customers was allowed to start in the first place. Who were the authors of those leases that now nobody will sign up to? How many properties were made leasehold needlessly? How much profit have they made out of this scam? And who exactly are the beneficiaries of the leases now?

These properties are being passed around from one company to another. Some are based outside this country, and there is secrecy about who the ultimate recipients are of the substantial incomes coming from the leases. There is an old saying that an Englishman's home is his castle, but it now seems that an Englishman's home is in fact a revenue stream for an offshore company operating from a tax haven.

What is very clear to me is that when people bought their houses they thought they were doing just that—buying a home. What they never contemplated for a moment was that actually the true owner of their home would be someone they might never know the identity of, who can sell on their interest in the property to somebody else without their knowledge or consent. It sounds like something out of feudal society, not 21st-century Britain.

That brings me to what I would like a Select Committee inquiry to look at: the legal profession. Speaking as a former solicitor, I know that mistakes are made, but it seems incredible to me that so many people make the same complaint about the advice they received at the

[Justin Madders]

time of their purchase. I surveyed my constituents in leasehold properties and a staggering 80% of them did not know the true nature of what they were buying. I think those figures demonstrate that there is a compelling need for further examination of the advice that was provided. I have heard of developers offering incentives to use particular solicitors. Why would they do that, and what led to such a collective failure in the legal profession?

What advice was given to the lenders, whom solicitors also have a duty to? We now know, for example, that Nationwide will no longer lend on properties with doubling ground rents. That rather raises the question of what their and other lenders' exposure is and, crucially, why they granted mortgages on these properties in the first place. None of the developers will tell us how many properties they have built with these onerous clauses attached. We need to know the scale of the problem; the stability of the housing market rests on the back of that.

I hope I have demonstrated the range of issues that need to be dealt with in respect of this scandal. A full Select Committee inquiry is the way ahead. This has not happened by accident and we need to know why it started.

Finally, Mr Deputy Speaker, I wish you, all other Members and, in particular, all the staff who work so hard to keep this place running smoothly, a restful and peaceful summer.

3.35 pm

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): We have had some excellent speeches, including a great maiden speech from the hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda). I was at university in Reading, and I spent a lot of time drinking pints in The Nob, going to the kebab shop and eating Champ's burgers. I studied chemistry and food science, and I think I took the food part a bit too literally. We have also heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers), who raised the issue of BBC salaries. Earlier today, my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans) talked about Derek Thompson's salary. Doctor Who is now a woman. It is only in the world of the BBC that a nurse gets paid more than a doctor. But I am not going to talk about the fictional hospital in "Holby City". I want to talk about a real hospital: my local hospital, St Helier.

Just before the election, I brought the Secretary of State for Health to St Helier. I was pleased that he took me up on my invitation to come to see the best and the worst of the hospital. He saw that we have the best A&E in London in terms of achieving its targets. He saw the fantastic work of the staff there, and the award-winning fracture unit. He also saw how the multi-disciplinary patient reviews are setting a really good example for other hospitals.

However, the Secretary of State also saw the hoarding around the back of the building, which is crumbling. The hoarding is there not because of construction work but because we cannot rely on bits of masonry not falling off. When a building has the ability to make people more ill, that is not a good thing. There is a fantastic renal unit at St Helier, but the area with the

sickest patients is dysfunctional because the lifts do not work properly. A modern-day hospital bed does not fit inside the lifts, so the trust is paying something like £10,000 a week for ambulances to move people from the back of the hospital to the front. This is a building that predates antibiotics, and it will never be what most people would think of as a modern-day healthcare facility. We really need to find a solution to this.

I am delighted that a solution is starting to present itself. We have had review after review, but now, for the first time, the trust has been allowed to engage with the public on an option that does not include St George's in Tooting. There are six MPs whose constituents are served by the St Helier and Epsom hospitals and they disagree on a lot of the detail, but they do agree that people needing A&E or maternity services should not have to go to Tooting. St George's is already overloaded, and it is also incredibly difficult to get there in the rush hour as it involves heading into London. The option is to build a specialist acute unit on one of the three sites that the trust owns. It could be at St Helier or at Epsom, or it could be a co-located site involving the Royal Marsden, which could add extra benefits to the services provided there.

Apart from reacquainting myself with the family and trying to get a bit of rest, I will be spending the summer back out on the stump speaking to as many people as possible, because what we need at this stage is for people around Sutton to be asking the NHS to support the trust's vision and saying, "Yes, we want that level of investment." The work will cost between £300 million and £400 million. Trying to extract that sort of money is not easy, but we have to find the local will to start talking about where to locate the specialist acute facility and about how to get the money, which could come from the Treasury or from loans, or we could leverage money from pension funds. My local council's pension fund invests in at least three shopping centres, so why not invest that money in local infrastructure? However expensive the project might be, I think we can all discount PFIs, which have been discredited over the past few years.

In engaging with the public, the trust has ruled little out, but what it has ruled out is really significant: it has ruled out closing St Helier hospital. We have had lots of campaigns to save St Helier, but its closure has been ruled out. The trust is spending £12 million on refurbishing the back of the building, and it has applied for grants to get more money. The trust has asked for about £80 million to cover costs, £40 million of which—if secured—will help to keep St Helier open for at least another 20 years. That has to be good news for the people of Sutton.

The trust has also ruled out doing nothing. I have said that the building is crumbling and that it cannot be turned into a modern facility, so I know that the trust will do what it can to make the hospital last, but we have to do something for my constituents, for the boroughs of Sutton and Merton and for the surrounding areas. The trust has also ruled out building on the land that it solely owns on the old Sutton hospital site in Belmont, because it is too small. That is why the trust is looking at co-locating with the Royal Marsden hospital, the benefit of which is that extra facilities will be added for the Royal Marsden, which does superb work in cancer treatment—having an acute facility right on the doorstep will be good news.

In conclusion, I will be going around speaking to as many people as I can, and I hope the constituents will look at my website, come and speak to me and really get involved. By the time we get back after the conferences, we will hopefully have completed the first stage of getting new healthcare facilities in Sutton. Mr Deputy Speaker, I wish you and everybody else a very restful summer break.

3.41 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a pleasure to speak in these Adjournment debates, and I look forward to each one. People say that I always speak in Adjournment debates, but there you are. In the past, I have taken this opportunity to talk about Northern Ireland's history and culture, and it is important to get that in *Hansard*. I have spoken about the Apprentice Boys and the Orange Order, but today I want to speak about the Royal Black Preceptory. People will know about 12 July, which is a bank and public holiday in Northern Ireland. It is a celebration of our culture, history and heritage and, for people who may not be aware, it is important to those who wear a collarette and walk down a certain street. I want to speak about why members of the Royal Black Preceptory put on their collarettes and hold their head high and walk at parades in the so-called marching season.

The Royal Black Preceptory, or the Institute of the Imperial Grand Black Chapter of the British Commonwealth, was formed in Ireland in 1797, two years after the formation of the Orange Order in Daniel Winter's cottage, Loughgall, County Armagh. Its headquarters remain in Lurgan, County Armagh. It ran on an informal basis until 14 September 1846, when the Royal Black Institution was placed on a permanent basis through its reconstitution at a meeting held in Portadown.

From that point, the institution was infused with new life, vitality, inspiration, discipline and a foundation, which has helped it to stand the test of time and to expand to the worldwide membership that exists today. The tiered structure of the institution has its foundation in the local preceptory. Each preceptory has a unique number, which is allocated by the governing body when a new warrant is issued. The preceptory elects officers, who represent their membership at the next tier, namely, a district chapter. Officers from the various local district chapters come together and form a county or provincial grand chapter. My Royal Black Preceptory is number 675, Ballywalter Crimson Arrow. I have been a master and a district master and am currently the register.

The officers of the various county or provincial chapters constitute the membership of the governing body known as the Imperial Grand Council. One of the institution's most colourful and well-attended events is the annual demonstration at Scarva in County Down, which is traditionally held on 13 July. Preceptories from Portadown, Newry, Tandragee, Markethill, Banbridge, Rathfriland and Lower Iveagh take part along with many national and international visitors.

Exceptional numbers of people turned out this year. I believe that across the whole Province there has been more interest in our culture and history this summer than ever before. The numbers who attended and took part in the demonstrations or parades have been phenomenally larger than normal.

Other demonstrations attended by the majority of preceptories in Northern Ireland are organised on the last Saturday in August each year, usually across six different venues. A demonstration is also organised for the second Saturday in August in Fermanagh, attended by preceptories from Fermanagh, Cavan, Donegal and Monaghan. There is also one in Scotland, attended by all Scottish preceptories.

I will quote the official website of the Royal Black Institution:

"At the beginning of the 21st century, the Royal Black Institution is poised to continue its valuable role in maintaining its witness for the Christian Reformed Faith and fostering friendly relations among people of a common heritage on what is truly a worldwide scale."

The basis of the Royal Black Institution is the promotion of scripture, the principles of the Protestant Reformation, and religious freedom, democracy and liberty for all. The Royal Black Institution has preceptories throughout the world, mainly in the major English-speaking countries, and is particularly strong in Newfoundland, Canada. The society is also popular in Scotland—I see that some of my colleagues from Scotland are here today—where 60 preceptories exist, organised into 11 districts across the country. In Glasgow alone, 26 marches by the Royal Black Institution took place in the year 2009-10.

We walk on the last Saturday in August. This year, the demonstration will be held in Comber, which is in my constituency, for the whole of County Down. For those who love marching bands, the preceptories demonstration always brings an exceptional quality of bands. The Royal Black Preceptory members are well turned out, in suits, ties and in some cases bowler hats.

The society is formed from Orangemen and can be seen as a progression of that order, although they are separate institutions. Anyone wishing to be admitted to the Royal Black Institution must first become a member of an Orange Order Lodge, and many people are members of both. The Royal Black is often referred to as

"the senior of the loyal orders".

The Black's foundations are scriptural and it does not involve itself in politics or take "political" stances that sway towards one particular political party or another, while the Orange Order has traditionally been seen to play a more prominent role in Unionist politics. When people talk about "political rallies", that is why many Black preceptory members do not associate with such rallies.

I am a proud member of the Royal Black Preceptory 675, along with my brother Keith, and I walk proudly, understanding that when I walk I carry with me the weight and history of our nation. The fact is that the underlying principle of the Black is religious freedom, which I greatly appreciate and often speak about in this House. It means a lot to me and to all the other people whose fathers and grandfathers have proudly stood under the scriptural banners of the lodges. Although there may be some on either side of the divide who seek to make such walks a political action, as a politician I can proudly say that that is not my purpose when wearing my collarette. My purpose is to declare that I hold to the tenet of religious liberty for all, and cling to the right to express and celebrate my heritage and culture as a man who loves God, loves scripture, loves his community, loves culture and loves our marching season.

[Jim Shannon]

I will give a note to anyone in this House—right hon. Members or hon. Members—who invites me to any events on 12 July or the Black Saturday. For some reason, I will not be available. On those two occasions back home, I have a long-standing engagement of celebrating who I am. Although I really appreciate such invitations, I am sorry that I will not be able to take them up.

I thank Mr Deputy Speaker, the other Deputy Speakers and Mr Speaker, and the staff of this House, for their kindness to all of us as right hon. and hon. Members, including the catering staff, the security staff and especially *Hansard*, who often translate my Ulster Scots into English, which I appreciate very much; *Hansard* does very well. I wish all right hon. and hon. Members a very relaxing and peaceful holiday. They deserve the break. What a privilege it is to come to this House to represent our constituents. We are very privileged to do so and I thank the people of Strangford for giving me the chance to do that again.

3.48 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow all the hon. Members, on both sides of the House, who have expressed their passion and commitment to their constituencies today. As a new Member of this House, who has been here for only a few weeks, may I also express my thanks for the kindness and advice that everyone has offered me. Members from all parties and the staff, particularly in the Lobby but also elsewhere, have helped me. Every time I look a bit lost, someone comes to my aid and directs me to the Tea Room. Ladies and gentlemen, thank you all so much.

Before we go into recess, I know that some Members may be thinking about deck-chairs and warm prosecco, but I will not. Those pleasures will have to wait, because in Redditch my constituents are working, thanks to the record low levels of unemployment, which are now at a 42-year low. That means people in Redditch are working hard.

I pay tribute to our fantastic entrepreneurs in Redditch. I have made it my priority to back small businesses, and I have already visited two in my constituency—Ubi-Tech and Heartbeat—that are creating jobs at a record rate, which I welcome. We have seen unemployment in Redditch fall to a low of 2.1%, which is lower than the national average. That is fantastic news for all the residents who are taking advantage of opportunities to progress themselves and fulfil their potential.

I want to go further. I want to help everybody in Redditch who wants to get on in life, so I will be launching my Redditch mentor scheme over the summer recess. The scheme will be an opportunity for local entrepreneurs to work in schools and colleges to further young people's skills and raise their aspirations, and I am pleased to have already had some support from local businesses.

Young people sometimes face barriers to getting on in life, and we all need to do more. We talk a lot about mental health in this House, and I support and applaud those efforts, but we know we need to do more on the ground. I am also making it a focus to visit the wonderful organisations in Redditch that work so hard to help the

vulnerable people in our communities, notably: the Where Next Association, a charity that works with young people and older members of society with learning disabilities; Victim Support; Boys2Men; and the Sandycroft Centre. They are doing fantastic work on the ground, and I look forward to helping them join those efforts together so that everyone in our society can take advantage of the opportunities on offer.

We have seen our economy creating jobs at a record rate, and we have seen what happens when the economy does not work for everyone. We see youth unemployment across the rest of Europe spiralling out of control and blighting lives, so I welcome our Government's work to keep youth unemployment down, which helps all young people get a good start in life.

As other colleagues have said, fake news has sometimes blighted our election campaigns—the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) also alluded to this point. During the election, I struggled with a campaign to save the Alexandra, our local hospital. In truth, the Alex has never needed saving. The Alex is a fantastic hospital, and it was a very difficult issue for us to address in the election campaign. I call on everyone to stop using the national health service as a means to gather votes, because it does not help the hard-working doctors and nurses who have to deliver health services for patients in Redditch. It does not help them to address the issues that they are tackling admirably.

I thank the Secretary of State for Health and his Department, which yesterday announced that it would support our health services in Redditch and across Worcestershire by investing £29 million. That will help our hospital in Redditch to proceed with and deliver the results of the consultation that the clinical commissioning group decided on. I, like many others, was not happy with the consultation, which went against the wishes of Redditch people but continued for five years. There was so much uncertainty hanging over the people of Redditch that we now need to move on. We need to see the new services and investment delivered into our hospitals, which will ultimately see better care and better treatments for people in Redditch.

Finally, I say to all the EU citizens working in our national health service in Redditch, “You are welcome here, and we value the work that you do in treating our citizens in Redditch. We know you will be able to stay in this country after we leave the EU. We want you to feel welcome. We know that only 5% of NHS workers are from the EU, but you make a very significant contribution, so thank you for all the work you do.”

I wish everyone a very peaceful recess.

3.54 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): First, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the new Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) for an eloquent and informative maiden speech.

The issue I want to talk about is the Government's consultation on “Driving offences and penalties relating to causing death or serious injury” by dangerous driving. The consultation began in December 2016 and concluded on 1 February 2017. This year's snap election has resulted in many casualties, one way or another, and it would seem that this consultation is yet another. In response to a written question I tabled on 21 June 2017, asking

when the Ministry of Justice planned to publish its response to the consultation, I received the following reply:

“The government is now considering the consultation responses. Any announcement will be made in due course.”

Dissatisfied with that response, I raised the issue at business questions last week. The Leader of the House appeared to share my concern and promised to write to me, but as yet I have not received a letter—I am sure it will arrive at my office soon.

I raise this issue because of the tragic death of my constituent Joseph Brown-Lartey in November 2014. Joseph was killed, at the age of just 25, by a 19-year-old uninsured, unlicensed driver in a hire car who ran a red light at 80 mph in a 30 mph zone. He hit Joseph’s car. The impact was so great that the car was cut in two and Joseph was killed instantly. Just the previous day, that driver had posted a picture on Snapchat of his speedometer at 142 mph on the M62, with a boast that he had driven from Leeds to Rochdale in just 11 minutes. He was sentenced to just six years’ imprisonment, of which he is likely to serve three. He will very probably soon be released, but Joseph’s family are serving a life sentence with the loss of their beloved son.

I wrote to the Attorney General on behalf of Joseph’s family, asking for this sentence to be reconsidered, but the ruling was that it was in line with current guidelines and was therefore not considered to be “unduly lenient”. It is the belief of Joseph’s parents and myself, and many other affected families, that these guidelines are outdated and that the penalty does not match the severity of the crimes committed by dangerous drivers. The maximum sentence is 14 years, yet it is very rare that even this maximum sentence is imposed. Joseph’s parents, Dawn and Ian, have campaigned tirelessly under their “Justice for Joseph” campaign, championed by local radio station Key 103, to try to ensure that other families do not suffer the same sense of burning injustice that they have. They have handed in a petition, signed by more than 20,000 people, to 10 Downing Street, calling for tougher sentences for dangerous drivers. They have given the wreckage of Joseph’s car to Greater Manchester police, and it is being used to educate drivers, particularly young drivers, about the dangers of driving dangerously. Members may have seen the car outside Parliament in July last year and may, rightly, have been shocked to see it split completely in two. The road safety charity, Brake has given its full support to the campaign and has launched its own parallel campaign, “Roads to Justice”. Gary Rae, from Brake, has said:

“There are too many families who suffer the double trauma of losing a loved one in a sudden and violent way and then witness the judicial system turning its back on them.”

There was relief when the Government finally announced in December last year that a consultation was to be held, with the possibility of life sentences for those causing death or serious injury by dangerous driving. However, it is now July 2017, we are about to go into recess and still there is no sign of the outcome of the consultation. In the meantime, many families sadly have been and continue to be affected by this gross injustice.

At the launch of the “Roads to Justice” campaign, I met a constituent of the Prime Minister. Mark Hollands’ daughter Bryony was tragically killed by a drunk driver who came off the road and struck her while she was

walking along the pavement. Bryony’s killer was given an eight-year sentence, of which he will serve four. Bryony was a 19-year-old music student. Since her death, her father has campaigned tirelessly for tougher sentences and raised funds for the music therapy charity Nordoff Robbins, in his daughter’s memory. Bryony’s father contacted me today to say that the family should have been attending her graduation ceremony in Sheffield this very afternoon.

In Aldershot in November last year, two young runners, Lucy Pygott and Stacey Burrows, were killed by a drunk driver while out training. Their killer, a soldier, got just six years, of which he will serve three. As Lucy’s mother said:

“The British Army trains soldiers to kill—this man killed with his loaded weapon of a hot-hatch car.”

Sadly, the list goes on and on. I recently wrote to the Secretary of State for Justice to ask for information on the progress of the consultation, and I highlighted two more cases. One was in Oldham; two young girls aged 11 and 12 were killed, yet the driver, who fled the scene, received a sentence of just four years, of which he will serve two. One was in St Helens in May this year; a four-year-old was killed and her grandmother seriously injured by the driver of a stolen car that mounted the pavement at speed, with the driver also fleeing the scene. When he was finally arrested and charged, he received a sentence of nine years, of which he will serve four and a half.

While the Government delay, the families who lose loved ones in such horrific and entirely avoidable circumstances should not be made to suffer the added injustice of such lenient treatment of the killers. I am keen for the Government to make clear their intentions as soon as possible, for the sake of the victims and their families, who have suffered enough. I am extremely grateful to have had the opportunity to raise this hugely important matter today.

4.1 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), not only for that moving speech, but for showing a lot of fight on behalf of the victims in those terrible cases. I pay tribute to her campaign for justice, which I hope she continues with; we will all support her in that endeavour.

I wish to raise the case of a constituent, Mr Chris Francis of Constable Road in Sudbury. He contacted me almost a year ago today to express his concerns about a large metal barrier that had been erected across the garden gate at the rear of his property. When I first heard about it, I thought it was perhaps just another constituency case, but he explained that he is blind and used the gate to safely and easily access his property with his guide dog, Nimbus. Central to his concern about the barrier was the fact that he would no longer be able to use his back door as an exit in an emergency—I emphasise that we are talking about an emergency. Mr Francis was not notified or consulted by Calibre Homes, the company that erected the barrier.

I went out to Constable Road to see the houses, all ex-council houses that back on to an estate called Suffolk Court. The company that manages the estate had erected the barriers outside rear gates that had been

[James Cartlidge]

used for many years. Suddenly, the residents of these houses woke up to find that they could not open or close them. The barriers were covered in anti-burglar paint, they were ugly and, in my view, the way they had been built was aggressive.

In November, I went back to see Mr Francis to update him on the progress of his case, or lack of it. I had been telling Babergh District Council that I thought the residents had a right of way, and asked the council to help me to prove that; the council was going through the inevitably slow legal process of doing so. When I went to see Mr Francis in November, I was shocked to discover that he had suffered a severe stroke—a right-sided total anterior circulation infarct. Mr Francis is 62 and, as I said, blind. He is a Royal Air Force veteran: he was a parachuting instructor in the RAF for 10 years. He then set up his own parachute school. He was a very active man and has lived a brilliant life.

When I saw him that day, he was in a most distressing state. His sister, Anne, who has been a stalwart by his side, explained to me the circumstances of his stroke. She came to Mr Francis's property to find that he had collapsed at the front door. She could not go through the front door because his key was in it, so immediately called the ambulance service, which tried to access the house from the rear.

The report states that

“the delay in getting into the property was due to a tall metal fence, which obstructed their ability to get through to the back of the property. It was in fact so high it was unsafe for them to climb over to gain entry. Therefore, they requested the attendance of the Police to gain access.”

The police report states:

“There was no safe entry point to the front of the property as the male had collapsed by the front door. Efforts to get to the rear of the property to assess an entry point were severely hampered by the large fencing. I was eventually able to scale it after using a wheelie bin to get some extra height. Not all officers would have been able to do this...In relation to delay, I would say the fencing added about 10 minutes to police gaining entry...This would have removed a delay of medical attention by about 30 minutes as Ambulance on arrival would have been able to go straight into the property.”

In other words, if the barrier had not been there, there would have been an extra 30 minutes for an ambulance to attend to this man suffering a stroke. Everyone in the Chamber will know that the NHS has an acronym for treating stroke, and that is FAST, because the speed of treatment is critical. My constituent suffers from significantly reduced mobility, speech and wellbeing. He relies on considerable assistance from his sister and family and requires a wheelchair.

My main reason for raising this case is that I believe that Calibre Homes—I have corresponded with the company and it has shown no willingness to remove the barriers, has been unable to justify them and, in my view, has been most aggressive—has in effect contributed to the severity of the stroke suffered by my constituent, a blind veteran. That is absolutely shocking. In fact, it has continued with that rather belligerent attitude. Anne Francis, the sister of my constituent, has been in communication with Calibre Homes, pleading for the removal of the fence to help him have a better quality of

life. Indeed, the Suffolk County Council occupational therapist has reported on access possibilities, stating that

“the front wheelchair access is not practical in part due to the shared porch and part the gradient required...I would think they have a strong case if disability is the issue, and the rear is the only wheelchair access”.

Mr Francis requires an electric wheelchair that needs to be housed outside but requires rear access. We have asked Calibre Homes, which has refused to grant this permission or remove the fence.

I ask Members to bear in mind that, in my view, that barrier is unjustified because those residents have a right of way. They had been walking out of the back of their homes for donkey's years and suddenly they woke up to find these things straight out of an American penitentiary centre stuck in the concrete at the back of their houses, covered in burglar paint. It is absolutely reprehensible.

I want to finish with a point about Calibre Homes. I have been in correspondence with the company. It is aggressive in the way that it writes, it could not care less about my constituent and it has shown not a shred of humanity or compassion for someone who is suffering severely and has served this country. I wish Mr Francis well in his recovery, I will work with Babergh District Council to try to prove the right of way for those residents and I will fight his corner. He is vulnerable and needs me to do that. I will fight for him and my constituents against this company, which has no scruples.

4.7 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I echo the comments of the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) about the warm welcome that has been extended to new Members. I pay particular tribute to our staff in the SNP Whips Office, who have supported me in my meteoric rise to deputy assistant junior Whip.

I want to mention the proposed closures of Parkhead and Easterhouse jobcentres within my Glasgow East constituency. These proposed closures are ill-thought-out and will have a deeply damaging impact on some of the most vulnerable communities in Glasgow's east end where access to transport and digital connectivity are major barriers. Ministers on the Treasury Bench would do well to come to Glasgow and see for themselves the havoc that these proposals would cause to an already fragile community. My main subject today is a difficult and deeply upsetting one. I must confess, I even thought twice about whether to speak about it at all, but it is incumbent on me to speak up because those who I want to speak for cannot speak up for themselves. They are the children and babies with life-threatening and life-limiting conditions, children who never live long enough to go to nursery or school.

Many right hon. and hon. Members will have experienced the joy of becoming a parent. Most, if they are lucky, will have a trouble-free pregnancy and a safe delivery. Some of us have gone through a difficult pregnancy, and the child is born prematurely or in dangerous circumstances. My own son Isaac was born prematurely and spent the first two weeks of his life in an intensive care and special care unit. We are indebted to the staff at NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde for all of the care, love and support they provided to him during that time.

Isaac eventually left hospital, and he is a happy, if cheeky, little boy. However, on or before birth, some parents have to face the sobering, tragic reality that they will outlive their children, which is utterly unimaginable, yet, sadly, a reality for the families of approximately 50,000 children on these islands.

In preparing for this debate, I was incredibly grateful to my constituent and friend, Louise Gillan from Springboig, who shared with me her personal experience of having a child with complex health needs. Her daughter, Erin, was diagnosed with a rare condition at the age of two.

Across the UK, there is a mixed picture when it comes to the funding of children's palliative care. Together for Short Lives quite rightly wants the UK Government to follow the lead of the Scottish Government, who have allocated £30 million over five years to children's hospices, so that there is parity of funding with adult hospices. Children in England, Wales and Northern Ireland deserve the same recognition, opportunity and support as those in Scotland.

At this juncture, I want to pay tribute to the hon. Members for Colchester (Will Quince) and for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) for speaking so personally and movingly about their own experiences of being bereaved of a child. The hon. Gentleman did excellent work in the last Parliament to build interest and momentum around the concept of parental bereavement leave, which both Labour and the Conservatives included in their election manifestos. I am pleased that, in the past 24 hours, the Government have committed to introducing bereavement leave and supporting the private Member's Bill of the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake).

The main issue I want to raise today is the cruel anomaly of not paying the mobility component of Disability Living Allowance for children under three years old. This has been dubbed the baby benefit bar. Children under three with life-shortening conditions often depend on ventilators and large equipment to stay alive. Some babies and children have permanent wheelchairs, as they are not able to use buggies suitable for well children of the same age. The wheelchairs are heavy because of the equipment needed to secure them to a vehicle.

All this leads me to conclude that exclusion from the mobility component of DLA is as inherently unfair as it is illogical. Calling on the UK Government to include the under threes in the mobility component of DLA is a small ask, but it is one that could enormously support and transform the lives of the families of children with short lives. These additional mobility needs are already recognised in other areas of Government policy. Children under three who depend on bulky medical equipment, or need to be near their vehicle in case they need emergency medical treatment, are already eligible for a blue parking badge, so excluding them from the DLA component is clearly an anomaly.

What we are talking about here is the difference of just £58 a week, which is a drop in the ocean for the Government when we consider just how few families this will affect, but it will have the potential to move some of those families away from unnecessary poverty.

I want to share with the House this testimony from a parent of a child receiving palliative care. They told us:

"My daughter has had a tracheotomy with a ventilator attached 24/7 since the age of eight months. She needs these for an undiagnosed neuromuscular condition. She cannot support herself at all. Carrying her, her vent, her suction machine, her oxygen, her emergency equipment to our car and back for two years was extremely difficult. We ended up selling our family car and purchasing a wheelchair accessible vehicle privately as it just became too hard to carry her as she grew."

Time is not on the side of these families. The best that we can do is to be on their side.

4.13 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is a pleasure to be called to speak in this debate. One person who must be looking forward to the recess is the speech writer of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is sadly no longer in his place, given the number of contributions that the hon. Gentleman makes in Parliament. He is probably busy writing an intervention for tonight's Adjournment debate. It was certainly interesting to hear the hon. Gentleman's comments.

I have three issues that I wish to raise. Hopefully, they will be the subject of some attention before we return in September. The first is the school funding formula. It was great to hear the announcements that were made earlier this week, which reflected much of the lobbying that had been done by Torbay schools. The next part is ensuring that we get the detailed figures for what it means per school, especially as it will mean that we can rebut some of the stuff that has been put out on the internet. I am looking forward to seeing the figures, and I know that many schools in Torbay will appreciate having the certainty that they will represent.

The key issue that I hope will be worked on over the summer relates to transport issues in my constituency. The first is around finally sorting out the remaining funding needed to deliver the first new station in Torbay for decades—at Edginswell. There is a strong business case, with local enterprise partnership support and £4 million in match funding, and the council has been told that delivery would be relatively easy, with planning permission in place and a site that is ready to go. I hope that the Department for Transport will decide to cut at least £1.5 million off the total cost of delivery by insisting that Network Rail covers the costs of realigning the track, which locally we suggest is a maintenance task.

The project has gone through all the GRIP—governance for railway investment projects—stage 3 documentation for Network Rail. The moment there is an announcement on funding from the new stations fund, a start could be made. I know that the council is keen to invest and the operator is keen to provide services. It would send a huge message about our ambitions in the bay, not least in developing the business park at Edginswell and supporting the nearby hospital, which has had numerous staff access issues, because a convenient train service would make a real difference. New housing estates are being built nearby, so the station would open up opportunities for residents to find jobs in the bay and slightly further afield. I hope that we can take the project forward when we return in September.

I also hope that by the time we return in September there will have been some progress on CrossCountry's proposals for a new train timetable. The initial proposals produced last year were nothing short of disgraceful.

[Kevin Foster]

CrossCountry attempted to portray them as an “improvement to your services”, even though that poster was on a platform at Torquay station from which all the services would be scrapped. I was pleased that those proposals were withdrawn, but discussions are still ongoing. I hope that by September we will have received confirmation that Torbay will definitely stay on track. I hope that families coming to the bay for a holiday will not have to change trains with their luggage at a busy Exeter St David’s station to what is joyfully called a “metro service” but is actually a commuter train that is likely to be overcrowded at particular times of the day and on which seats cannot be reserved.

One of my priorities over the recess will be to campaign with local residents on another transport issue: reinstating the bus services that were lost when Local Link, a local operator, ceased all its local routes back in April. Many have been reinstated—I am thinking of the No. 60, in particular—with a community bus operator or an alternative operator, but residents in Torbay Park, Ellacombe and the Lichfield Avenue area of Barton are still waiting. Given the topography of Torquay—the town of seven hills—someone might not be all that far from a bus route as the crow flies, but if that journey involves walking up a steep hill, for many elderly residents their bus pass becomes almost useless. If getting to the bus stop is fine, coming back might not be. I have started a petition, which I hope to present to the House in September. It is vital that we campaign for the return of those services, particularly given the information I have received that a route on a not-for-profit basis could well be viable. It is about sorting out capital funding for a new bus that would allow the service to be delivered.

Politics in Torbay is always at its best when we are talking about policies and delivery, not bickering about structures and personalities. That point will have particular prominence today back in the bay, given a meeting that is going on. I hope that all those elected to serve the most beautiful bay in the UK will remember that that must be the focus of their time and energy, and I hope that people see that it is the focus of my energies in this House.

I am conscious of time and know that other Members wish to speak, so I will draw my remarks to a close. I am looking forward to the recess because, as some Members will know, I got married on 10 June. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] Thank you. Many things had to be cancelled because of a decision made by the other woman in my life—Mrs May, not Mrs Foster. For example, my stag night ended up being an election count, Hazel’s hen night was cancelled and our honeymoon was postponed. Hopefully we will find some time over the recess to have our honeymoon—as Hazel pointed out, the trip up to London this week to cover my office for a couple of days was not really what she was looking forward to. Recess will certainly be busy. I wish everyone in the House, including you, Mr Deputy Speaker, a very enjoyable and productive break.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Happy honeymoon.

4.19 pm

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): May I, on behalf of all the House, start by warmly congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) on his wedding and wish him a very happy honeymoon, whenever that takes place?

I thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for this opportunity to raise a few issues that can be crowded out in the ordinary course of busy parliamentary business. In doing so, I will unapologetically focus on Cheltenham, because one thing I have learned over the last two years is that, for all the cynicism about our democratic process, Parliament does, indeed, remain the forum in which we can seek effective redress for our constituents and speak truth to power. We saw that in action with the Government’s welcome decision last week to allocate more frontline funding for our secondary schools, and my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) and I saw it in the last Parliament, with the passage of legislation to extend the maximum sentence for stalking, following the terrible ordeal of a Cheltenham GP.

I would like to take the opportunity at the outset to congratulate all the students who are receiving awards at the National Star College leavers award ceremony in Gloucestershire. The National Star College, for those who do not know it, is an independent specialist further education college for people with physical disabilities, acquired brain injuries and associated learning difficulties. It is an extraordinary place; no one who visits it can fail to be moved by what is being achieved by staff and students alike.

What I want to talk about specifically today is Cheltenham General Hospital. We in Cheltenham value our hospital greatly. Members might think that that is a truism, but it is particularly the case in a town of 115,000 people. Only this morning, I received a message from a constituent, who referred to Cheltenham General, stating:

“My wife has been admitted there four times in the past two years—three times for surgery—and on each occasion—from the first visit of the paramedics to the A&E staff and on the various wards she has received the most wonderful attention—professional, kind, caring and patient.”

What a wonderful tribute, and it is not unusual. It is echoed by the findings of the recent Care Quality Commission report. Inspectors describe staff as “committed, caring and compassionate”. They also observed “exceptional teamwork”, particularly when a department was under pressure.

However, there is an issue about our night-time A&E. In 2013, Cheltenham General’s A&E service was downgraded. Blue light services were diverted to Gloucestershire Royal Hospital. Although night-time A&E notionally remained, and indeed remains, open for GP referrals and walk-ins, the reality is that a major service change took place. The emergency nurse practitioners, who do a magnificent job of holding the fort, do not have doctor support to assist them. That is important, because in the CQC report I referred to a few moments ago, medical and nursing staff raised concerns with inspectors about medical cover at night. To their great credit, consultants regularly work longer hours to support their junior colleagues. The CQC was not convinced that that was sustainable, and nor am I. That is notwithstanding the fact that the care that has been delivered is co-ordinated and multi-discipline.

What needs to be done? There is a clear problem with the recruitment of middle-grade doctors in A&E not just in Cheltenham but across the piece—the trust has made that clear, and the evidence bears it out. That is why I have called for a debate on the issue in this place, and I take the opportunity to raise it now.

Improving incentives for middle-grade A&E doctors is a crucial part of the long-term solution. In the short term, I welcome the fact that the trust is looking closely at providing an urgent care centre at Cheltenham General Hospital—something that was reported in the local paper, the *Gloucestershire Echo*, in March this year. Only today, we heard my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove) extol the virtues of urgent care centres, because they provide urgent care, as the name might suggest, and, crucially, divert patients from accident and emergency—something we all have an interest in. An urgent care centre would see emergency nurse practitioners supported by GPs, which I welcome. However, that will take place only if we as a country increase the pipeline of GPs in our surgeries, and that means addressing the issue of rising GP indemnity—or insurance—premiums, which I have referred to previously.

The key point is that the people of Cheltenham want Cheltenham's A&E to be preserved and enhanced. I have made that point in the past and I will continue to make it. Some have raised with me a concern about whether the downgrading of night-time A&E was simply the thin end of the wedge that would presage the end of A&E in Cheltenham. After my election in 2015, I met representatives of the trust to make precisely that point and to raise precisely that concern. I was given a clear assurance regarding A&E's future; there was no suggestion of its demise. That was also the case in the following year, 2016, when I met the then chief executive, who described rumours of A&E closing as “blatant scaremongering” and confirmed:

“What we said to you on 5 June 2015 still stands and the board has not changed its position on A&E at Cheltenham General.”

I welcome that robust commitment to A&E. It must remain in place. Crucially, it must remain in place notwithstanding the recent finding of financial mismanagement at the trust—which, I should stress, predates the appointment of the current chief executive and chairman, who are doing an excellent job in uncovering these problems.

Retaining and enhancing A&E at Cheltenham General must remain a service priority. I say that because the idea that a resident in Battledown, Oakley, Charlton Kings or Charlton Park to the east of Cheltenham can readily get to A&E at Gloucestershire Royal hospital, having to travel all the way down the Golden Valley bypass and the A40 in a big traffic jam, is for the birds. Those of us who live there know that that is not a realistic or optimal solution.

Finally, I want to pay tribute to two constituents of mine, Lynda and Philip Hodder. Mr and Mrs Hodder are the parents-in-law of a young Australian woman who, in June of this year, was, very sadly, killed in Borough Market in the terrorist atrocities. The young woman who was killed was referred to by some as “the angel of London Bridge” because of the way that she sought to aid others who were coming under attack. The dignity, fortitude and courage shown by my constituents has been enormously humbling. It is what has fortified me in making the representations that I have made

about how we go about addressing the issue of those who are suspected and even convicted of terrorist offences in this country.

The point that my constituents have made to me, with a power that only people in that position can, is that while of course in a free society we rightly take account of the human rights of all people who come into contact with our criminal justice system—and yes, that must mean people who come into contact with it for terrorism offences—let us never forget that the most fundamental human right of all is the right to life of people who are innocent, decent, hard-working, law-abiding members of our community doing nothing more than going about their business, whether at Borough Market or anywhere else. Their rights must always be put first.

It is a huge privilege to be able to raise the concerns of my constituents in this great place, and to seek redress on their behalf. Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to do so. I wish you and all Members of this House a very happy and restful recess.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I call Nigel Evans.

4.28 pm

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): Tail-end Charlie. [*Laughter.*] Me, not you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

We have heard some powerful speeches here today, especially from my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk). I, too, lost a constituent, at the Manchester Arena. We need to do a lot more to support the families of those who survive after the loss of loved ones. The hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) made a brilliant speech. If she wants to go to see any Ministers about increasing the sentences of these killers in motor vehicles, there are a lot of Conservative Members who will go with her to give support to that. The hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) and I have a lot in common. He said he had a meteoric rise; I had a meteoric fall. I know which one I would prefer. I wish him good luck in his new job.

I have just two issues to raise. First, I am sure everyone in the Chamber was sickened by the news of the death of Cecil the lion two years ago, and today the news has come out that the son of Cecil has been shot by a trophy killer. What is wrong with the people who get any pleasure whatsoever from killing these beautiful endangered animals? If they want to shoot a lion, they should use a camera, and future generations would then be able to enjoy these wonderful creatures. I hope the Government will bring pressure to bear on the Governments of countries that allow such killers into their countryside to kill these beautiful creatures.

The second issue I want to raise is exactly the same as that mentioned by the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders)—the leasehold freehold scam in our country. What is going on in Ribble Valley was brought to my attention before the general election. I do not know whether it is a north-west thing or is going on throughout the entire country. People are being recommended by builders to solicitors who then do not, funnily enough, point out or indeed emphasise the fact that the ground rents they will pay, which may start off at a relatively modest amount, will double

[Mr Nigel Evans]

every 10 years for the next 50 years, so at the end of that period they may be paying £10,000 a year in ground rent to live in a house that they have paid for. It is an absolute scandal.

This is blighting the properties that people are now trying to sell. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that some building societies will not touch them or lend anybody money to buy them. Even worse, when people are about to buy a property, they are told, “Oh, you can buy the freehold later on. Don’t worry about that.” What has happened in the Ribble Valley? People went to Taylor Wimpey and said, “You said we had two years to buy the freehold. Well, we’d like to buy it.” They were expecting to pay £4,500, but they were told that the leases had been sold on to another company for a sum of money, and we are now talking about a considerable sum of money that the people wanting to buy the freehold will have to pay to an independent, third company. They were not told by Taylor Wimpey that that would happen.

I want to give one vivid example, which is the test case of Trevor and Margaret Knowell, who live on Calderstones Green in Whalley. They bought their property in 2011, when they were informed that they had a two-year window within which to buy the property’s leasehold. They contacted Taylor Wimpey’s legal team before the two years had expired, and they were told they were unable to purchase the leasehold because the negotiations with a third party were “too far gone” to halt and the leasehold was then sold to E & J Estates for £7,000. Having contacted E & J Estates, Mr Knowell bought the lease for £38,000, just months after the lease had been sold for £7,000.

I say to the Government—our manifesto said that we would get some reforms in this area—that this scam must be made illegal. We have to protect people unknowingly and unwittingly buying these properties who are then left wide open to being fleeced by a third party. The developer does not appear to care at all about putting people in an invidious position, and in any case should they really suggest solicitors to act on behalf of people who are buying their properties? That should also be made illegal, so that people get proper, independent advice. Had they been warned about this in the first place, such people would not have touched these houses, and the developers would not have been able to fabricate a scam that is now inflicting misery on so many people around this country.

4.33 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): I am pleased to be making my first appearance at the Dispatch Box as the shadow Deputy Leader of the House. I am very grateful to Members on both sides of the House for their kind words. I look forward to playing my role in continuing to ensure an open, modern Parliament, and one that reflects the priorities of the many in this country, not the few.

This is an important moment for our country and our democracy, and indeed for Parliament. Clement Attlee once said:

“Democracy means government by discussion, but it is only effective if you can stop people talking.”

The interim Prime Minister tried that with her call for “no running commentary” on Brexit, but this Parliament and the people who send us here have been clear that we will discuss, debate and vote on the most significant change to legislation our country has seen in the past 40 years in this Session. Where it is in the interests of those we are proud to represent, we will be very pleased to work with Government Members. Our duty in this place is not yah-boo, but can-do. If by collaborating we can improve the lives of working people, that is what we must do.

I know from my own experience of working with Ministers since I came to the House two years ago, on issues such as the safety of towed trailers and improving apprenticeship opportunities, that we can make progress together. Where we have common ground, we must and will continue that approach. Since last we recessed, we have our new permanent memorial to our friend Jo Cox here to remind us that we do, indeed, have more in common.

Although hon. Members will be taking a vacation this summer, the daily struggle of millions of people to pay the bills knows no summer break. That is why colleagues from all parts of the House will, I know, be working hard to continue to help constituents.

We have heard this afternoon from many hon. Members about the issues that are close to their hearts, and it has been a pleasure to listen to Members from all parts of the House. We have had a magnificent maiden speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda), who talked about austerity and its effect on Reading, and the need for a good relationship with the people of Reading as we leave the United—[*Laughter.*] That would be a step too far; I meant the European Union. I am a very collaborative person. My hon. Friend also spoke about the need for more affordable housing, particularly in the south of England. I am delighted to have another Labour colleague further down the M4, as we repopulate the M4 corridor with Labour Members.

We have heard a number of excellent speeches. My right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) talked, as he does so eloquently and regularly, about Yemen and the effects of cholera there at the moment. He is sending us all away on the Pioppi diet for the recess, and I am looking forward to partaking of that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) talked about the NHS trust in his area and leasehold reform. He was joined in the latter by my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), who described what is going on with leasehold reform as

“the PPI of the house building industry”

and pointed out that if it continues, an Englishman’s home will no longer be his castle; it will be a revenue stream for offshore companies.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) spoke eloquently about the CAPA provision for sixth-formers in her constituency, and I hope that she will be able to ensure that the dreams of the young people of Wakefield are realised. My hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glendon) talked about the sugar tax and the need to combat the obesity epidemic. My hon. Friend the Member for Heywood

and Middleton (Liz McInnes) spoke very movingly, as I have heard her do in other debates, about the need for justice for people who are severely affected by dangerous driving. I, too, look forward to the Government's consultation on that important issue.

If there was a theme among the many speeches that we have heard today, it was austerity and its impact. Several Conservative Members talked about urgent care centres and the impact of austerity on A&E departments, which is also a serious concern in my constituency. The hon. Members for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge), for Corby (Tom Pursglove) and for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) talked about those matters. I welcome the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) to the House. She talked about the importance of EU citizens in her constituency.

As we head into the summer recess, it is worth reflecting on the contrasting nature of the weeks ahead, and comparing Labour Members with Conservative ones. I suspect that Conservative Members may be in for a more torrid and turbulent time. While I and my Labour colleagues will be returning to our constituencies to prepare for government—[*Interruption*—]—focusing squarely ahead on the priorities of those we represent, Conservative Members will be looking over their shoulders for the next leadership bid, the next denial of ambition or the next briefing against, while perusing the latest betting odds that might tell them who to back in the inevitable contest.

Hon. Members who have spoken in previous summer Adjournment debates have offered sage vacation advice. Indeed, we have been invited to Southend to join in this year's carnival. My constituency of Bristol South is not known as a tourist destination, but if colleagues find themselves there, they might find time to visit the excellent Windmill Hill city farm and the splendidly rebuilt Ashton Gate stadium, where they could watch quality championship football when Bristol City kick off against Barnsley on 5 August. It will be the first step, I am told, in this year's promotion quest.

Finally, I wish hon. Members, the men and women who protect us, and the staff who serve us so well in these Houses a peaceful summer, and thank them for all that they do. In particular, may I congratulate and thank all those involved in suddenly closing down Parliament for the election and then resuming the services for continuing and new Members? It was a massive management and operational task. We should be grateful to them and I wish them some well-earned rest.

4.40 pm

The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Michael Ellis): It is always a pleasure to be under your jurisdiction, Mr Deputy Speaker.

May I start by warmly welcoming the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) to her position as shadow Deputy Leader of the House? I look forward to working with her on those collaborative and common-ground issues on which we can work together. I am sure we will continue to do that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger) started this afternoon's debate. He puts his views extremely powerfully on the record. I am not going to say anything more about that.

The right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) spoke once more about Yemen, an issue that is very close to his heart. He is a doughty campaigner, a powerful advocate for a wide variety of causes. He is not in his place because he has business elsewhere. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office is fully engaged on the issue of the appalling cholera epidemic in Yemen and, of course, this Government are honouring the 0.7% GDP commitment to international development. I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on his newly elected position on the new all-party parliamentary group on immigration and visas.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) spoke about a very wide variety of issues, from a visit from Her Royal Highness the Countess of Wessex to his belief that the BBC would be somewhat cheaper if he had a presenter's job. I think that is probably true, and maybe he should consider making an application. He always thanks and congratulates a wide variety of people in his constituency, and I know that they will very much appreciate being mentioned in this House. He is such a superb representative of his constituency and works very hard to represent everyone there.

The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) spoke next. He too is a powerful advocate, especially on the issue that several Members mentioned—leaseholders and freeholds and land rights. He is a doughty force as co-chair of the APPG on leasehold and commonhold reform. He does a powerful job as an advocate in that area, and I congratulate him on his work.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) was, of course, responsible for the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. He got it on the statute book, which is a great accolade and a huge credit to him for his work in that quarter. He spoke about his fight for a smoke-free Britain and about war crimes, the importance of human rights and the issue of caste. He speaks regularly on issues that cross party divides—issues that we can all understand and support. I know that he is widely admired and respected by all quarters of society in his constituency, particularly those of the minority ethnic community, who very much appreciate his powerful representation on their behalf.

The hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) gave his maiden speech, on which I congratulate him. I welcome him to this place. He spoke proudly of his constituency and spoke very well of his predecessors. I wish him well. I am sure that he will be an asset to his party. One of his predecessors whom he did not mention was none other than Rufus Isaacs, whose priorities, although more than 100 years ago, also included land reform, before world war one, as well as the legal standing of unions. He was a Liberal Member, but history remembers him very kindly.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) spoke powerfully about the flood disaster in 2007. Everyone remembers it as an appalling incident. He described how he organised a group of people to help his community and we thank him for that. He encouraged people to sign up to the Environment Agency's text alert system, and I join him in that. He spoke of the importance of local media. As constituency Members of Parliament, we all know how important our local

[Michael Ellis]

media are. My hon. Friend spoke of resilience, communities sticking together, leadership and a shared purpose. I support him and second his comments.

The hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) spoke about a performing arts school in her constituency and how she had greatly enjoyed a production of “West Side Story”. She spoke so compellingly about it that I wish I had seen it. I have looked into the matter that she raised and she should receive a reply. She said that she had not received one and I shall follow that up. I will also forward her concerns to the Department for Education. I note that she said that she would welcome Channel 4. I hope her area could pay salaries commensurate with what might be expected.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) also spoke about BBC salaries. That is, of course, a matter for the BBC, but there is disappointment about apparent gender disparity. Lord Hall has said that it was not where they wanted to be. My hon. Friend also spoke about Travellers and acknowledged that the law has dramatically improved in that area, but he wants a further robust approach and I think that many people in and outside his constituency would support him in that.

It was typically kind and considerate of the hon. Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie) to think of the staff of Members who were not returned at the election. There is a unique contractual situation in this place for those staff—it is not the most secure position. Of course, it is the responsibility of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority to keep those matters under review and I encourage him to speak to IPSA. He made some points with which I saw colleagues from different parties nodding in agreement.

My hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove) is a frequent and powerful contributor in the Chamber. He spoke about the Corby Urgent Care Centre, where there are 70,000 patients, only 6% of whom needed to be referred on to hospital. The centre clearly does a good job. I am concerned that my hon. Friend is worried about it. I strongly recommend that the clinical commissioning group in the area meet him and that they work together. He is another doughty campaigner and he should get the support of everyone in his community in working for the wider interest there and the valuable urgent care centre.

The hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) spoke about the refugee crisis around the world and issues that are important to his constituency, including HMRC and immigration rules. Doubtless, many will have noted the power of his comments.

My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) was full of praise, rightly, if I may say so, for Ministers—I think it was for Ministers in other Departments, not for me—as regards school funding. She said that there was more for schools in her constituency. There is more for other constituencies across the country, thanks to this Government. She is working with other Conservatives in her area to achieve a great deal for her constituency.

The hon. Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon) was complimentary to the soft drinks industry for the work it is doing on a plan to reduce sugar. There is

always more that can be done, of course, as I am sure she would accept. She is right to fight against the problem of obesity, which is life-limiting and has an adverse and deleterious effect on the health of young people—on the health of people of all ages. No doubt she will continue her fight in that quarter.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) spoke very fondly and movingly of Lucy, his staff member. I would like to mention her from this Dispatch Box as well. I do not know her, but I have no doubt that she has done a wonderful job for him. He also spoke of the aggression and intimidation he has received in his constituency. I know that that will not succeed against my hon. Friend. He is a powerful advocate for everyone in his constituency, and will no doubt reject and completely oppose those who use aggression and intimidation to try to get their way. The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) proposed some radical reforms to leasehold, and no doubt he will pursue his cause with the passion that I know he has in this quarter. We will have to see where that takes us.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) spoke about St Helier Hospital, and said it had the best A&E, with wonderful staff, I am sure. He spoke of the fracture and renal units there. I take this opportunity to thank the staff at that hospital and all our NHS staff around the country for the work they do to help those who need medical attention. There is work to do for that hospital, my hon. Friend said, and I am sure he will be a powerful advocate for it.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke about the Royal Black Preceptory, which was formed in 1797, and is apparently often called the senior of the loyal orders fraternal societies. I know that all Members in this House would want to wish everyone and all the communities in Northern Ireland all the very best.

My hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) is a new Member and I welcome her to this place. She says that her priority is to support small businesses, and rightly so. The unemployment rate in her constituency stands at 2.1%, so she is obviously doing a good job. She also spoke about fake news. We have to stop false or fake news reports worrying voters unnecessarily. Other Members also mentioned that. I know that my hon. Friend will be an advocate for her constituents’ interests in this House, hopefully for many years.

The hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) spoke very movingly about the death of Joseph and many others. There was an appalling collision in Joseph’s case and in other cases. Understandably, she is concerned about the apparent disparity between the sentencing and what those in society whom she is campaigning with would see as right. My heart goes out to all the families she mentioned, and there are so many others. Law changes take time. She is a powerhouse of a campaigner, and I am sure she will continue her work. I understand that a response to the consultation is hoped for soon.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartledge) spoke about an important piece of constituency casework. I recommend that Calibre Homes conduct

themselves with appropriate care when it comes to my hon. Friend and have respect for his role as Member of Parliament for his constituency.

The hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) spoke movingly and powerfully about children with complex needs. I know that Her Majesty's Government are working with Motability on the particular point that he raised. He also spoke movingly about his son. His family must be proud of him for being here, and it must be difficult for him to be some distance from Glasgow East when he is serving his constituents in this House.

My hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) had a list of local issues. From his speech, it will be obvious to anyone who did not already know it that he is an active local representative. He spoke of the beautiful bay that he represents and mentioned the fact that he was married on 10 June. I congratulate him and wish him well. I presume that his being here today is part of his honeymoon. I hope that he will be keeping an eye on his emails in the weeks ahead. I wish him all the very best.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) was one of a number of Members who spoke passionately about their local hospital. He is fighting for, and with, Cheltenham General Hospital. His is a powerful voice, and he is a hard-working Member here. He says that he has been given repeated assurances about his hospital. He also spoke about the dignity and fortitude of the relatives of people who have been killed, particularly in terrorist attacks. I endorse what he said, and I offer the respect of everyone in the House for those family members. Our hearts go out to them in these difficult times.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans) said that, as the last Member to speak, he was the tail-end Charlie. Others have called him other things, but one thing he certainly does is speak powerfully in the House. I know that millions will agree with what he said about Cecil the lion's son being killed by a poacher. We all hope that the maximum force of the law will be applied to those who kill wildlife and endangered animals in that way. My hon. Friend also spoke about ground rent issues. I would say that those he is up against in his constituency and elsewhere ought to be careful, because he is one of the men in grey suits who are spoken of apocryphally and who get things done in this place and elsewhere. In all seriousness, the scams that are perpetrated on our constituents must be dealt with.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I should like to take this opportunity to thank you, Mr Speaker and the other Deputy Speakers, as well as all the staff—the parliamentary staff, the constituency staff and the civil service staff—and I wish everyone all the very best for a peaceful summer.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I, too, wish everyone a very safe recess. Please take your safety and security seriously over the summer, and we look forward to September. I thank all the staff involved in keeping us safe, fed and looked after in this House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

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

4.59 pm

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I should like to associate myself with what you and the Deputy Leader of the House have said in thanking everyone for looking after us. I have a question on a bit of procedure. It is a shame that Mr Speaker is not in the Chair, because he might have been able to give me a slightly more forceful answer. You have just put the Question to the House at the end of our debate. I understand that when more people are in favour, you say, "The Ayes have it, the Ayes have it", and when more are against, you say, "The Noes have it, the Noes have it." What happens if there are equal numbers on each side? Would you say, "The ties have it, the ties have it"?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Very good! No, what I would say is, "I have it. I have it." And if anyone wants to join the big five group, there is a new all-party parliamentary group that has been formed today by the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans).

PETITIONS

Higham Ferrers General Practice Surgery

5 pm

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): In my constituency, many of the doctors' surgeries provide excellent availability and quality of service, but there is a problem in one area. If I read the petition, the situation will be made clear.

The petition states:

The Humble Petition of residents of Higham Ferrers, Northamptonshire and the surrounding area,
Sheweth,

That the Petitioners believe that the Higham Ferrers General Practise Surgery is facing significant strain and requires support to meet its waiting time and quality of care obligations to patients.

Wherefore your Petitioners pray that your Honourable House urges the Department of Health, NHS England and the Higham Ferrers Surgery to work together to ensure that waiting times are reduced and the quality of care improves at the Higham Ferrers Surgery.

And your Petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray, &c.

[P002048]

Planning application in Irthlingborough

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): A similar online petition echoes the concerns outlined in this petition and has received 359 signatures.

The petition states:

The petition of the residents of the UK,

Declares that the planning application 17/00969/OUT should be rejected; further that local roads are not suitable for increased traffic flow, and already pose issues for emergency vehicles; further that local schools are already at full capacity; further that local doctors and dentists are already at full capacity; further that the land is situated next to the Nene Wetlands conservation area and it is known that various species live on or around that land; further that the land is on a flood plain and the developer has been unable to satisfy the requirements outlined by the Environment Agency in respect of this; further that, the land was sold for use as agricultural or equine land, and it is believed that when the land

[Tom Pursglove]

was put up for sale an interested party approached the council to seek outline planning permission to build stables on this land and permission was denied; and further that the developer has not carried out an acoustic survey in relation to the electrical transformer as requested by environmental protection.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to compel East Northamptonshire Council to reject the planning application to build 124 houses on green belt land to the rear of Nicholas Road, Irthlingborough.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002049]

Continuation of local bus services in Congleton Constituency

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I rise to present a petition on behalf of over 200 residents, expressing concern about the review and potential closure of local bus service 315 from Alsager. It echoes similar concerns that I have received from constituents regarding the 78 from Rode Heath to Leighton Hospital and the 319 through Goostrey, Holmes Chapel and Sandbach. The petition declares that the closure of the 315 would have a disproportionate impact on the local community and requests support for retention of the service.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the UK,

Declares that it is the opinion of Alsager residents, shop keepers and market traders that plans to close the 315 local bus service are ill-considered, and will have a disproportionate impact on Alsager as a whole; further that the 315 service should be retained; and further that a local petition has received 201 signatures.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to support the retaining of the 315 bus service.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002050]

Future of the NHS

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Andrew Stephenson.)

5.4 pm

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): Before I start my speech, may I thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, the Speaker and all the office staff, the police and everyone else who takes care of us here? I wish them all a very happy summer recess, when they all go off on their holidays. We are extremely grateful for all that is done.

First, I thank and praise all those who work in the NHS, especially those on the frontline. Secondly, it would be inappropriate of me not to pay tribute to our able and competent Front-Bench team, who face some extremely difficult challenges within the NHS. My speech today is in no way at all a criticism of the Government; it is purely based on my own observation and the observations of others, in part in Dorset but also from around the country. I hope Ministers will forgive and indulge me as I honour one of my election pledges and bring this matter to the Government's attention.

As I said, in essence I am responding to my own observations and to those of the many people I have spoken to, who work either in or around the NHS. I, we and they are proud of our NHS, and rightly so. As Nigel Lawson, the former Chancellor, so memorably said, "It's the nearest thing we have to a national religion".

The NHS will be 70 years old next year; it is the world's fifth largest employer, with 1.5 million employees; and it serves a population of the United Kingdom of more than 54 million people. The total budget for NHS England is a staggering £117 billion. The three founding principles of the NHS—that it is available to all, free at the point of delivery and based upon clinical need rather than the ability to pay—still stand. Last week, the US-based Commonwealth Fund health think-tank found the NHS to be the best, safest and most affordable healthcare system of the 11 countries it analysed, for the second time in a row. That is a record to be proud of.

However, the NHS is, to some degree, a victim of its own success. That same study placed the UK second from bottom for clinical outcomes. So what to do? Politicians take a scalpel to the NHS at their peril. The consequence is that only sticking plaster is used to meet changing circumstances. Medical advances, longer life-spans and soaring healthcare costs have outpaced resources, and the situation can only get worse.

A recent Public Accounts Committee report found that the financial performance of NHS bodies had deteriorated, with NHS trusts seeing their deficits almost treble to £2.6 billion in a single year, 2015-16. Plugging those deficits will not be easy. Addressing the shortage of nurses and GPs, coping with a strained adult social care system, responding to an overstretched A&E service and countering ambulance waiting times all require careful thought and perhaps further review.

I am a former soldier and we used to say in the Army that time on reconnaissance is never wasted, so a visit to the frontline—in my speech—is instructive. A senior doctor on my Dorset patch despairs at the "army of office staff" who leave every evening on the dot of 5 pm, while work in the hospital, which he emphasises has

always been a seven-day service, rolls on. He believes that administrative staff could be cut by about 25% without affecting patient care.

That senior doctor says the so-called “bed bureaus” in most hospitals are a case in point. When a patient is admitted, doctors must book a bed through bed managers—there is one per shift, so three per day—who, in turn, inform the ward sisters, who were themselves once responsible for the beds on their wards. In fact, the bed managers are often very senior nurses who have been promoted out of their clinical roles into well-paid managerial jobs. Formerly, such senior nurses were an invaluable source of knowledge and training for junior nurses, but it now seems there is a risk that their hard-earned skills will be wasted in administrative roles.

To be fair, the NHS says that managers have been cut by 18% since 2010. However, in the view of the senior doctor I am referring to, there is still ample opportunity better to share back-office functions across regions, especially in commissioning services, purchasing and postgraduate medical education for doctors. For those who are unaware, newly qualified doctors apply to a regional deanery for further training in foundation years 1, 2 and 3. That deanery remains responsible for their rotations until they choose their clinical specialty, three years after qualifying. Therefore, my doctor source asks, why are there education managers, deputy education managers and deputy assistant education managers in most hospitals he has worked in? In addition, he points out that nurses are efficiently certified and accredited by their own system, so they do not need in-house education managers, either.

The pressure on social care has also had a significant impact on acute hospitals, says this doctor. Like hospital administrative staff, care home staff are available to assess prospective new residents only during office hours, leaving A&E departments—often with elderly patients who are not strictly emergencies—to languish until Monday morning. Occupational therapists are also unavailable until Monday morning, meaning patients cannot be sent home because their homes cannot be certified as safe. In addition, A&E departments are frequently overwhelmed by patients suffering from mental health issues.

The under-16s pose a particular problem, certainly in Dorset, because the office hours of the children’s mental health assessment service are from 9 to 5, Monday to Friday. Most young patients present at night, when stress, depression or suicidal thoughts tend to rear their ugly heads. An A&E doctor is unable even to prescribe a sedative. Instead, dedicated nurses must be found to watch the young patient constantly until Monday morning, when a child psychiatrist can see them.

In addition, the NHS internal market, which has been with us since John Major’s Government, has also had unintended consequences. Procuring goods and services across a region, rather than restricting individual commissions to each small trust, would save millions, says this doctor. So what can be done? Clearly, the current situation is unsustainable in the longer term. The right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), if I may paraphrase him, has said that the NHS is so rapacious that it could probably never be satisfied. However, there must be another solution.

Healthcare spending is protected relative to other public services, but increasing demand and costs surely demand we think a little more out of the box. As I have

mentioned, hospital deficits reached £2.6 billion in 2015-16, negating the benefits of any funding increases. Projections from the Office for Budget Responsibility suggest that spending on healthcare could rise from 7.4% of GDP in 2015 to 8.8% in 2030-31, which is the equivalent of a real increase in spending of £100 billion.

The Office for National Statistics predicts that the proportion of people aged 65 and over will increase from the current level of 18% to 26.1% in 2066, with over-85s tripling to 7.1% over the same period. A study by the King’s Fund found that financial pressures have affected access to services and quality of patient care, while the Care Quality Commission’s latest report concluded that the quality of care provided across England varies considerably.

When compared with member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the UK spends less per capita than France, Germany, Sweden and the Netherlands. We also perform poorly on many acute care indicators, with worse outcomes for stroke victims, heart attacks, and cancer survival over five and 10 years. With more people, better and more expensive technology and greater expectations, the pressures will continue to grow.

A significant new House of Lords report, “The Long-term Sustainability of the NHS and Adult Social Care”, describes a “culture of short-termism” across successive Governments. Interestingly, the report calls for a new political consensus on the future of the health and care system via

“cross-party talks and a robust national conversation.”

I do not entirely agree, but I will come on to that later.

The report concludes:

“Short-term funding fixes will not suffice. Neither will tinkering around the edges of service delivery.”

It made three recommendations: that there should be radical service transformation, with more integrated health and care services in primary and community settings; that there should be long-term, stable, predictable and adequate funding for the NHS and adult social care; and that there should be immediate and sustained action on adult social care, with urgent funding to alleviate the crisis in NHS hospitals. It is not just the Lords who have an opinion; these are coming in thick and fast from across the political spectrum, including from the King’s Fund, the Barker commission, the Nuffield Trust, the Health Foundation, the Public Accounts Committee, the Care Quality Commission and a number of parliamentary Select Committees.

To be fair, a good start has been made. The Health and Social Care Act 2012 abolished primary care trusts, to be replaced by 44 clinical commissioning groups, responsible for commissioning the majority of NHS services. Since 2015, those in turn have developed local sustainability and transformation plans, as part of the NHS five year forward view. The STPs are blueprints for better integration of GP, community health, mental health, cancer care and hospital services, focusing on more joined-up working with home care and care homes. The Government are to be congratulated on all of that. I am delighted and touched that this week Dorset’s STP has been awarded more than £100 million by the Government. Dorset is also one of eight areas nationally to announce an accountable care system, which will fast-track these improvements, especially taking the

[Richard Drax]

strain off A&E departments and making GP appointments easier to get. It will share in a £450 million pot. The STPs are, say NHS England,

“a starting point for local conversations”.

We all hope so. Dorset’s CCG is currently poring over responses to its public consultation which closed in February. Some of its proposals, including moving A&E services from Poole to Bournemouth, and losing community hospital beds on Portland and at Wareham, I find difficult to accept.

Inevitably, some of the CCG’s remit must be to find savings. Various suggestions have been made in the past: the Carter review in 2016 found that £5 billion could be saved through shared procurement and back office support; the Naylor review in 2017 concluded that better management of the NHS estate could generate £5 billion and provide land for 26,000 new homes; and the Wachter review suggested that better IT systems would help. Whatever savings are made can then be reinvested in the NHS’s most precious asset of all, those on the frontline, where there are genuine concerns.

A House of Lords report described the lack of an appropriately skilled, well trained and committed workforce as the

“biggest internal threat to the sustainability of the NHS”.

A shortfall of some 10,000 GPs across the UK is predicted by 2020. At the same time, hundreds of GP practices are in danger of closing because 75% of their doctors are aged over 55. Nurses are wooed now with flexible hours and school-friendly schedules, but the abolition of the nursing bursary earlier this year has seen the number of applicants applying to start nursing degrees this October fall by 23%. I know from my own research into ambulance waiting times that the ambulance trust covering my constituency is having trouble both recruiting and retaining staff.

We all agree, in all parts of this House, that the NHS is a unique national treasure, to be protected, sustained and nurtured, but it cannot remain a sacred cow, untouchable at any cost. So why do we not hand this problem to an independent panel, totally divorced from politicians, and ask it to see how we can make better use of the £117 billion that we spend? From what I have heard and seen, I simply cannot believe there is not a better way of running our beloved NHS. The will from those in all parts of the House is there, so let’s be bold, take politics out of it, simplify the way the NHS is run and channel more resources to the frontline.

5.19 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): It is a great pleasure to join you in the House for the last debate before the summer break, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) on securing this debate and commend his timing, as it is two days after we laid the Department of Health and NHS entities’ 2017 accounts before Parliament. He will note from what I am sure will be his diligent scrutiny of those accounts that provider deficits have been much reduced in the year that has just ended compared with the figure he cited for the previous year. That is a tribute to the focus of

managers and trust leaders on securing the financial balance that the NHS as a whole has delivered over the past year.

To put all that in context, this is a time when more people than ever are using the health service. In 2016-17, some 23.4 million people attended A&E departments in England—2.9 million more than in 2010. The overwhelming majority of patients continue to be seen within four hours, and the NHS overall sees more than 1,800 more patients within the four-hour standard every day compared with 2010. In the previous year, the NHS carried out 11.6 million operations—some 1.9 million more than in 2010. That provides the context of the achievement and the treatments that have been given to patients throughout the land.

I am pleased that my hon. Friend recognised the excellent care that the NHS provides, which has been demonstrated for the second year running by the Commonwealth Fund report: in its international study published last week, the UK was ranked as the No. 1 health system in a comparison of 11 countries. That is a testament to NHS staff. The patients who benefit from those treatments rate their experience of care highly. The adult in-patient survey, which was released in May, shows that the majority of patients report that their overall experience was good, with 85% rating it as at least seven out of 10—a slight improvement on the previous year.

Looking to the future, which is the subject of the debate, the Government are committed to increasing the NHS budget to ensure that patients get the high-quality care they need. By 2020-21, NHS spending will increase by £8 billion in real terms from the 2015-16 baseline. That will deliver an increase in real funding per head of the population for every year of this Parliament. Nevertheless, my hon. Friend is right to point out that whatever funding we provide, it is important that we spend it to achieve the best possible outcomes for patients.

It is essential that we ensure that the NHS continues to make the most effective use of its resources to deliver high-quality patient care, so I recognise what I think was my hon. Friend’s motivation in securing this debate and raising this subject before the House rises for the summer recess. We all agree that it is important to target NHS funding to frontline services, which is why we are investing in the workforce and there are already more than 33,800 extra clinical staff, including almost 11,700 more doctors and almost 13,000 more nurses on our wards since May 2010.

NHS management is an important element of ensuring an efficient NHS, but of course we are keen to ensure that an increasing proportion of NHS funding goes to patient-facing services. Between 2010-11 and 2016-17, the proportion of the NHS pay bill spent on managers declined from 6.5% to 5.8%, which I am sure my hon. Friend will welcome. We are also reducing the number of people involved in management, which he called for. Between May 2010 and March 2017, the number of managers and senior managers in NHS providers and support organisations reduced from some 37,000 to around 31,000—I think that is similar to the effective percentage to which my hon. Friend referred. We are also looking to manage the rate of pay of senior managers, again to ensure that as much as possible is focused on the frontline.

It is important that we recognise that leadership is as important in the NHS as it is in any organisation—we must ensure that we have high-quality leadership across organisations. I for one am keen not to bash the managers in a somewhat traditional manner, but to recognise that high-quality leadership in our NHS organisations is important in driving high-quality performance for patients. That is why I have been working with the leadership academy in Health Education England to ensure that we have two things: a pipeline of talent so that we can identify quality individuals at the beginning of their careers in the NHS and track them as they pursue their careers, identifying the leaders of tomorrow, in a similar system to that with which my hon. Friend will be familiar from his service in the military; and some consideration of how we can get more clinicians involved in leadership roles in their organisations. Clearly, we have directors of nursing and medical directors in all provider trusts, but too few go on to take up the most senior leadership positions as chief executives.

Richard Drax: I am listening carefully to the Minister. Would it be naive to say that what we want to see is matron, in the form of Hattie Jacques, back on the wards and to hand far more administrative work, if that is the right phrase, back to clinicians, with whom it originally lay?

Mr Dunne: I am not keen to hand administrative work to clinicians, but I recognise that there is a role for ensuring that senior clinicians are present and in charge of activity in wards. That is the experience I am seeing as I visit acute hospitals around the country: senior members of staff, normally coming out of nursing staff—so they are a matron or other senior nursing officer—are responsible for what happens on their ward.

My hon. Friend says that an independent review might be appropriate, and I say gently to him that we think that the right way to drive improvement across the NHS and help position it for the challenges of the future is to back the plans prepared by the leadership of NHS England with colleagues from across the system through the five year forward view. This is the NHS's own plan for change and it lays out how the NHS can transform services and improve standards of care while building a more responsive modern health service. We are backing this plan, enabling the NHS to deliver Government objectives including seven-day services and improved access to cancer treatments and mental health services. We agree that the answer to the challenges faced by the NHS lies in modernising services and keeping people well and independent for longer.

The NHS is using the sustainability and transformation partnerships mentioned by my hon. Friend to deliver that vision through transformation across local areas.

These are clinically led, locally driven and can deliver real improvements for patients. The five year forward view also announced the development of new care models and we are already seeing the results.

My hon. Friend referred to the announcement yesterday about the first allocation of capital funding for the most advanced STP areas, including Dorset, which covers his constituency. It is fortuitous that the largest single beneficiary of capital through the STP allocation was Dorset, and what a great day for him to secure this debate and give an albeit somewhat guarded welcome to that significant capital injection. I am aware that he has a number of issues with how that money will be spent.

Richard Drax: It was totally unguarded. I am extremely grateful, as I am sure all clinicians and all those who work in the NHS in Dorset will be.

Mr Dunne: That applause is on the record, and I am delighted that my hon. Friend takes that view.

We see this investment as backing the exemplar STP plans that have been published thus far, and we hope that other areas, whose plans are in less good shape, will be encouraged to look at those that have succeeded to see what they can do to follow their example for the next phase of the roll out in the coming years.

I will conclude with a couple of comments about how we drive efficiency through the NHS and make best use of resources. My hon. Friend referred to the Carter and the Naylor reviews. Carter is driving heavily towards using best practice and removing variability across the NHS, whether in clinical practice or in financial performance, in areas such as procurement. Alongside that, Naylor is looking at how we drive out inefficiency from back-office functions, from estates and from the facilities management element of running such a substantial network of hospitals and facilities across the country. There is scope to do more. That will appeal to my hon. Friend's desire to put more resources on the frontline. We are looking at encouraging organisations to share back-office facilities—as he called for—to bring down cost and drive up efficiency and operational productivity, which is the right way to go.

I conclude by confirming that we are making good progress in small steps. We need to continue to make progress to try to raise the depth of the tread of the steps that we are taking to ensure that the NHS is fit to serve the health needs of this population for the future.

Question put and agreed to.

5.31 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 20 July 2017

[MR NIGEL EVANS *in the Chair*]

Jobcentres and the DWP Estate

1.30 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered job centres and the Department for Work and Pensions estate.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Evans. This is a very serious issue, and I will be unashamedly referring to the effects that the jobcentre closures will have on claimants in every single constituency in the city of Glasgow, but before I do, I will make some general remarks.

The closures are, of course, part of a wider Government strategy to review their property estate, but it is my contention that very little strategic thinking is being done centrally. Government Departments' offices are closing in towns and cities, with potential job losses, alongside the closure of jobcentres in the same towns and cities across the United Kingdom. I hope the Minister will be able to tell us if one Department is considering office closures across all Government Departments, and whether there is a strategic overview.

I hope the Minister will finally admit not only that the starting point of this process was the 2015 spending review, which identified a 20% cut in the Department for Work and Pensions estate, but that that target also decided the endgame, as everything since has been an exercise in delivering those savings no matter what. It has been a question of identifying an outcome and working back from that, with a fig leaf of consultation and a token change not by closing six jobcentres across the UK, but by pushing ahead with halving the number of jobcentres in Glasgow, with the solitary exception of Castlemilk jobcentre. As we all know, Castlemilk is noted for its excellent transport links—not! Along with my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald), I acknowledge the reprieve but condemn the closure of Langside, which is a resource close to a major further education college. Talk about an opportunity lost for positive outcomes.

The suggestion that the closures will usher in an improved service, with fewer public access points combined with swingeing back-office cuts, is an insult to our intelligence. Ministers have had to admit that they expect at least 750 DWP staff to lose their jobs and have refused to rule out compulsory redundancies, although I invite the Minister to do so today. The knock-on effect on vulnerable users and the wider community through the cumulative effect of closures hitting local economies and businesses is hard to quantify, but one thing we can be sure of is that the Government have made no assessment of the impact of these cuts.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. I am so sorry to hear of the impact that these closures will have in his

constituency. In my constituency, the jobcentre in Broxburn is going to close. The constituency has already faced significant economic challenges, with the closure of Hall's, and people now have to travel more than six miles to the jobcentre. Does he agree that a global view of communities that have had such losses is vital in this process?

Chris Stephens: I do agree. The Government really have to publish a map of office closures in every single UK Government Department. Not only has my hon. Friend's constituency seen the closure of Hall's, but Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs wants to close its office in Livingston, while jobcentres are being closed in the very same constituency. That really does not add up.

This is a calculated, savings-driven, back-of-an-envelope, callous exercise in studied avoidance of the real issues at stake. The scale of job losses is severe because it is cumulative, coming as it does after years of erosion of DWP staff numbers. I note the careful use of semantics when any Minister replies to questions; they talk about no loss of frontline staff. However, the cuts programme includes large-scale back-office closures, with no clear commitment to no job losses, and as those of us with trade union experience know fine well, big budget savings are made on salaries rather than bricks and mortar, and not renewing a lease does not realise the savings that not paying wages and underwriting pensions does.

Before the Minister repeats the mantra that we have heard and memorised about Glasgow having the most jobcentres per head of population, may I strongly suggest there is a reason for that? It is not a numbers game. It is because historically and currently, Glasgow has the highest levels of deprivation in the country. The highest proportion of indices of multiple deprivation data zones in Scotland are in the city. We are talking about intergenerational poverty, rooted in the Scottish Office plan to encourage skilled workers to leave the city in the 1960s, followed by the systematic and planned destruction of the industrial base of Scotland in the 1980s. That was combined with the explicitly political reorganisation of local government in 1996, which abolished Strathclyde region, so that the ability to fund social work and education services by a broader tax base was destroyed. We remember how the Tories have dealt with Glasgow over the years, and we now see once again how they wilfully fail to recognise the scale of deprivation and poverty that people in our communities struggle with daily.

Carntyne West and Haghill data zone, ranked No. 2 in the list of the most deprived areas in Scotland, is currently within walking distance—if you are healthy—of Parkhead jobcentre. North Barlanark and Easterhouse South, ranked No. 3, is just about within walking distance of Easterhouse jobcentre. Both are marked for closure. If we take the time to look at the location of the most deprived communities in Glasgow, which has the highest percentage of deprivation in Scotland, and then overlay the map of closures, a bleak picture emerges. The people who are the furthest from being job-ready and require intensive support are now being pushed even further to the margins. The notion that they can and will use online services instead can only come from those who have no grasp of the realities of lives where women struggle to afford sanitary products, never mind broadband and tablets. Is this digital by default, or exclusion by design?

[Chris Stephens]

The Scottish index of multiple deprivation indicators identifies the 10 most employment-deprived zones in Scotland. With Possilpark ranked fourth and Wyndford ranked eighth, the closure of Maryhill jobcentre will do little to alter those statistics. Possilpark tops the list of zones with the poorest health indicators, and with the recent publicity surrounding a claimant who was forced to get out of her wheelchair and crawl up the steps of the building where her assessment was taking place, we can only wonder what levels of indignity will follow from these closures.

To know Glasgow's geography and transport links is to understand the problems people will experience in the communities with the highest levels of deprivation and the poorest transport links. Glasgow is like a wheel, with the circular subway and linear spokes of bus routes radiating from the city centre, but not across communities. The east, north and north-east of the city, where the majority of closures are planned, are not well served by public transport. The 2014 report commissioned by Glasgow City Council on in-work poverty, "Hard Work, Hard Times", identified transport as a major barrier to finding and sustaining work. In the consultation response on some of Glasgow's jobcentres, a staggering 92% of respondents expressed concerns about the increase in travel time to attend the new jobcentres, and 79% expressed concern about the potential increase in travel costs.

It is clear that the industrial level of denial about the impact of these closures is accompanied by an expectation that other agencies will pick up the pieces and that, as per usual, local councils and third sector bodies such as citizens advice bureaux will carry the burden of mitigating these cuts. At Scottish questions yesterday, in answer to pointed questions about jobcentre closures, there was a glancing reference to "new outreach facilities"—provided and funded by whom, exactly?

Not only in Glasgow, but across Scotland and the UK, the way this cuts exercise has been conducted is riding roughshod over any partnership approach. Local community planning partnerships heard about the closures via the media, when many have been trying to address employment issues as a key outcome in their plans. Jobcentre Plus has been described as a claimant employment service rather than a public service, as those not claiming benefits do not receive support, and that is writ large in the way DWP and HMRC closures have been announced—I am not going to say "planned", because that would imply a holistic approach with a strategic overview of the estate, rather than an incoherent, budget-driven approach.

People are rightly concerned and angry about the closures, and with the roll-out of the fiasco that is universal credit, we can only conclude that unacceptable burdens are about to fall on the people who are most vulnerable, furthest from the job market and least digitally connected, and that despite the best efforts of local councils, the third sector and local elected Members and their staff, real suffering will follow as people are sanctioned for not attending a jobcentre miles away because a costly, complicated journey has replaced the access to support that they once had.

I look forward to other hon. Members explaining how the closures will affect their constituents and, of course, to the Minister's reply.

1.40 pm

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Lab)): It is an important statement that I want to make on the DWP estate, because although we have always spoken about jobcentre closures in Glasgow and the surrounding areas, when I recently took up the role of MP for my area, I suddenly found out that 250 jobs had been earmarked to go from the DWP estate. Those jobs are concentrated in the Coatbridge area. They are also flexible jobs that enable working people to have a family life and save childcare money and other costs. With those 250 jobs, there are no compulsory redundancies; there are no redundancies, but the Government want to move them off the estate. They are splitting the workforce into three parts, with two parts going to Motherwell and one part to Glasgow, but people are being given only three years' bus fare money when it should be five years' bus fare money.

Leaving all that aside, the biggest problem I have is that the Government are taking away 250 local government jobs that help our community. They mean that £4,000 a week on average is spent in the community. If you need the receipts, Mr Evans, I have them, because I asked the staff to do this exercise for me. As I said, on average £4,000 is spent in our community, so not only will 250 jobs be taken out of Coatbridge; there will also be an impact on our high street, which is already run-down. Small businesses will be affected, and there will be additional job losses.

In conclusion, I would like to know why the jobs are leaving Coatbridge. There is no need for compulsory redundancies and no need for the jobs to move. All we will be left with is another empty building and more empty shops.

1.42 pm

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): God must be smiling on us given that you, Mr Evans, are in the Chair for another debate on Glasgow jobcentres. Just before the House rose at Christmas time, I think we had the last Westminster Hall debate then as well. I can see a pattern forming, but I am sure you are not at the centre of it.

I want to pick up on what my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) said, and I congratulate him most sincerely on securing the debate. I will begin with the Castlemilk jobcentre, which the Minister wished to close. I am very thankful that he has now removed that jobcentre from his list of closures. When anyone picks a fight with Castlemilk, Castlemilk fights back, and it has a tendency to win. Let that be a lesson to the Government for future battles. That did not happen by accident; it happened because a community was united in fighting off a vicious attack on it. People came together from every part of the G45 postcode to fight the cut, and in the end they won.

I pay particular tribute to one constituent. Many people were involved, but they will forgive me for singling out one—my constituent Jean Devlin, who was like a terrier. When I was down here in Westminster, picking fights on their behalf, she was running off photocopies of petitions and standing outside the jobcentre, catching every passing person and every person going in and out, along with various other people, so I pay tribute to the role that she has played in the campaign.

However, I am left with some regret, because the Minister still wishes to close the Langside jobcentre. As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West mentioned, it is not just near a college, but across the road from it. You could probably throw a golf ball and hit the college if you were to stand at the door—not that I would ever suggest that you would do such a thing, Mr Evans. The jobcentre serves the second most densely populated council ward in Scotland. There is a clear need for a jobcentre in a place such as Langside.

The third jobcentre, which was supposed to absorb all the closures, is the Newlands jobcentre. I still do not understand why it is called the Newlands jobcentre—it is actually in Pollokshaws, which is further away again. That jobcentre was supposed to absorb all the cuts that the Government were going to make elsewhere. I will have a particular focus on how they plan for that to happen.

I wish to press the Minister on one thing. I will be charitable—he knows I am a charitable man—and say that perhaps he could not answer the question that I asked him yesterday because of time constraints. I suspect that that will not be an issue this afternoon. He intends to close a multitude of jobcentres across the city of Glasgow. That slack has to be picked up by somebody, because anybody who has been to Glasgow knows that it will be very difficult for the remaining jobcentres to pick up the slack. I think I am still right in saying that to this day, no Minister has even bothered to visit one jobcentre in Glasgow that the Government wish to close. If the remaining jobcentres cannot pick up the slack, who will?

I have had discussions with Susan Aitken, who is the new Scottish National party leader of Glasgow City Council and a councillor for Langside, the ward that hosts the jobcentre that the Minister still wishes to close. The council is extremely concerned. I do not say that to be party political: councillors across the chamber in Glasgow are concerned that the work will be left to the Prince's Trust, the Scottish Association for Mental Health, Jobs & Business Glasgow and various other council and third sector organisations. Where will the money come from? I want to know about the discussions that the Minister has had, or will be having between now and when the House comes back after the summer recess, with the leader of Glasgow City Council, Jobs & Business Glasgow, SAMH and the Prince's Trust in Glasgow, to find out what support he can give them in transition and in money, because supporting people, particularly vulnerable people, into work costs money, and it is money that should be well spent.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): This is a very important debate. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that a substantial proportion of the people who work in these centres have alternative working patterns to facilitate childcare and other things? In this cry for objective evidence for the closures, I wonder whether the Minister can disclose whether that was addressed. I am talking about how the individual members of staff with alternative working patterns will be affected by the closures.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: The hon. Gentleman makes an extremely important point, which has been adumbrated by other colleagues, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West and the former Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West,

Margaret Ferrier, who was also like a terrier in this campaign. We rightly pay tribute to the work that she did to save jobcentres in her constituency.

This has been the most cack-handed project I have seen since I became a Member of the House. Given all that has happened, and given all that you and I have observed, Mr Evans, that is quite a statement to make. The information was leaked to the press. Members of Parliament were finding out through social media. We had to drag the Government kicking and screaming to have a consultation. They say that they have met their legal obligations under the Equality Act 2010, but they have still never bothered to publish an equality impact assessment, and I plead with the Minister to do so.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): On the lack of an equality impact assessment, more than a quarter of the jobcentres that are set to close are in London, and we know that a significant number of black and Asian and disabled people will potentially be disproportionately impacted by the choice to close jobcentres, so can the Minister please confirm when a full equality impact assessment will be carried out? Is the lack of one due to the fact that, as we know, the closures will have a disproportionate impact on those protected groups?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: The hon. Lady makes an extremely important point. While the scale in London will obviously be bigger, we face the exact same issues in Glasgow in terms of who will be disproportionately affected by the cuts. I plead with the Minister to publish the equality impact assessment, because I would hate to see the Government taken to court over it, and frankly that is where things are headed.

The Minister can pull this back. He needs to engage constructively with Glasgow City Council—I am sure colleagues will ask for similar engagement in their local authority areas. He needs to start showing people that there is a proper plan to mitigate the impact of the closures, particularly on ethnic minority people, as the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) said, on people for whom English is not their first language and on those who have childcare and other caring responsibilities, as the new hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) said. I give the Minister the opportunity to show us that he is up for serious dialogue, because since December last year it has certainly not looked like it.

1.50 pm

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) for securing this debate.

In Inverclyde, we currently have two jobcentres: one in Greenock and another in Port Glasgow. Following the UK Government's consultation, it was determined that the Port Glasgow jobcentre would close, while the Greenock office would be moved to an as yet undetermined location. I believe that this decision is short-sighted and sympathise with the views of staff at the Port Glasgow jobcentre, who have expressed understandable concerns regarding the impact of this change on their clients.

The Minister should know that Inverclyde has some of the worst levels of social deprivation in the UK. Some 26% of children in Inverclyde grow up in poverty; one in 10 live in severe poverty; youth unemployment is

[*Ronnie Cowan*]

more than double the UK rate; and the number of people on jobseeker's allowance or required to find work on universal credit is double the rate in the UK as a whole.

It might be thought that such a set of circumstances would prompt the Government to grant additional support to the area. Instead, the UK Government's response has been to cut benefits and halve the number of jobcentres in my constituency. A report issued by the Scottish Government found that Inverclyde will experience one of the most significant falls in welfare spending of any Scottish local authority relative to the size of its working-age population. By 2021, this will amount to an overall cut of £15 million—the equivalent of £298 per working-age adult.

Given the challenges that Inverclyde faces, I think it would be appropriate for the Minister to visit my constituency. That is why I wrote to him on 14 June and extended an invitation to meet not only me, but the jobcentre management to discuss the impact of the proposed closure on my constituents. And yes, I am still waiting for a reply. A ministerial visit would also be an opportunity for the UK Government to provide some much-needed assurances regarding the long-term future of the Greenock office and the vital service that it offers. I can see the Minister looking quizzically at me. Is he questioning what I am saying?

The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds) *indicated dissent.*

Ronnie Cowan: Okay. Is the proposed closure of the Port Glasgow jobcentre about providing a better service for users? No, of course it is not. In the words of the Public and Commercial Services Union, the UK Government are “abandoning the unemployed” at a time when many people on lower incomes are facing uncertain futures with respect to their employment.

Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): On the issue of uncertain futures, does the hon. Gentleman agree that the closure of jobcentres such as mine in Dalkeith will affect women affected by the Pensions Act 2011, dealing the WASPI women—Women Against State Pension Inequality—a double blow, which is unacceptable? Does he join me in wondering where those women will go to find the apprenticeships that Government Members suggest that they find?

Ronnie Cowan: The hon. Lady is absolutely correct. It is the classic double whammy that people are put into an impossible situation by the Government and then look for support from them and find that it has been taken away. As we all know, the apprenticeship scheme is just an aberration at the moment.

Unfortunately, all levels of poverty are rising. In-work poverty is on the rise, yet the Minister continues to argue that jobcentre mergers are needed to ensure that the welfare state

“works for those who need it and those who pay for it.”

That kind of irresponsible language detracts from the reality that those who need the service and those who pay for it are in fact the same people. Ultimately, the

whole of society benefits if poverty and inequality are reduced. Jobcentres are supposed to be part of the solution.

Aside from the £1 billion deal with the Democratic Unionist party, the UK Government have made the case over the past seven years that drastic public spending cuts are a financial necessity. The plan to close jobcentres across the UK is part of a wider plan to sell £4.5 billion-worth of Government land and property by 2021. While it is easy to cut services and demonstrate savings made in the short term, it is not so easy to quantify and predict the long-term impact of those changes.

Hannah Bardell: On the matter of property and quantifying decisions, does my hon. Friend agree that the decision to close an HMRC office in my Livingston constituency and an area of West Lothian that is significantly cheaper, and to move it to Edinburgh city centre in a record long-term contract of 20 to 25 years, is just sheer stupidity on the Government's part and clearly a waste of public money?

Ronnie Cowan: I absolutely agree, and could not have put it better myself.

The UK Government have simply not made a convincing case that the proposed closures will benefit clients or society as a whole. Jobcentre staff have contacted me to say that the impact of the closures on disabled people has not been properly assessed. The Scottish Government have indicated that the closures are likely to push many vulnerable people into crisis. Will the Minister meet me in Inverclyde and show that the UK Government are actually listening to those concerns? We are about to set off into recess. I assure the Minister that I will clear my diary and cancel my holidays, and will be there whatever day he wishes to come and visit Inverclyde.

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): I am going to call Mr Sweeney next, but it is good to see so many new Members here. We will go on until 3 pm, so if you wish to contribute to the debate, please stand in your place and that will indicate to me that you wish to contribute.

1.56 pm

Mr Paul J. Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Evans, for calling me to speak in this debate. I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) for securing this debate on such an important matter affecting the city of Glasgow and all across the United Kingdom.

It is clear that the situation in Glasgow is stark and acute. While the UK unemployment rate is 4.8%, in Glasgow it is 8.5%, essentially twice the UK rate. Justification for the closure and rationalisation of jobcentres is based on the idea that jobcentre provision in Glasgow is higher than the average across the UK, but it is clear that that is necessary to deal with the long-term, intractable problem of structural unemployment in Glasgow. I am utterly incredulous that the Government feel that they are justified in cutting the estate in this manner or that it will in any way benefit or enhance the service provision. How on earth will this help to deal with the long-term problem of structural unemployment?

While we have seen the welcome reduction of unemployment rates in Glasgow, it has left a hard kernel of people who are particularly challenged in getting back into the jobs market. They need much

more intensive and tailored support to meet their specialist needs. It is absurd to suggest that we provide that by continuing to frustrate them by rationalising the jobcentre estate. Some of the areas that the hon. Gentleman referred to, including ones in my constituency such as Possilpark and Carntyne West and Haghill, have the highest Scottish index of multiple deprivation child poverty rates—up to 50% in some cases. Families are already challenged by severe problems in their lives, and to further frustrate their ability to care for themselves in this way is utterly appalling in a modern society.

We have seen the justification that some of the jobcentres in Glasgow are unfit for purpose and unable to accommodate additional supplementary uses. PCS has surveyed and assessed that, and it was found to be untrue. The Maryhill jobcentre is well integrated. It has several rooms that are under-utilised, but it has a number of well integrated services with Glasgow Life, Momentum, Shaw Trust, Homestart and Wyndford hub, including Possilpoint in my constituency, where the service provision transfers across the borders.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I thank the hon. Gentleman, my constituency neighbour, for giving way and apologise, Mr Evans, for being late: I was detained in the Chamber. I echo the hon. Gentleman's tribute to the fantastic work of Maryhill Jobcentre and the disappointment that it is to close. Does he share my concern that this might not be the end? Will he join me in asking the Minister to guarantee that Springburn jobcentre in the hon. Gentleman's constituency, to which Maryhill users are being redirected, will not be under threat, and that there will now be a clear process of transition, advice and support for users who have to make the switch from one jobcentre to another?

Mr Sweeney: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that pertinent point about the potential transfer of services from Maryhill to Springburn jobcentre in my constituency. When I reflected on the history of my constituency in my maiden speech last week, I noted with some dismay that it went from having the largest locomotive works in Europe to now having the largest jobcentre in Europe. Although that is perhaps not an asset to be particularly proud of, it is entirely necessary, because my constituency faces some of the highest structural employment rates in this country. He deals with similar issues in parts of his constituency.

Although we have heard the justification for moving to a so-called super-jobcentre in Springburn, we have also heard the announcement that critical back-office staff in Springburn will be cut; I understand that some 200 redundancies are being consulted on. Although the Department has assured us that there will be no compulsory redundancies, I cannot see how practical that is, given that the consultation includes cuts to 280 frontline and desk-based staff in jobcentres in Glasgow.

Although the idea of centralising facilities may seem superficially attractive on a map, anyone with a cursory knowledge of Glasgow's geography and how dysfunctional its public transport system is will be well aware that travelling from Maryhill to Springburn is an utterly arduous journey even for people of fit body like me. I have made the journey to Maryhill regularly because my Army Reserve barracks is there, and I have found that on average it takes 90 minutes to two hours to complete the journey.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: When Members representing Glasgow constituencies during the last Parliament visited senior DWP officials at the jobcentre in Laurieston, I jokingly asked, "Did you use Google Maps to work this out?", to which they said, "Yes." Does the hon. Gentleman share my dismay that they based their decision on Google Maps?

Mr Sweeney: I think it is highly likely that they did. It would be utterly bizarre for anyone with any knowledge of Glasgow geography to conclude that it is a practical proposition for people who live in Maryhill catchment to attend services in Springburn. The bus system in Glasgow radiates from the centre; capacity to move across the north of the city is highly limited. The nature of the public transport system in Glasgow is another issue.

Chris Stephens: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that not only did the DWP use Google Maps, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) said, but the information on Google Maps was outdated, and some bus services that it advertised no longer operate in our city?

Mr Sweeney: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point. In recent months, First Glasgow, the predominant bus operator in Glasgow, has cut a number of vital routes that might otherwise have facilitated those journeys. My mum lives in Springburn and works in Clarkston, and she often tells me of the arduous journeys that she makes across the city using First buses. Buses are regularly cancelled arbitrarily, or drivers change. There is no reliability or resilience in the public transport system; using it as a justification for rationalising the estate across Glasgow is highly risky.

Perhaps the DWP's genuine motive is cost-driven. It is not about facilitating improved access; it is a cost-driven exercise to reduce Department overheads and, in the process, to frustrate those trying to access services, in order to reduce claimant rates and benefits being paid to citizens in Glasgow, increasing their concomitant despair, dismay and psychological ill-health. The proposals are utterly unsound, and I urge the Minister to reconsider on a practical basis.

I offer a solution: collocation, which has been advocated by a number of agencies, including the union PCS and Citizens Advice. For example, as a new Member, I have been looking for somewhere to establish a constituency office, which is more easily said than done, particularly in Glasgow North East, where the number of retail units is not huge. I looked at one location in Saracen Street in the heart of Possilpark, one of the areas of highest social deprivation in the United Kingdom, never mind Glasgow or Scotland. I did so for a particular reason: I wanted to make a statement that I was there to serve the community of highest need in my constituency.

I noted that in that street alone, there is a closed-down citizens advice bureau, as well as a unit owned by North Glasgow Housing Association and leased to Jobs & Business Glasgow, which in turn sublets it to Skills Development Scotland. Full rent is paid on the unit, but it is occupied only two days a week; it is being under-utilised. It is there for the taking. Why on earth could the DWP not engage with the agencies to use that opportunity for collocation at minimal cost, sustaining

[Mr Sweeney]

the same footprint at a fraction of the price? If it is true that the idea is to re-deploy instead of reducing the number of jobs, surely that would be an essentially cost-neutral exercise that would maintain the footprint while ensuring provision for the people who need it most and dealing with the intractable problem of unemployment in our city.

Chris Stephens: The hon. Gentleman is making an important point about collocation. Does he agree that collocation should have been discussed by the DWP, the Scottish Government, local authorities and other organisations before consulting on closures?

Mr Sweeney: Yes, I absolutely agree. Surely the presumption should be in favour of maintaining the footprint at all costs. Any reduction in the estate should be considered only as a final measure once all other possible mitigation options have been exhausted. It is clear to me after even cursory engagement with trying to set up a constituency office that there is ample opportunity out there to utilise alternative measures to maintain the footprint by co-operating with other agencies occupying the same space. That would be a great and worthwhile measure to explore as a first instance. I urge the Minister to engage with all Glasgow Members and city councillors to broker such negotiations as a matter of urgency. Opportunities in Glasgow are ample, and we should consider them in Glasgow and across the United Kingdom to maintain the footprint and operate with efficiency by having an integrated approach to collocation. I am absolutely in favour of that.

The justification for reducing face-to-face engagement is an increasing shift to using IT services. We know that that is a myth. Anyone who has watched the film “I, Daniel Blake” will be aware that among the people who have to deal with and engage with such services, it is not the case. The DWP has failed to understand the fundamental reality of unemployment: there is a cyclical component and a structural component. Obviously, as the economy has recovered, the cyclical component has decreased, but the structural component has remained, particularly in Glasgow. The underlying rate of unemployment is still high: indeed, twice the national average. Those people are generally unable to access IT facilities easily, nor are they necessarily IT-literate. That is why we need to maintain face-to-face services. PCS consultation and research backs that up, determining that the most effective measure for returning people to the jobs market was a face-to-face account management offer through DWP jobcentres. We must maintain that level of service. An online system is not a substitute.

These are the people whom we need to support the most. They may be using library IT facilities, which are so oversubscribed in Glasgow that time limits on users have been introduced. People who are already unsure and unconfident about using IT facilities are now time-limited—much as you might want to time-limit me, Mr Evans—in utilising them. Imagine the stress associated with not only filling out a complex and convoluted form but doing so under the pressure of a ticking clock. That is clearly not a good situation. It would be much preferable if those facilities were available through a face-to-face consultation.

To draw my points together, it is clear that the consultation is a sham, driven by the preconceived outcome of reducing the estate. It is not about consultation on mitigation in any meaningful way, as the collocation option has clearly not been explored in any depth. I urge the Minister to consider that as a proactive and collaborative measure that could serve the interests of driving a more efficient use of public resources while maintaining a critical level of service provision to the communities that need it most.

The justification based on geographic proximity is utterly untrue. Not only do the new locations lie outside the 2.5-mile radius that was supposed to be used; the walking and travel times are much longer and more arduous than a cursory look at Google Maps might suggest.

Glasgow’s situation is unique. It has a long-term structural unemployment problem, particularly in Glasgow North East and in the constituencies of other Glasgow Members present today. We need much more focused and intensive support, so it is critical to maintain the current footprint of jobcentres in Glasgow. It might be justifiable to argue that we have a greater density of them than other cities, but that is for a very good reason indeed: Glasgow has historically had a problem with unemployment, so it is critical we maintain our jobcentres.

I thank all hon. Members for their contributions to the debate. I hope the Minister will take our points on board and offer a meaningful and practical solution, so that we can maintain a great public service in Glasgow and ensure that we share the same objective of reducing and minimising unemployment in Glasgow. Let us do something productive to achieve that.

2.10 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Evans; I am grateful to have caught your eye, having come in slightly late. I will make just a couple of brief comments.

One of the consequences of the general election result in Scotland is that we can now demonstrate cross-party consensus in our concerns. [Interruption.] A certain degree of cross-party consensus, at least. I pay tribute to my new neighbour, the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney), and welcome him to his place.

The impact of these jobcentre closures will be felt very strongly across the communities of Glasgow and in the other parts of Scotland and the United Kingdom that are affected. The Minister cannot say that he has not been warned, because we have repeatedly brought our concerns to Westminster Hall and to the main Chamber. The responses to the consultation reflected the disproportionate impact that the closures will have on the poorest and most vulnerable members of society. They include people who really depend on the services that jobcentres provide to get the skills and training to bring them back into the labour market: people with disabilities, people from socially deprived backgrounds, and single parents—particularly single mothers, who we heard a lot from in the process we went through in Maryhill.

What we need from the Minister now is some kind of certainty about the next steps. When will a timetable be announced? What transitional arrangements will be in

place for the service users who will have to start making these journeys? Will they get a guarantee that if they miss appointments or arrive late because of the public transport issues that Glasgow Members have highlighted, they will not be subject to sanctions? That is the kind of certainty that the Minister urgently needs to provide, along with a timetable for when all this will happen.

Another key issue that has come up in the process and that has to be taken into account in the next steps is dialogue with the Scottish Government. We have repeatedly heard from Ministers in the Scottish Government that—much like Members of this House—they have been informed of decisions at the last minute, or even after those decisions have been announced to the public. They have not had any opportunity for discussions about collocation or pulling services together. I hope that as the estate contraction process takes place, the Minister will ensure full engagement with the Scottish Government and with the relevant local authorities.

There are broader questions about the process of downsizing the estate. When the consultation began, I heard quite a lot from Ministers that this was about providing the best possible service to users. When the results of the consultation and the final decision were announced, they said, “Well, actually, this was a financial decision about effective use of the estate, under-utilised buildings and so on. It was the consequence of a contract that was entered into under the new Labour Government—a public-private partnership, essentially.” What further efforts have this Government undertaken to review the contract with Trillium? What discussions have they had about the next time there has to be an estate review? I have asked written questions about that.

What about other aspects of the DWP estate—not least the prime property at Caxton House in central London, to which we were all invited for a meeting before the general election? First, did Ministers consider whether it was necessary to retain it? Secondly, what if Trillium decided that it wanted to keep its hands on it and booted everybody out? Were contingency plans made for that? Why not disperse some of the DWP staff further across the United Kingdom?

It is incredibly disappointing that we have to keep coming back here with these questions, but I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) on securing this important debate before the summer recess. I also congratulate the other Members who have participated, and I thank you again, Mr Evans, for allowing me to contribute at short notice.

2.15 pm

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I feel enticed to say a few words, because other hon. Members have painted a rather gloomy picture of certain elements of Glasgow. I am an Ayrshire chappie and I do not know Glasgow that well. In Ayrshire, there are some disappointing aspects of the modernisation of the DWP estate and some things that I am not entirely happy with. However, some elements of the rather gloomy and dull picture that has been painted lie with the nationalist Scottish Government and with the poverty and inequalities that they should be addressing. *[Interruption.]* I am sure they do lie there—I am sure they are devolved issues, as SNP Members would be quick to tell us.

There is pain along with the change. Any change brings pain, but this is a modernisation of the estate.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: The hon. Gentleman talks about modernisation—I cannot believe what I am hearing. This is a closure. We were never asked about modernisation, collocation or anything else—that has all come from us. The Government are proposing closures, nothing else.

Bill Grant: I beg to differ. We see the same thing in different ways. It is modernisation. Things change; we cannot stand still. There will be pain—there is always pain when there is change. I am absolutely certain of that, and I concede to some of the concerns the hon. Gentleman raised, but I am sure that the Minister will bring something forward.

There have been changes in the way people do business. Football has probably reduced to some extent because of online facilities, modernisation and the way we conduct business through social media and the internet. Things change, and they do not always bring pleasure. I am sure there will be pain. There is pain in Ayrshire—we are losing an office there—so I am not immune to it either.

As for transport, I sat on the Strathclyde partnership for transport for many years. The transport system in Glasgow is quite good, including the underground with its inner and outer circle, and the buses. I concede to the expertise of Glasgow Members—they live there and I do not—but I have always found the transport system there to be very good.

Hugh Gaffney: Coatbridge is outside Glasgow—it is rural. People depend on these jobs in rural communities in Coatbridge, just as they do in Ayrshire. The hon. Gentleman talks about travelling into Glasgow, but the people of Coatbridge do not want to travel anywhere. We want local government jobs for local people so that we can look after our families and local communities. That is the essential point, which is the same in Coatbridge as in Ayrshire.

Bill Grant: I must announce to Members gathered here today that my mother-in-law comes from the Whifflet in Coatbridge, so I know it rather well. Links into the city centre were never particularly difficult—and it was a great place to have a pint of beer, I might add.

Chris Stephens: The hon. Gentleman talks about the estate being modernised. Could he tell me what is modern about asking the poorest and most vulnerable to travel further to a jobcentre to secure work?

Bill Grant: My point about modernisation was to do with the estate, and I said that there would be pain. To me, the estate means the physical structure of the buildings—the floors, the roof, the ceilings and so on. I did concede that there would be pain, and I accept what the hon. Gentleman says, but we cannot stand still. No one can, no matter what sphere of business they are in or what service they provide.

Yes, there will be pain. I do not gloat or take any pleasure in the idea of somebody having to catch two buses and then get the train or the underground. There are challenges. If people are not at work, I am sure they

[*Bill Grant*]

will have considerable time to make the journey to the jobcentre and back, but there may be people who are incapacitated who find difficulties. I accept that that is an extreme challenge.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Is the hon. Gentleman in favour of the closures or against them? I am unclear.

Bill Grant: I am not going to answer that directly.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Of course not!

Bill Grant: Of course not—I am being honest. I am in favour of modernisation, not standing still, and I am in favour of being progressive. There is a very good phrase used in the Scottish Parliament: “This is a progressive issue.” We are progressing with the DWP estate. I believe that that is happening throughout the United Kingdom—it is not confined to Glasgow—but there will be pain.

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): We now move on to the wind-ups. That speech was not the wind-up, by the way.

2.19 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Evans. It is also a pleasure to see my old friend from the Strathclyde fire board, the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant). I can confirm that he is a bit of a wind-up merchant, but his comments failed to address the points that my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) started with. The issue is the structural poverty and historic unemployment and deprivation that Glasgow and the west of Scotland still see as a result of the Tory legacy from the '80s and beyond. This Tory Government seem set on compounding that poverty and misery and making it worse. They are not looking at the communities that the cuts affect; they are looking only at lines on a map or on Google Maps. They are not looking at the Scottish index of multiple deprivation, as my hon. Friend mentioned. If that index was placed over the map, they would see that the cuts are falling on the poorest communities and those who need support the most. They deserve support the most, because they are the furthest away from the labour market.

I do not know whether the Minister has since taken it down, but when he had us over to his office after the cuts were announced, he had an enormous poster on his wall, right behind where he sat. It was a kind of heat map of the joblessness figures for the whole country, and Glasgow was a great big red beacon on that map. That is exactly where the cuts are falling and where support is needed the most.

My hon. Friends have mentioned the issues with the digital divide. They talked about how difficult it is for people, such as the character in “I, Daniel Blake”, who are pencil by default rather than digital by default. That is true of people in the east end of Glasgow and many of the poorer communities in Scotland. Citizens Advice Scotland did a report a few years ago called “Offline and left behind”, which pointed out that the majority of CAB clients it sees would struggle to apply for benefits and jobs online. That will continue to be the case,

because many of them are older workers and further away from the job market. The hon. Member for Midlothian (Danielle Rowley) mentioned the 1950s women affected by the state pension changes. The Government have made great play of trumpeting that there will be support for those women. Where will that support be if the infrastructure they rely on is taken away from their communities?

I have mentioned before in the Chamber that I met a woman in my constituency outside Bridgeton jobcentre, which is due to close. She was in bits. She was a WASPI woman who was being forced back to work. She was continually receiving letters calling her into Bridgeton jobcentre. Because it was just down the street from her house, she was able to get her baffies on to get there, but she was scared going in. She was terrified. She was crying going in and coming back out. These are the kind of women who need to be able to access support nearby. Getting up, getting fully dressed, getting on a bus and travelling to the other end of the city would be too much for her. She would fall out of the system and get no support at all. That is not acceptable, and it is not the kind of society we want.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) asked, who will pick up the slack? Who will take up the burden when the jobcentre has gone away? It will be services such as the Scottish Association for Mental Health and the Glasgow Association for Mental Health, which provide so much support to people with mental health issues that are preventing them from taking a job, caused by trauma they have experienced or issues they have had in their lives. Those issues are multiple and complex, and we ignore them at our peril.

The Government are content to let the voluntary sector, food banks and charities pick up where the state has left off and rolled back. The Tory Government are obsessed with dismantling the social security infrastructure of our nation. The things that were put in place to help and support people when they need it most are all being unravelled. That speaks to the issue with the HMRC offices and the DWP back offices. In a lot of cases, they were placed so as to facilitate economic growth in areas that had issues. The hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) illustrated that perfectly by talking about the impact on the wider community of the 250 jobs and £4,000 a week. I would not be surprised if the figure were higher. It is a small sample—a snapshot in time—of the people who go there to work and use the local sandwich shop or the local paper shop. They will buy things in the high street on their way to and from the office. That is true of every single jobcentre that the Government propose to close. Closures will have an impact on the local economy. Empty buildings will be sitting in communities going unused and becoming derelict.

Mr Sweeney: The hon. Lady will know that many communities in Glasgow have seen regeneration of their high streets. In particular, there are many great regeneration initiatives in Glasgow that aim to find new and innovative uses for high streets. Surely a progressive measure would be for the DWP to work in partnership with regeneration agencies in Glasgow to look at options such as collocation that would drive vibrancy back into high streets, drive economic activity, drive better job opportunities into

communities and create a virtuous cycle of economic growth in Glasgow and around the UK. That is surely what the DWP should be looking at, rather than having a silo mentality of cutting overheads at the expense of everything else. It should be looking at how it can crowd in growth and opportunities through other more entrepreneurial activity, such as collocation.

Alison Thewliss: I absolutely agree with the point that the hon. Gentleman makes. Clyde Gateway, which works in my constituency and across the boundary into Lanarkshire, is a prime example of that. It was not consulted. It has been the driver for economic regeneration in the east end of Glasgow. It has got people into work. It has looked at the people who are furthest away from the job market and got them into apprenticeships and real paying jobs against all the odds of ill health and deprivation, but it was not consulted or involved in the process. It was not asked about collocation. It would bite the Government's hand off if they wanted to move HMRC offices from the city centre out to the east end of Glasgow, because it knows the impact that would have on positive regeneration. It would bring in jobs and benefit to the wider economy. It knows that, and it has tried to attract organisations such as Police Scotland, which has come into the area. The area is starting to come up, because it is getting those extra, good-value jobs, and people are moving into the area to build their lives rather than just coming in and out for work. That is hugely important.

The Government would save money with collocation. As my hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) pointed out, it is much cheaper to have offices in Livingston than in the centre of Edinburgh and much cheaper to have jobs in Dalmarnock or Shawfield than in the city centre of Glasgow. The Government are wedded to the idea of shiny big offices in the city centre. If it is not important where the jobs are done, why should they be done in the most expensive office space that can be found? Why can they not be in local communities, giving benefit to the wider area? As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South said, that is part of the Government's cack-handed approach to the issue.

The Government have not looked at the data. We have all asked written parliamentary questions, and they cannot show us the data that evidences the decisions. It is not there. They do not know how many claimants of particular types go and use the jobcentres in question. With the transition to universal credit, it is likely that those jobcentres might be needed more rather than less, because people will need to go in and out about the work-related aspects of universal credit, when they are asked to do more work or earn more. The Government do not seem to be thinking about that at all.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) said, we do not know any detail on outreach. I ask the Government to be careful about how it is done, because there is a huge stigma for some people in accessing jobcentre services. If they are going in and out of the building they can just about cope, but if the services start to be in the community centre, their pals might know they are going in. An officer might sanction someone right there in the middle of the canteen. Such things are really upsetting, and the Government need to think about how they are done,

not only for the safety, data protection and dignity of the people using that service, but for the safety of staff. The number of attacks on jobcentre staff has gone up as people get increasingly upset and frustrated with the process. The Government have a duty to those staff to ensure that they are safe, wherever the service is.

There is a security guard on the front door of each jobcentre in Glasgow. If I walk in, someone will come up and challenge me and say, "Who are you? Why are you here?" Within seconds of me walking in the door in Bridgeton, they were saying that. There is a reason for that, and the Government need to think about the safety of staff when they proceed. They need to be careful to do it in a sensitive and effective way. I suppose the Government would know that if they had visited any of the jobcentres in Glasgow or the wider area. I imagine a Government entourage would roll into the building and the jobcentre staff would know they were coming, unlike when I just pitch up on the doorstep, but the Government should consider trying that. They should take up the offer of my hon. Friend the Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) to visit the jobcentres in Inverclyde, or any jobcentre at all. They could understand the geography and see what it is like for clients to go from one place to another on two buses. Rather than just sitting in an office using Google Maps, they should do the journey themselves.

We have invited the Minister before to come on journeys with us around Glasgow. As part of its campaign, the *Evening Times* in Glasgow did case studies and went out on journeys to and from all the different jobcentres. It has done great campaigning work on the issue, and it knows the city well—certainly a good deal better than Ministers.

Mr Sweeney: There are a couple of relevant points about the need to have a security guard on the door, which reflects a number of problems with the current provision. There is the protection and morale of staff, but there is also the morale and self-esteem of the people who use the service. It is a measure of how the service conducts itself and how the interface with the service feels. People who already have anxiety issues, low self-esteem and problems with engaging are being introduced to this kind of Kafkaesque nightmare, where they feel intimidated and are effectively being negatively influenced to dissociate themselves from using the service.

Alison Thewliss: I agree that it seems to be part of a wider plan to stop people using the services in the first place and to get people away from going there and seeking support.

I cannot speak for the rest of the country, but I will speak for Glasgow. What is good about jobcentres in Glasgow is that Bridgeton, Parkhead and Easterhouse all have citizens advice bureaux round the corner, very close to people. If someone finds themselves sanctioned or is stressed or worried, or needs extra support, that support is literally around the corner. They can cross the road to get there, and that help and support will be there. I know from speaking to staff at citizens advice centres in Glasgow that that happens regularly; they are there to provide that service. At Shettleston, which will replace Bridgeton, Parkhead and Easterhouse, there is no citizens advice bureau across the road. I wonder why that is.

[*Alison Thewliss*]

In Possil, as was mentioned, there are other services as well. In Langside, there is a college across the road, which is exactly where we would want something that can encourage people to up their qualifications and seek new opportunities.

There are opportunities for collocation that we know the Government have not even explored or looked at. I understand that they offered something to the Scottish Government with no options. Rather than engaging properly and thoroughly, they said, “This is what we are thinking of doing—and we are doing it.” As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West said, they did that rather than looking at the whole estate and what is the best type of service for people—what works and actually improves things. In all the discussion, there has been nothing about which jobcentres are effective and which are not. Where do things work well for people and where do they not, and how can we improve that? It is just all about cuts, not about people.

Bill Grant: I come back to my theme of modernisation. [*Interruption.*]

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): Order.

Bill Grant: I visited the Ayr jobcentre a couple of weeks ago, as I did the one in Cumnock. Cumnock is a deprived area and there are challenges there. On my modernisation theme, I recall a visit as far back as 2005 and 2006, when I retired from the fire service and went to the jobcentre in Ayr. It was a very uninviting, dark and intimidating place. The staff were behind screens for their protection. It was not very welcoming.

I say the word “modernisation” again, because when I went to the Ayr jobcentre just a couple of weeks ago, it was a very warm and welcoming place. The staff’s morale was high and they were enthused to tell me of the good work they were doing. Somebody will keep me right, but I thought the term was “job coaches” for those employed to encourage people into work. They were proud of the work that they had done through the modernisation of the premises. I found the staff’s morale high, though they are better judges of that. In some cases, modernisation works. I found it warm and welcoming there, whereas more than a decade ago it was a terrible place to visit.

Alison Thewliss: Modernisation is fine, but that is very different from shutting it, which is what is happening in this situation. These jobcentres are not being modernised—they are being removed and closed; they are gone. Modernisation is not what this debate is about.

I appreciate that time is tight and I have gone on for a wee while now. My hon. Friends the Members for Glasgow North and for Glasgow South and the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) powerfully raised the need for an equality impact assessment. The Government said that they would provide an equality impact assessment of each jobcentre after the event, not before deciding on the closures. We have not seen those as yet.

Hugh Gaffney *rose*—

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): Order. Just before this intervention, I would give a gentle reminder that we are now under some time limits, in order to give equal time to the Labour Front-Bench spokesperson, and Members will also want to hear what the Minister has to say. Are you taking an intervention now?

Alison Thewliss: Yes; I am just about done.

Hugh Gaffney: Has the Minister watched “I, Daniel Blake”? Let us be modern and look at the world. Ken Loach made a very good film, so let us look at “I, Daniel Blake” and have a reality check on the whole DWP estate.

Alison Thewliss: The hon. Gentleman will find that Ministers will never say whether they have watched it. They probably ought to. I would be happy to put on a movie night if that would help.

We need to see the data and to know what happens next. We need to know what happens in the transition period and what the alternative services are, and whether there are going to be outreach services. What I really want more than anything else is for the people in our constituencies in Glasgow and right across the country, wherever they are, to have a no-sanction guarantee, at the very least for an interim period until the new arrangement settles in. If one person gets sanctioned because their bus does not turn up, that is an absolute scandal that falls on this Government. I will raise any constituency case I get of that kind with the Minister on the Floor of the House; he will know all about it.

2.35 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) on securing what is and remains a really important debate—although we have had it several times already. He spoke powerfully of the intergenerational poverty and deprivation in his constituency. That was a theme picked up by the hon. Members for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) and for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), and my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney), who spoke of the impact of the closures on some of the poorest in the UK.

There was also a strong contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney), who talked about the impact that the 250 job losses will have on the local economy in his constituency. Members also spoke of the disproportionate impacts on certain groups in society—most notably my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova), on black and Asian people, and my hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian (Danielle Rowley), on WASPI women.

From the Government Benches, the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) said that there will be pain and that for some people there will be extreme challenges. I ask the Minister to reflect on that.

As we know, the Government have recently confirmed plans to close around one in 10 jobcentres in the UK by March 2018. Public consultations were held on just 30 of the 78 jobcentre closures proposed in January, and only 16 have been reprieved, with three additional closures

now confirmed. We understand that 590 jobcentres will be retained, 109 will be closed, and 50 collocations will go ahead. The future of eight sites is still to be negotiated. Yet the Department for Work and Pensions has yet to provide details of when each office closure is to take place, even though some could be as early as this summer. Will the Minister tell us when the first centres are scheduled to close, and which ones they are? People have a right to know. Will he publish the current closure dates planned for each office, so that people can have as much information as possible to make provision as they need to for the change in circumstances?

Jobcentres provide really important services in our communities, offering services that are designed to support people should they be unfortunate enough to lose their jobs or become ill or disabled, as well as for those who have been disabled throughout their lives. It is often said that how a society treats its most vulnerable is a mark of its civilisation. Our social security system is precious and should be there for people in their time of need. However, it appears that the Government are eroding our social security system and failing to pay heed to the needs of individuals and communities, at a time when we face the uncertainties of Brexit, increased job insecurity with 1 million people on zero-hours contracts, a crisis in low pay and the Government's introduction of in-work conditionality—sanctions for working people, as it is also known.

It is increasingly clear that the impact of the closures on claimants will be considerable and the effect will be most acutely felt by the most vulnerable in our society, such as the chronically sick, the disabled and those with caring responsibilities, along with those with poor or no IT skills. Where, then, are the equality impact assessments for the closures? We have asked for them, but they are still yet to be seen. The Government are disregarding the needs of communities at the very time when the world of work is changing rapidly. The Government are yet to publish the equality analysis for the closures. Can the Minister give an exact date for when the full equality analysis will be published?

The Secretary of State said it is reasonable to ask claimants to travel further to another jobcentre as that is what people in work have to do every day, but he does not take into account the fact that those people have wages to pay their travel fares. People claiming social security are more likely to have a health problem or disability. They are more likely to struggle to travel longer distances, and as a result are at greater risk of being sanctioned for being late. People with children may also find it difficult to travel longer distances. What assessment has the Department made of the impact of the closures on claimants' travel times, and of the associated costs? Can the Government specify whether the travel time includes those who cannot afford public transport and have to walk?

Marsha De Cordova: On the issue of the closures, it would be helpful if the Minister could talk about travel times and set out what mechanisms will be in place to support those with mobility issues or other disabilities, who will have to travel further. What adjustments will be made for those protected groups?

Margaret Greenwood: My hon. Friend makes a really good point, and it is important that the Minister responds to it.

What guidance does the Department intend to give staff on sanctioning people who miss an appointment because they have to travel further? We need to be clear about what sanctioning can mean to people. A first sanction means no benefits for four weeks. A second sanction means no benefits for three months. A third sanction means no benefits for up to three years. The system risks forcing people into destitution, crime or suicide, so this is a really important issue.

Let us consider the roll-out of the full service of universal credit. The DWP is reducing its estate at the same time as it is speeding up roll-out of the full service of UC. Over the past two years, the full service of universal credit has been rolled out to five new areas each month. This month, it has been extended to 30, and there are plans for it to be accelerated in October to 55 new areas per month. If the DWP feels able to announce such far-reaching plans to close jobcentres, it must surely have a clear idea of what the impact will be on work coaches, who are at the centre of its plans for employment support, but the Minister's answer to a written question I submitted asking for the DWP's assessment of the optimal number of universal credit claimants in a work coach's caseload was vague to say the least. Will the Minister give us a clearer response today? What is his Department's assessment of the optimal number of universal credit claimants a work coach can deal with, for both the live service and the full service? Or is his Department forging ahead with plans to close jobcentres without a clear idea of the number of staff needed?

The closure of jobcentres and the migration to online applications will make it harder for many people to claim social security. Many people do not have access to computers or mobiles, are unable to carry out transactions, or are not able to use the internet at all. A 2015 study by Citizens Advice Scotland found that 59% of respondents were unable to make an application for benefits online without help, and 30% of respondents were not able to apply for a benefit online at all. In Glasgow's most deprived areas, almost half of respondents had never used the internet. More than half of clients did not have a computer or a device they could use to access the internet, and more than 40% of survey respondents could not use a computer at all. The Minister's response, when questioned on claimants' access to IT, has been to say that jobcentres provide access to PCs. If jobcentres are closing in large numbers, surely there will be less access to PCs for those who need to use them.

It is becoming clearer that the full digital service roll-out is experiencing major problems. Claimants are forced to spend increasingly long periods on the phone to try to resolve issues relating to their claims. A recent Citizens Advice report suggests that sometimes the only way to resolve a problem is to go to a jobcentre directly. The report calls for a comprehensive support package to be put in place, offering face-to-face help with all aspects of making and managing a universal credit claim. Will the DWP listen to Citizens Advice's call for such a package? What is the DWP's assessment of the effectiveness with which the full digital service is being rolled out? The process is called "test and learn". Can the Minister please tell us what has been learned so far?

Let me turn to back-of-house offices. Front-facing jobcentres are not the only service the DWP is cutting. All but two back-of-house offices face closure, and staff

[Margaret Greenwood]

are to be concentrated in a small number of hubs. That will have serious implications for staff, who will be forced to travel further or move. For some people, that will be practically impossible. Can the Minister tell us how many people will be made redundant, first, from the planned jobcentre closures, and secondly, from the closure of back-of-house offices?

Let me turn to the health and safety impact. The transfer of staff and claimants from jobcentres that are closing also raises health and safety issues. The closures will put more pressure on overstretched staff. The Minister said that work coaches are the central customer-facing role, but Jobcentre Plus staff dealing with phone inquiries about claims are also frontline staff. It can be extremely stressful to answer calls from people who are frustrated about a problem with their claim or delays in processing it. The Public and Commercial Services Union reports that staff are already being taken away from processing claims to answer phone lines, which leads to a vicious cycle: claimants are more likely to phone to ask what is happening to their claim because it has not been processed due to the delays. Apparently, among staff, it is known as the “cycle of hell”—a circle of inefficiency and stress, which they are struggling to get out of. Will the Minister tell us what steps he is taking to ensure the health and wellbeing of staff in DWP offices?

The Secretary of State said on 6 July that the DWP is actively recruiting. That is welcome, but I would be grateful if the Minister could share with us the DWP’s current assessment of Jobcentre Plus’s performance on staff retention. Will the DWP publish statistics on the turnover of Jobcentre Plus and back-of-house office staff?

[MIKE GAPES *in the Chair*]

In the debate on 6 July, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) rightly raised the issue of the safety of young people who travel from different parts of south London, in the context of increasing youth violence. PCS raised similar concerns with me in relation to other major cities. Problems are likely to arise when services are merged in one office in an area with a gang culture. That serious issue is likely to affect staff and claimants, so it is important that the DWP listens to and acts upon the concerns of staff in such cases. Will the Minister give an assurance that he will do that? What support is DWP offering staff to ensure they maintain their emotional and physical wellbeing at work?

It is important that there is sufficient room space available in the remaining jobcentres so claimants who have to disclose personal information can do so in privacy. Has the DWP carried out a health and safety assessment of the impact of the planned closures? If not, why not? If it has, will it publish it?

My concern is that acceleration of the roll-out of the full digital services of universal credit, together with the programme of the rapid closure of jobcentres, will put intolerable pressure on staff and create chaos for claimants—especially the most vulnerable. The Government’s answer to any criticism of cuts to social security is that work is the best route out of poverty. Why, then, are they closing jobcentres on such a scale, when they offer services that are specifically designed to help people find employment?

2.47 pm

The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds): It is a delight to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) on securing the debate. He and others will be aware that this subject has already been debated extensively in Parliament. There has been an Opposition day debate, a Westminster Hall debate, an Adjournment debate and a Back-Bench business debate. There was another Westminster Hall debate yesterday, specifically on south Wales. The issue has been raised at DWP questions and Scotland Office questions. There have been two urgent questions and a substantial body of written questions.

Today’s debate has been wide-ranging. We heard a full exposition from the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) and a very interesting speech from the hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood). In the time left, I will do my best to cover as many of the points that have been raised as possible.

The Government are committed to maintaining our record of protecting the most vulnerable while supporting everyone to fulfil their potential and play their full part in society. That includes reforming the welfare system by making work pay, supporting those unable to work and examining our assets to ensure that we are deploying resources effectively. On 31 March 2018, the DWP’s 20-year private finance initiative contract with Telereal Trillium, which covers the majority of the DWP’s current property portfolio of some 900 sites, comes to an end. That date provides an opportunity—indeed, an imperative—to review which office locations we need and how our estate is to be managed in the future. We have sought to do that in a way that delivers better value for the taxpayer and makes best use of the space available, while continuing to deliver vital support to claimants and pursuing our reform agenda.

Margaret Greenwood: Will the Minister give way?

Damian Hinds: I am sorry, I will not. The hon. Lady will have to forgive me, but I want to answer as many questions as possible.

To give some context, the DWP occupies about 1.5 million square metres of office space, but the way it operates is significantly different from 20 years ago, meaning that at least 20% of that space is under-occupied. The falling claimant count and the increased use of online services in recent years mean that 20% of the money the Department spends on rent goes towards space we are not using. By paying only for the space we need and the services required to operate from it, we anticipate saving £140 million per year over the next 10 years. To be clear, this is not about reducing services—the hon. Member for Wirral West alluded to that—but about taking the opportunity to stop spending taxpayers’ money on empty space and instead spend more to support those in need.

The labour market is in its strongest position for some years: the employment rate is 74.8%, the joint highest figure on record, and since 2010 unemployment has reduced by 913,000 and the overall number of people claiming the main out-of-work benefits has fallen by more than 1.1 million. In Glasgow over the past four years, the claimant count has come down from 27,890 to

16,800. The DWP estate is bigger than it needs to be, is not flexible enough to deal with the needs of the Department's customers now and in the future and, in some instances, is of poor quality, preventing improvements such as digital innovation and more interactive ways of working with customers.

The Department is not transforming its estate in isolation. In June 2013, the Government published their first overall estate strategy, which was expanded in October 2014. The strategy aims to ensure that all Departments are working towards an effective and efficient Government estate that provides value for money to the taxpayer, delivers better, more integrated public services and acts as an enabler of growth. In January this year, we announced proposals to rationalise the DWP estate. The proposals encompassed most of our Jobcentre Plus offices, processing centres and head office buildings. Our announcements on 5 July finalised those plans for the majority of sites.

In our processing centres, the changes move towards creating larger, modern, digitally enabled centres, with teams working on several areas coming together to deliver a joined-up, efficient service to our customers. The focus is on creating an estate with a much improved working environment, with more opportunities for our staff to develop, learn new skills and progress.

Significant investment starting in 2018 will include the opening of a new processing centre in Glasgow, which will allow us to bring together colleagues from smaller, older sites across the area into a new property fitted out to create an efficient, effective working environment that allows the DWP to align more closely with other Departments working in the area. With the existing large processing site in Northgate, that will result in a DWP presence of more than 2,000 staff in Glasgow. In total in Scotland, we will keep a substantial processing presence, with large sites in locations such as Falkirk and Kilmarnock expanding to bring further jobs into those areas.

That investment will continue with a new purpose-built site in the Treforest area to the north of Cardiff in south Wales, which will bring together colleagues from smaller, older sites across the region into a new building and provide about 1,600 jobs in one of the most deprived areas in the UK. We are also working on similar large processing sites in Bristol, Birmingham and Hastings. Together with the changes to how we work in some of our remaining properties, that will create a processing estate that will be able to support the Department well into the future, while remaining flexible enough to deal with changing needs over the coming years.

The changes in the jobcentre network focus on three things: first, moving some jobcentres to shared Government premises to allow for better, more efficient use of space and a more co-ordinated service; secondly, moving some jobcentres to new buildings because the quality of the existing property is not up to scratch or is unable to meet the needs of our customers now and in the future; and thirdly, merging smaller and underused jobcentres to create larger operations that offer a better, more joined-up service to our customers. The changes include around 40 new opportunities to collocate jobcentre services into local authority or community premises, which will result in about 80 collocations in total.

In Scotland, we have 95 jobcentres, which is more jobcentres per head of population than in England. The changes will result in 11 jobcentres merging into nearby

offices, three jobcentres moving into shared offices with local authorities and councils, and one jobcentre moving into an improved building in the same town. The resulting 85 jobcentres across the country still leaves Scotland with significantly more offices per head of population than England.

In Glasgow, we have 17 jobcentres, which the hon. Member for Glasgow South West acknowledged in his opening speech was more per head of population than in any other major city in Great Britain. Even with the reduction to 11 jobcentres, Glasgow will continue to have more per head of population than other cities. We consulted on three moves in Glasgow—Maryhill, Castlemilk and Bridgeton—and held a further consultation on Broxburn. The changes will enable the Department to offer a more efficient service while delivering value for the taxpayer.

The changes have been developed working closely with local leaders, using their local knowledge of the area, travel network, customers and community needs. Distance and journey times were calculated using a variety of methods to ensure accuracy in our planning, including online tools and timetables, as well as information collected on local public transport routes. Most importantly, that was all used to inform discussions with local staff, with their experience and knowledge of their areas.

Any change with an impact on DWP employees has involved consultation with them and their trade unions. In most cases, staff consultation began with an announcement back in January, followed by three to five weeks of discussion when we considered the impact of any changes on their offices. We have consulted the public on any jobcentre mergers that may mean customers will have to travel a little further. There is no statutory requirement for such consultation, but we were committed to making the decisions in consultation and have conducted public consultations on all proposed closures of jobcentres that fall outside the ministerial criteria.

Chris Stephens: Will the Minister give way?

Damian Hinds: I was trying to leave the hon. Gentleman a minute at the end, but he may go ahead.

Chris Stephens: The Minister has outlined the Government strategy. May I ask him a simple question? Is he saying that more jobcentre closures are on the cards? In other words, is the Department planning more closures?

Damian Hinds: I am fairly sure that I was talking not about that, but about the consultation criteria. At the end of the process, we will have a settled estate, which will put us in a better position to share services and so on with other bodies.

I will skip over some of my material and respond directly to some of the questions that came up in the debate. The hon. Member for Wirral West asked about concerns about travel times and travel costs. I reassure Members that claimants can be reimbursed for any travel to jobcentres that is more frequent than fortnightly. For those on JSA for more than 13 weeks and, in some circumstances, from the very first day on other benefits, it is possible to apply for a Jobcentre Plus travel discount card, which is available for different local transport companies. Of course, anyone on employment and support

[*Damian Hinds*]

allowance is not asked to attend the jobcentre regularly. The existing outreach services and the additional ones that we will put in place as a result of the changes will give us more presence in local areas.

On sanctions, the point is that we ask people to make reasonable efforts to get to appointments and other things they have committed to as part of their job search. There will be a transition time as people get used to different arrangements, but the requirement for people to make reasonable efforts will always remain.

On access to online facilities, DWP always has an alternative to online, but in this day and age it is also true that to look for work and to be in work, it is increasingly essential to have some IT skills. We therefore think it is important to help people with that, which is one of the reasons why we provide IT equipment in jobcentre lobbies and have people who can help claimants with it.

The hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) asked whether the other jobcentres in Glasgow have the capacity to take in the extra operations. The answer is that they do—that is the entire basis of our plans. We will put outreach in place in those locations where we had a public consultation because the distances travelled would be a little further.

We want to minimise all risk of job losses. We have not yet completed all the conversations with staff, and we are continuing to have those one-to-ones. The DWP has a good record over many years of retaining staff. We will seek to facilitate that as much as possible.

Some of the questions were about working with the Scottish Government. We are keen to do so, and we look forward to more such opportunities in future. I was also asked about the equality impact assessment, and we have built in consideration of the impact on people with protected characteristics through all stages of the estates project process. We will continue to do so, thus fulfilling our duty under the Equalities Act 2010.

Mike Gapes (in the Chair): You have 10 seconds, Mr Stephens.

2.59 pm

Chris Stephens: I will just say this: taking away places that give people a safety net is not modernisation, but a recalling of Victorian values.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Combat Compensation

3 pm

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government proposals for better combat compensation.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes, in the last Westminster Hall debate before the recess. I refuse to call it the graveyard shift—this is an extraordinarily important debate. I welcome the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), to his seat. May I formally put on the record the whole House's gratitude to him for his work, particularly during the terrorist incident, when he administered CPR to PC Keith Palmer? He is a real hero, who has served in uniform and stepped up to the mark when his country needed him.

This debate addresses concerns arising from the “Better combat compensation” consultation, which ran until 23 February 2017 and on which the Government have yet to publish their conclusions. According to the Government, an enhanced compensation scheme will address the

“urgent need to reform the current system for dealing with compensation claims brought before the Courts and provide clarity in law on issues of negligence which may contribute to deaths and injuries suffered by members of our Armed Forces in combat.”

Linked to that scheme, the Government propose to enshrine in legislation an extension to combat immunity, so that it not only applies to deaths or injuries that occur in the course of combat but covers all military operations.

The Secretary of State for Defence has stated that those proposals arise from three main concerns: that service personnel and ex-service personnel who are injured in combat can be drawn into long and frustrating legal cases; that the legal costs of such cases borne by the taxpayer often far outstrip the damages awarded; and that judges are required to second-guess military decisions using criteria appropriate in civilian life.

In essence, through its “Better combat compensation” proposals, the Ministry of Defence plans to scrap the legal duty of care that it owes to service personnel. That duty of care has been in force since 1987, when Parliament repealed section 10 of the Crown Proceedings Act 1947 to provide protection for those who bravely serve their country. I find it hard to believe that the Minister believes that it is both legally and morally right that the MOD should be allowed to legislate its way out of that duty of care.

I will first address the concern that judges are required to second-guess military decisions using criteria appropriate in civilian life. The courts already recognise the difference between cases involving military decisions made by armed forces personnel in combat and civilian cases where the duty of care applies. The duty of care is not exclusive; it applies to all walks of life. That is reflected by the fact that not a single court decision has second-guessed a military decision made in a battlefield situation.

The right of access to the courts is a long-established common law right that is now enshrined in article 6 of the European convention on human rights. Any exclusion

of that right would require primary legislation, which would need to be judged compatible with the convention. Does the Minister know whether such legislation would be judged compatible? If it would, when do the Government propose to bring forward such legislation? There was no mention of it in the Queen's Speech.

Extending combat immunity could be a slippery slope. If the MOD, as an employer, can legislate its way out of a duty of care to our armed forces, where will that stop? Will other employers, such as the fire service or the police service, be next? Where will it end? As a Government Department, the MOD already enjoys Crown privilege, which means that, although health and safety legislation applies to it, it is not subject to criminal enforcement action in the courts. Instead, such action is mirrored by administrative arrangements, which ultimately lead to a Crown censure instead of prosecution.

Introducing a smokescreen of combat immunity over all military operations, as the Government propose, would be a huge step backwards. Combat immunity, which is currently interpreted by the courts, is there to protect military operations when thinking is impaired in the heat of battle. It does not, and should not, apply to procurement decisions made back at Whitehall when equipment that is procured for our troops turns out to be faulty or unsuitable.

The MOD has already tried and failed to extend the scope of combat immunity in the courts. The Supreme Court ruled in a landmark case that the Government are under a legal obligation to fulfil their duty of care and to ensure that British soldiers are sent to fight with adequate equipment and training. In that case, our troops were travelling in the lightly armoured Snatch Land Rover, the vulnerability of which had led some soldiers to call it the "mobile coffin". The Chilcot report eventually found that the Snatch Land Rover was at the end of its planned life in service and that an alternative should have been found.

That case defined the legal obligations that the Government owe to soldiers who are killed or injured on active service abroad. Why is the MOD now attempting to ignore the will of the highest court in the land? Under the system of blanket immunity that the MOD proposes, those facts would never have come to light, there would have been no pressure to make changes and no lessons would have been learned.

That brings me to the second concern put forward by the Secretary of State: that legal costs outstrip the compensation awarded. That assumes that people have a purely financial motive for taking cases through the courts, but their motivation is often more complex. Service personnel and their families do not simply seek financial recompense; they often seek justice. They seek to protect others from suffering the same fate as them or their loved ones. They want to shine a light on their case and ensure public scrutiny so that it does not happen again. They want questions answered.

Extending the scope of combat immunity would be discriminatory to armed forces personnel and their families, and would breach the armed forces covenant. The covenant's two principles are that,

"the armed forces community should face no disadvantage compared to other citizens in the provision of public and commercial services; and that special consideration is appropriate in some cases, especially for those who have given the most such as the injured or the bereaved."

The covenant is a pledge that together we acknowledge and understand that those who serve or have served in the armed forces, and their families, should be treated with fairness and respect in the communities, economy and society that they have served with their lives.

This is not how we in this country should respect those who risk their lives to protect our way of life. Why should a decision about equipment or training made at a desk in Whitehall not be subject to the same scrutiny as similar decisions made by other employers? In April last year the Defence Committee published its report, "Beyond endurance? Military exercises and the duty of care", which called for the MOD to be subject to sanctions under the Corporate Manslaughter and Corporate Homicide Act 2007, without exemption. The inquiry was called after three Army reservists died after taking part in SAS selection exercises in the Brecon Beacons. They were three of 135 armed forces personnel who lost their lives while on training and exercises between 1 January 2000 and 20 February 2016: a statistic to make us sit up and think.

The inquiry found that it was wrong for the MOD and armed forces to have exemptions under the Corporate Manslaughter and Homicide Act in situations where they have been penalised by Crown censure for serious failings in hazardous training and selection events. The Government, however, rejected the Committee's modest proposals to reform the military exemptions in the Corporate Manslaughter and Homicide Act. Why is the MOD so reluctant to accept responsibility for its actions? Do our brave men and women, who put themselves on the front line to protect our country, not deserve better?

I now turn specifically to the compensation awards under the new enhanced scheme. Before doing so, it is important to point out a flaw in the current system that takes no account of those who have suffered brain damage as a result of their injuries and lack capacity to make decisions or control large amounts of money. The MOD simply pays more than half a million pounds into a soldier's bank account with no checks currently on capacity. They are simply left to get on with it. Lawyers instructed in such cases are under a duty to assess mental capacity and are negligent if they fail to do so. That protects vulnerable claimants. No such checks and balances exist for military service personnel, so I ask the Minister to address that urgently.

The MOD's enhanced pension scheme should not be reviewed as an issue linked to the extension of combat immunity as the two issues are independent of each other. The Government say that individuals or their families will be awarded better compensation for injury or death in combat and will not require legal representation. Straightforward cases will be suitable for the compensation scheme, but using the scheme should be optional, with the decision taken to do so by armed forces personnel or their family. The option to go through the courts and the subsequent public scrutiny must remain open. Many cases will inevitably be very complex with a need for multiple experts to help to assess the extent of injuries and losses.

Service personnel are often vulnerable and traumatised, and some will have catastrophic injuries. In my constituency I have the South Manchester amputation unit, which I visit regularly and I have seen the extent of many of the injuries. Improvements in medical expertise mean that those who suffer battlefield injuries have extended life

[Mike Kane]

expectancy. The complex nature of the injuries, including the cost of adapted housing, equipment and rehabilitation to last a lifetime, has always been determined by experts and the courts, with independent legal advice available. The MOD now proposes to take those calculations away from the courts and instead handle them itself. Further, it expects injured and vulnerable military personnel to be able to assess themselves whether the correct amounts have been awarded. Does the Minister really expect vulnerable and injured service personnel and their families to navigate the process without legal representation? If the MOD is serious about full compensation, servicemen and women must have recourse to legal representation to help prepare the evidence for the courts to adjudicate.

However, the proposal will allow the MOD to create a situation in which it serves not only as gatekeeper, but as both judge and jury. The fact that the MOD itself should decide whether a claim against it is valid creates a clear conflict of interest. As a result, it is unlikely that armed forces personnel and their families will have confidence in the system or its impartiality.

In summary, the Government need to look again at the enhanced compensation scheme and the proposal to extend the definition of combat immunity. As it stands, soldiers will be shut out of justice, and military equipment failures will be swept under the carpet rather than receiving public scrutiny through the court system. I repeat my questions to the Minister: does he legally and morally believe that the MOD should be allowed to legislate its way out of its duty of care to our soldiers as set out in the armed forces covenant and in law? If the Minister proposes to extend combat immunity, when does he propose to put the primary legislation before Parliament?

The Government have stated that there is an urgent need to reform the current system for dealing with compensation claims. When, therefore, can we expect the conclusions of their urgent consultation? I am sure we can all agree in this place that any process of compensation for armed service personnel needs to be transparent, and that everybody needs to be accountable. The enhanced compensation scheme and proposed extension of combat immunity fails to deliver either. Our armed forces deserve better.

3.15 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I congratulate the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) on securing this important debate this afternoon.

The hon. Gentleman made a cogent, reasoned and passionate speech about combat compensation, the changes that are likely to be made, and the suffering that service personnel and their families are likely to experience as a result of the Government's proposed changes. I agree with what he has said. I find it strange that, as he says, the MOD will end up being gatekeeper, judge and jury, especially in compensation claims, and that there has been no real attempt by the Government so far to say when, how and if they are going to do away with their legal duty of care towards service personnel. We all owe

them so much. As has already been said, much has come to light because of the fact that combat immunity was not quite so widely drawn.

If the Scottish Government's Minister for veterans was involved in this matter, he would be seriously concerned. So many service personnel who have been affected by what has happened to them, and of course to their families, might not now be able to get unbiased and free access to compensation. That is really dangerous, especially for those who suffer mental health problems as a result of their service. As we know, sometimes such problems do not occur until many years after service has ended.

The Scottish Government urge the UK Government to publish a response to the latest quinquennial review as soon as possible and to address directly the review's recommendations. In particular, we urge the Government to increase the maximum tariffs for mental health and to improve communication, particularly for veterans who may experience late onset symptoms.

The Scottish Government welcome the launch of the "Defence people mental health and wellbeing strategy" as a positive step forward, but maintain that there is still much more that could be done. For example, if people receive compensation as a result of their service, that should not be allowed to affect any other benefits that they get. It is vital that we treat our veterans with the utmost dignity and respect and allow them free, fair and equitable access.

The Government must not try to do in private what has recently been done in public, because that has forced the MOD to look at its procedures and at how it carries out its procurement and training methodologies. Service personnel need the utmost respect from the Government and the best possible compensation when things that the MOD is responsible for go wrong.

3.19 pm

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. To be honest, I was not best pleased when I realised that I had to come to this sitting of Westminster Hall, right at the end of a parliamentary term, but when I realised what issue was to be considered, my attitude soon changed. We owe a great deal of gratitude to my hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) for bringing this extremely important issue forward and securing the debate.

All of us here today would agree that we want the best and most appropriate compensation for all those who deserve compensation, whether they are soldiers or other members of the armed forces who have been hurt, or members of their families. We want justice for everyone, and we want it to be done as quickly and expeditiously as possible. I expect we are all concerned about the lengthy delays in some court cases, because we want justice to be achieved as quickly as possible.

I have two profound concerns about the proposals that the Government sent out for consultation. The consultation period has concluded and I shall be interested to hear what they intend to do in the light of the responses—whether they intend to legislate, and what form that legislation will take.

My first concern is quite fundamental, and it is about combat liability. Who exactly would be entitled to put forward a claim for compensation? The consultation paper suggested a new definition of liability:

“We believe that the test should be whether the harm—injury or death—occurred in the course of a UK military operation as a result of direct or indirect hostile enemy action, or as the direct result of misdirected targeting by friendly forces, or as the direct result of action taken to avoid hostile enemy action. If it did, it should be regarded as occurring in combat.”

That might on the face of it seem to be a straightforward, common-sense definition of combat, but its implications are truly profound, and it flies in the face of the practice and legal precedent established in this country since at least the end of the second world war. The suggested definition would mean that the Ministry of Defence could not be held accountable for decisions made far from combat, including those concerning training, procurement and the suitability of future combat equipment in the light of known operational issues. All those issues would be excluded under the proposal.

The practical implications of that are huge. An example that has already been quoted is the case brought with regard to Snatch Land Rovers. It was a long legal case, pursued against the Ministry of Defence by the families of soldiers who lost their lives in those inadequate vehicles in Iraq. In the end, it was successful in securing compensation and, more importantly, in gaining public recognition of the fact that the vehicles were inadequate. They were replaced with better, more sustainable vehicles that provided better protection for soldiers, but there were also lessons that had to be learned. The deficiencies of the Snatch vehicles were identified previously in Northern Ireland but, for reasons best known to civil servants and politicians at the time, action was not taken to replace them with appropriate vehicles. Those issues came to light clearly in the court case, which was long and protracted but extremely thorough. Of course, reference was made to all that in the Chilcot report, which I think should be considered alongside the Government proposal.

My second concern is that the proposal flies in the face of established legal practice based on common law, because it would take away people’s legal rights. It sets out, essentially, an in-house Ministry of Defence system, under which people would not have their legal rights or legal representation, but would accept what was decided by the Ministry. Admittedly, there would be an independent opinion about the entitlement.

I consider the proposal to be extremely worrying, and although I am a lay person, I am not the only one saying that. Lawyers with enormous experience are also concerned about it. The president of the Law Society said:

“This means cases would not be heard by an independent judge, facts would not be independently investigated, responsibility would not be established and a state institution, if liable, would not be held to account.

Soldiers and their families must not be shut out of our justice system.”

That, in a nutshell, is my second reservation.

In the light of those points, I hope that the Government will have second thoughts and listen to the Law Society and the many other people who have made representations. I also hope that the Government will uphold the consensus that was accepted by all parties on the armed forces covenant and take it forward, both in its detail and in its spirit, and that they will continue to have the principle of the duty of care for all armed forces personnel foremost in their mind whenever they consider bringing

forward proposals. With those few words about my strong reservations, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East for securing the debate and look forward to hearing the Government response.

3.27 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I welcome this debate, secured by the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane). He said that it was the graveyard shift: it is the last day of term, and I am already on my feet to respond to a debate that could have lasted an hour and a half. However, the subject is important, and I am grateful for this opportunity to respond as I begin my work in my present portfolio.

The hon. Gentleman made some very kind initial comments about what happened in the Westminster bridge attack. As this is the last sitting day before the recess, I think we are all reflecting on what has been a dramatic and difficult year for Britain, with the terrorist attacks and the Grenfell Tower fire. I feel humbled by the hon. Gentleman’s comments. It was a difficult day for me, and not a day goes by when I do not think about PC Keith Palmer. The toughest part of the day for me after that was going home and finding my eight-year-old boy at the top of the stairs, unable to sleep and wanting explanations of what had happened that day. All I could offer was that there are occasionally very bad people who do very bad things, but that there are always very good people who, even more, do good things. That day I was one of a number of people trying to do a good thing.

A lot of detail has arisen in the debate, and many questions have been asked. I shall do my best to answer the questions, but if I miss any details I shall, if I may, do as I customarily do and write to hon. Members. I do not have the excuse of not having enough time to answer; it is just that the portfolio is new to me, and I will say frankly that the issue is complex. However, as a former regular soldier and as a reservist—something that I should declare—I have a personal interest in making sure that when we send our brave soldiers, sailors and air personnel into harm’s way, we give them the equipment that they require.

I am grateful for the opportunity to elaborate on the Government’s proposals for better compensation. Before I turn to the details, it is worth saying something about the consultation paper, but also, in view of what has been said, rehearsing the rationale for the steps proposed for the consultation paper itself. There could hardly be a more important responsibility for the Ministry of Defence than ensuring that our arrangements for providing financial compensation to people who are injured while fighting for their country, and the families of those who are killed in so doing, are not only fair but generous. We owe them nothing less.

There are currently two routes by which service personnel or their families may be paid compensation for deaths or injuries suffered in that way. Virtually any injury, whether fatal or not, that is sustained by a member of the armed forces as a result of service will attract a payment under the armed forces compensation scheme. The scheme applies to deaths and injuries sustained both in combat and in situations such as training, and whether or not the Ministry of Defence was at fault in

[Mr Tobias Ellwood]

any way in the incident concerned. In a relatively small number of cases, a second route to seeking compensation would involve suing the Ministry of Defence for negligence in the law courts. That is because, were a court to find that there was negligence, it would award compensation that would be expected to be higher than that under the armed forces compensation scheme. In practice, the MOD would normally settle a case if it believed that it had been totally or partially to blame. It is fair to say that few cases actually go all the way to trial.

In the main, the MOD has no difficulty with the current approach, and we are not proposing any change whatsoever in cases that do not relate to combat. That distinction is important; I do not think the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East made the distinction in his opening remarks between cases that are in combat and those that are not. If people believe that they have a case, they may sue the MOD, and the Department will normally settle the case if it believes that it was indeed totally or partially to blame.

The real problem with the court route is when it comes to combat. Combat is inherently dangerous—we are sending people into harm's way to use organised violence. That was why the courts developed a doctrine known as combat immunity, which means that the Government cannot be sued for negligence when a person is injured or killed as a result of being sent into combat. The Ministry of Defence will continue to do everything practicable to minimise casualties among members of Britain's armed forces when they are called on to fight, but armed hostilities cannot be treated in the same way as training incidents or accidents in civilian life. I hope hon. Members understand and recognise that distinction, which I think is agreed across all parties.

Mike Kane: The Minister will know that the armed forces compensation scheme is limited in scope and does not take into account the rehabilitation costs of members of the armed forces who have been injured. We need to keep the court system so that they can get full compensation for the lifetime's worth of injuries that they have to face.

Mr Ellwood: If I may, I will come on to that in a second. Given that I have some time, it is worth saying that I have just been at a two-day conference with Veterans' Ministers from Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States, where we discussed that very thing: what support, compensation and packages of measures are available and in place while people are in the service, going through the transition, and once they are veterans. I think that is the point the hon. Gentleman is alluding to, and I will come to that shortly.

The challenge we face is that the scope of the doctrine of combat immunity is complex and unclear. That has resulted in some exceptionally protracted claims alleging that the MOD should not have used certain kinds of equipment or transport or should have trained people in a different way. The strong view of the Government is that decisions about such challenging and sensitive matters should be taken by military commanders with the appropriate expertise, and not—with all respect—by the courts.

Indeed, one of the minority judges in the Supreme Court case I mentioned rightly warned that the decision could lead to “the judicialisation of war”. The result

has been a number of long-running cases in which the MOD has been forced to defend its military preparations in the lead-up to combat. Such cases have risked the exposure of sensitive material, which could be useful to our enemies and adversaries. They have also cost large amounts of taxpayers' money, which could have been spent in better ways. We believe the cases have been highly stressful for the litigants and created much uncertainty for the conduct of future hostilities.

What we cannot have is cases where commanders in a war might be concerned about the manner in which they make decisions for fear of litigation or lawsuits when they come home. Military commanders may come to feel that they will be second-guessed back in Britain by lawyers intent on mounting negligence cases. That could have a chilling effect on decision making and affect our ability to fight and complete actions. Against that background, the proposals we put forward in our consultation paper offered a solution, which we believe will generously meet the needs of any service casualties in future conflicts and their families but also benefit the operational effectiveness of the armed forces.

Mike Kane: As I said in my speech, it was my understanding that no court decision has ever second-guessed a military decision in the theatre.

Mr Ellwood: I will confirm that is the case. What I am saying is that we would not want any officer, commander or non-commissioned officer to be concerned about such a consideration. However, I hear what the hon. Gentleman says.

We have suggested that in future, whenever a member of the armed forces is killed or injured in combat, compensation will be paid at the rate a court would have been likely to award if it had found the MOD to have been negligent, regardless of whether it has indeed been negligent. The amount will be assessed independently—that was a concern the hon. Gentleman had—by an experienced, qualified lawyer. For the claimant, that will mean that there will be no need to spend years engaged in complex legal battles, with no certainty of success, seeking to prove that the MOD has been negligent in law.

Wayne David: Rather than excluding claimants in their best interests, would it not be better for there to be a choice on whether to pursue the case through the route suggested, with the MOD, or to take independent legal advice?

Mr Ellwood: One of the purposes of the consultation is to simplify the system. We need a robust system that everybody is able to follow and that is clearcut for both sides.

For the Government, the new system will mean increased expenditure on compensation for death or injury sustained in the most challenging conditions. They will be paying higher sums in cases in which the MOD has not been negligent, but that will be offset to a large extent by a reduction in the costs of litigation. The Government would prefer to spend taxpayers' money directly on compensation for the armed forces rather than on legal fees. I think everyone would agree with that.

Mike Kane: I have two points on that. First, to whom would the lawyer be accountable and who would employ them? Secondly, if the MOD had admitted its negligence and settled the Snatch Land Rover vehicle case, it would not have run up so much expenditure on the legal case.

Mr Ellwood: It is because of such cases that we are now having to provide this compensation. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that no court has ever second-guessed a military decision, but the Supreme Court's judgment opened up the prospect of precisely what is happening and what might happen in future cases.

The corollary to the proposal is that any cases covered by the new, more generous compensation rules can no longer be heard by the courts. That will mean that complex issues of military planning will be decided upon by members of our armed forces with the appropriate experience and not by the courts themselves, as the Government believe is right and proper. The Government therefore believe that our proposals will benefit members of our armed forces involved in future conflicts, their families and the country as a whole, and we launched our consultation paper on that basis last autumn. At the same time as publishing the proposals for future cases, we offered to settle the current cases to which I referred. I am pleased that a number of those offers were accepted.

There were more than 500 responses to the consultation, and it is fair to say that the majority were broadly positive. However, respondents made a number of points that the Government are considering, and in some cases looking at very carefully indeed. For example, some suggested that claimants should be able to choose between the new scheme and the traditional court route. However, as I said earlier, that would be difficult for the Government to accept, because it would perpetuate legal uncertainty and the problem of the judicialisation of war. Some expressed concern about the independence of the assessors, and we are considering how best to demonstrate that they will indeed be totally independent in making their decisions. Some wanted assurance that mental injuries suffered in combat, particularly post-traumatic stress disorder, would be covered as generously as physical injuries. The Government completely agree with that point of view.

Mike Kane: Part of the nub of the matter is how those independent assessors will be independent if they are appointed by the Ministry of Defence. Do we not already have an independent assessor system in judges?

Mr Ellwood: I think there has to be some faith given to the fact that, when we make those appointments, we choose based on independence. I will look at that process and confirm that. I think we are getting into the weeds a little bit by talking about the confirmation of the independence of those who will make the decisions.

Finally, some suggested that, by removing such combat cases from the courts, an opportunity to prevent any recurrence would be lost. The Government disagree with that argument, because the adversarial nature of litigation makes it an unsatisfactory way of learning lessons. I think we would all agree with that. When a member of the UK armed forces has been killed in combat, a full inquest will always be held. When there has been a non-fatal injury of any significance, there

will be a service inquiry. I believe that those non-adversarial inquiries will get to the heart of what happened far more quickly than any civil litigation.

The consultation confirmed the Government's view that our proposals are fair and just, both for the taxpayer and for those who are killed or injured in combat and their loved ones. However, I must make it clear that we were disappointed that the Labour party's manifesto expressed itself against the proposal, which, in the current political circumstances, is a matter of some significance.

Wayne David: Will the Minister take an intervention on that point?

Mr Ellwood: Yes, if the hon. Gentleman will be helpful and say that he might be reconsidering.

Mike Gapes (in the Chair): Order. I do not think that interventions necessarily have to be helpful.

Wayne David: I am so pleased you said that, Mr Gapes. I was not going to introduce party politics into the debate, but as the Minister has done so, I want to make it absolutely clear that the Opposition want fairness and transparency, but that we also recognise that we live in a parliamentary democracy in which the rule of law is a cornerstone. I understand the operational necessities of conflict, but it is important that we always bear that in mind.

Mr Ellwood: I think it is probably too late to amend the armed forces Bill, which is passing through the House of Lords as we speak, but maybe if the hon. Gentleman and I have a quiet coffee, we will find there is some compromise to be had. I hope he would agree that the thrust of the consultation and the Government's proposals make sense, but I am happy to discuss them with him in more detail if he is minded to do so. We certainly believe that the arguments for making these changes are compelling, and we will announce how we intend to proceed as soon as possible. Of course, we can do that even earlier if Labour Members are inclined to support the proposals.

3.44 pm

Mike Kane: There is a scientific law known as Graham's law, which says that gaseous material expands to fill the room. In the graveyard shift, with four contributions, we have gone on for quite some time and explored these very important issues in great detail. We are beginning to get some more clarity about the Government's thinking.

I thank the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows). We often spar in this place over education issues, and it is rare that we agree on so many things, but I thought she spoke extraordinarily eloquently. She highlighted the issue of veterans with mental health issues. My concern is that the compensation scheme currently pays out but does not look at the long-term health implications for people who need adaptations, equipment and generally help to live. She rightly said that we look for the best possible compensation package.

My Front-Bench colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David), always speaks so eloquently. He talked about having the best and most appropriate possible compensation for armed services personnel

[Mike Kane]

and their families. He particularly highlighted issues around liability and said that fairness and transparency should be at the heart of the system.

The Minister gave his own extraordinary personal testimony in the light of the death of Keith Palmer. That will stay with him for the rest of his life. I wish him the best, along with his family and children, who he mentioned and who will grow up with that incident. He is in my thoughts and prayers.

The Minister promised to write to me on some of the finer details. Is it correct that primary legislation will be needed to introduce this system? When are the Government thinking of introducing that? I am glad that he praised the Labour manifesto; that was very courteous of him.

At the moment, there is a point of division between us. It would be great if the Front-Bench teams could go for coffee at some stage and reach some unanimity, but currently we stand divided, and we will have to see how this plays out in the weeks and months ahead. I am grateful to the Minister for his courteous and reflective response, to the other Members who have contributed and, as ever, to you for your chairmanship, Mr Gapes.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Government proposals for better combat compensation.

3.48 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 20 July 2017

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Insolvency Service Performance Targets

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): I have set performance targets for the Insolvency Service for the financial year 2017-18.

The Insolvency Service is the Government agency that provides public services to those affected by financial distress or failure.

The Insolvency Service provides the frameworks that deal with insolvency and the financial misconduct that sometimes accompanies or leads to it. Its aim is to deliver economic confidence through a corporate and personal insolvency regime which is regarded as fair and that gives investors, lenders and creditors confidence to take the commercial risks necessary to support economic growth.

In 2017-18, an important priority for the Insolvency Service will be to maintain its current high level of customer service while initiating a major change programme. I have set measures and targets at a level which reflects the challenges that the agency continues to face.

Attachments are available online at:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2017-07-20/HCWS84/>

[HCWS84]

CABINET OFFICE

Cabinet Committees and Implementation Taskforces

The First Secretary of State and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Damian Green): Today the Government are publishing an updated list of Cabinet Committees and implementation taskforces.

Copies of the associated documents will be placed in the Library of the House and published on gov.uk.

[HCWS100]

DEFENCE

Type 26 Frigates

The Secretary of State for Defence (Sir Michael Fallon): Following the announcement earlier this month that the Ministry of Defence had signed a £3.7 billion contract for the first batch of the new Type 26 anti-submarine warfare frigates, I am pleased to announce that the frigates will be known as the City Class. The first ship is to be named HMS Glasgow and her construction formally began today. Naming the ships after cities provides significant and readily identifiable linkages with large populations across the United Kingdom. Glasgow is a name with a distinguished historical pedigree, and this

first name in the class provides a tangible connection with the city where the ships will be constructed. There have been eight Royal Navy ships of the name from the early 1700s, who between them have earned 10 battle honours. In more recent history, two ships served in the world wars, including the Arctic convoys and the Normandy landings, and the last ship to bear the name was awarded the “Falkland Islands 1982” battle honour to add to the “Falkland Islands 1914” honour won by her predecessor. The Type 26 frigates, the first of which we expect to enter service with the Royal Navy in the mid-2020s, will provide essential protection to our nuclear deterrent and aircraft carriers into the 2060s, keeping British interests safe across the world.

[HCWS89]

EDUCATION

Post-16 Education

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): Today the Government are publishing Professor Sir Adrian Smith’s authoritative and wide-ranging review of 16 to 18 mathematics education in England.

The Government are determined to give all young people the world-class education they need to fulfil their potential. This includes providing opportunities to develop the mathematical and quantitative knowledge and skills appropriate to their chosen careers. In an increasingly technological world this will be vital to ensuring that our future workforce will be productive and competitive in the global marketplace.

Sir Adrian Smith’s review identifies a strong economic and social mobility case for raising participation in post-16 mathematics and improving knowledge and skills at all levels. He presents clear evidence for the value of mathematical and quantitative skills to students, whichever route they take.

The report includes recommendations and challenges that are wide-ranging—for example, the need to address negative cultural perceptions of mathematics. These issues will require detailed engagement and action between Government, industry, universities, schools and colleges.

I have today written to Sir Adrian thanking him for the review and confirming that the Government will set out our plans across the range of Sir Adrian’s recommendations in due course. The letter confirms that work is already under way to address a number of the challenges highlighted in the report, and there are a number of recommendations where we have been able to take immediate action.

We agree with Sir Adrian that we must be ambitious and take greater action to encourage and support more young people to choose mathematics post-16, particularly in areas where take-up is low. That is why one of the immediate actions we are taking today is to announce a new £16 million level 3 maths support programme. It will build on the momentum created by the further mathematics and core maths support programmes, and will work with schools and colleges to improve mathematics education by sharing best practice, and delivering knowledge-rich curriculum materials, as well as working

to increase participation and attainment in 16 to 18 mathematics. The programme will work to deliver focused intervention targeted to those who need it most.

The other immediate actions we have taken in response to Sir Adrian's recommendations are set out in my letter. For example, taking forward work on the new T-level qualifications to ensure they include mathematics where employers identify this as a requirement for employment; working with the newly constituted Royal Society Advisory Committee on Mathematics Education to ensure appropriate expert advice. We are also working with institutions such as the Royal Society and British Academy to encourage universities and employers to signal the value of level 3 mathematics qualifications for entry to undergraduate courses with a significant quantitative element and for a wide range of job roles.

We have placed a copy of Sir Adrian's report and our letter in the Libraries of both Houses and on the Government's website.

[HCWS99]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Inter-Pillar Transfer Rate in England

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): Today I am announcing that the amount transferred from farmers' pillar 1 direct payments to pillar 2 rural development in England will remain at 12% for 2019 and 2020.

Leaving the EU presents an unprecedented opportunity to develop a new system that works for us. The Government have committed to maintain the same total in cash funds until the end of this Parliament. As we prepare to leave, we will work with farmers, food producers and environmental experts across the United Kingdom and with the devolved Administrations to devise a new agri-environment system, to be introduced in the following Parliament.

I have, therefore, concluded that the inter-pillar transfer should remain unchanged in England under the current common agricultural policy framework.

[HCWS87]

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

New Bulgarian EU Commissioner

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Steve Baker): My right hon. Friend, Baroness Anelay of St Johns DBE, Minister of State for Exiting the European Union, has made the following statement:

On 7 July 2017, the Council of the European Union supported the appointment of Ms Mariya Gabriel as the new Commissioner for Digital Economy and Society. The UK voted in favour of the appointment of Ms Gabriel as Commissioner. Ms Gabriel is scheduled to hold the post until 31 October 2019.

The Bulgarian Government nominated Ms Gabriel as Commissioner following the resignation of the previous Commissioner for Bulgaria, Ms Kristalina Georgieva, in December 2016. Before her appointment, Ms Gabriel had been a member of the European Parliament since 2009.

[HCWS104]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Annual Human Rights and Democracy Report

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): I have today laid before Parliament a copy of the 2016 Foreign and Commonwealth Office report on human rights and democracy (Cm 9487).

The report highlights policy developments on human rights issues overseas in 2016.0

The report assesses the human rights situation in 30 countries which FCO has designated as its human rights priority countries. These are: Afghanistan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Burma, Burundi, Central African Republic, China, Colombia, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Libya, Maldives, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Syria, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Venezuela, Yemen and Zimbabwe.

This report focuses on how the Government are striving to protect and promote human rights around the world. In the two centuries since Britain became the first country to outlaw the slave trade, this country has helped to lead the struggle for justice and decency. The Government's approach towards human rights stands in this long tradition, based on the firm belief that our values are not only right in themselves but the key to prosperity and development.

[HCWS90]

EU-Canada Strategic Partnership Agreement

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): The Government wish to inform the House of their decision to opt in to the Council decision on conclusion of the EU-Canada strategic partnership agreement (SPA), in respect of article 18(2) of the agreement, which relates to judicial co-operation in the field of civil and commercial matters. This article falls within title V of part III of the treaty on the functioning of the European Union.

The SPA, a framework political agreement, will update the previous EU-Canada 1976 framework agreement for commercial and economic co-operation between the European Communities and Canada. It has two aims: i) to enhance EU-Canada political ties and co-operation on foreign and security policy issues; and ii) to upgrade co-operation on a wide range of other areas. The SPA, though not technically linked to the EU-Canada comprehensive economic trade agreement (CETA), is complementary and will provide wider benefits to the EU-Canada relationship.

The SPA has been under negotiation, between the EU, its member states and Canada, since 2011. The draft Council decision on conclusion issued on 24 November 2016. Notwithstanding the result of the referendum on EU membership the Government consider that it is in the UK's interests to opt in to article 18(2) of this agreement at the conclusion stage of the SPA negotiations. Article 18(2) of the agreement provides for judicial co-operation in civil and commercial matters. While it is not specific

about the type of co-operation that might be envisaged, the Government believe that it is beneficial for the UK to be involved in any such work between the EU and one of our closest Commonwealth partners while we remain a member of the European Union.

We do not expect the Council decision on conclusion to be adopted until all member states have ratified the SPA.

[HCWS93]

Somalia (Security Assistance)

The Minister for Africa (Rory Stewart): The UK remains committed to building a stable, peaceful and prosperous future for Somalia. Instability in Somalia affects stability across east Africa—fuelling irregular migration and providing a foothold for terrorist groups such as al-Shabaab and Daesh. It is important that we maintain our support in order to tackle these shared threats to both the UK and the Somali people. This is why the British Government have announced a further £21 million of support for security work in Somalia, and helped to agree the security pact at the London Somalia conference earlier this year.

In the shorter term, with the support of the Somali Government, the UK has funded the construction of a police training facility in Mogadishu at a cost of £1,767,016 which will shortly be handed over to the Somali police force. This facility has been funded by FCO policy programme funding. The development of security partners and counter-terrorism (CT) policing in Somalia is vital to help ensure that the Somali authorities have the right tools to deploy in their ongoing fight against terrorism.

The provision of this facility is fully in line with the Government's strategic CT objectives for east and south Africa. Using the overseas security and justice assistance guidance, FCO officials have also assessed the project for human rights risks, and concluded that the risk of such violations arising from the project's delivery may be mitigated.

[HCWS91]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Second Generation Schengen Information System

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): The Government have decided not to opt out of a new EU proposal for a regulation governing the use of the second generation Schengen information system (SIS II) for police and judicial co-operation purposes ("the draft police co-operation regulation"), and not to opt in to a proposal for a regulation on the use of SIS II for the return of illegally staying non-European economic area (EEA) nationals ("the draft returns regulation").

SIS II is an EU-wide system that circulates alerts on people and objects that are of interest to law enforcement agencies across the EU. This includes people who are wanted for extradition on European arrest warrants,

stolen vehicles, lost or cancelled travel documents and suspected criminals and terrorists on whom information is sought.

The proposed police co-operation regulation will replace the legislation that currently governs SIS II's use for that purpose. The UK has participated in this aspect of SIS II since April 2015. Our law enforcement agencies benefit from this, for example by being able to detain at the border people who are wanted under European arrest warrants and to obtain intelligence from police forces across the EU on suspected criminals and security risks. The draft regulation contains a number of proposals that would update SIS II's capabilities, for example allowing it to store a wider range of biometric data and permitting alerts to be created to protect children who are at risk of going missing. There are some changes we will seek, in particular to maintain member states' control over when alerts are created, but the Government believe we will be in a better position to do this by not opting out and remaining full participants in the negotiation.

The proposed returns regulation would allow member states to use SIS II to circulate alerts on non-EEA nationals who have been made subject to removal decisions. Therefore, the UK will not opt in to the draft returns regulation.

The decisions announced here have no implications for our general opt out from the internal border-free zone established by Schengen.

Until the UK leaves the EU it remains a full member, and the Government will continue to consider the application of the UK's right to opt in to, or opt out of, forthcoming EU legislation in the area of justice and home affairs on a case-by-case basis, with a view to maximising our country's security, protecting our civil liberties and enhancing our ability to control immigration.

[HCWS96]

Newly Naturalised Passport Applicants

The Minister for Immigration (Brandon Lewis): I am writing to advise you that Her Majesty's Passport Office is introducing changes to its interviewing processes.

HM Passport Office reserves the right to call any passport applicant for an identity interview. However, where the identity of a newly naturalised British citizen can be confirmed using records already held by UK Visas and Immigration, they will not be routinely required to attend an interview as part of their first UK passport application.

The new process maintains our high standards of identity assurance but removes an unnecessary burden on newly naturalised citizens by no longer requiring them to confirm their identity twice to the Home Office before being issued with a UK passport.

[HCWS97]

Mutual Recognition of Freezing and Confiscation Orders

The Minister for Security (Mr Ben Wallace): The Government have decided that the UK will opt in to the regulation on the mutual recognition of freezing and confiscation orders.

The proposed regulation would replace and build upon the existing mutual recognition framework which is currently in two existing instruments—the Council framework decision on the execution in the European Union of orders of freezing property of evidence (2003/577/JHA) and the Council framework decision (2006/783/JHA) on the application of the principle of mutual recognition to confiscation orders. These framework decisions were transposed into UK law in 2014.

Through our serious organised crime strategy and action plan for anti-money laundering and counter terrorist finance, we have made it clear that being able to recover criminal monies is a priority. The proposed regulation will bring benefits to the UK through strengthening the ability of our operational agencies to have our orders recognised and executed, particularly in countries which have traditionally been slower to assist in cross-border asset recovery cases.

The UK's experience of the existing framework decisions has been positive, although numbers of mutual recognition requests are limited due to the short time (since 2014) that the decisions have been fully transposed in UK law. Asset recovery in some EU states has traditionally been difficult through mutual legal assistance routes, which are lengthy and cumbersome.

Opting into this measure is also consistent with the UK's approach to participating in EU mutual recognition measures to improve practical co-operation between member states. Opting in at this point shows our continued positive engagement with this measure, and demonstrates our commitment to work together with our European partners to fight crime and prevent terrorism now and after we leave the European Union.

[HCWS101]

Annual JHA Opt-in Reports

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): The Home Office and Ministry of Justice have prepared the sixth and seventh annual reports to Parliament on the application of protocols 19 and 21 to the treaty on European Union (TEU) and the treaty on the functioning of the European Union (TFEU) (“the treaties”) in relation to EU justice and home affairs (JHA) matters (Cm 9488). The reports, which are today being laid before the House, are submitted on behalf of both my own Department and that of the Secretary of State for Justice. Copies of the Command Paper are available from the Vote Office and on gov.uk.

On 9 June 2008, the then Leader of the House of Lords committed to table a report in Parliament each year setting out the decisions taken by the Government in accordance with protocol 21 (“the justice and home affairs opt-in protocol”) and to make that report available for debate. These commitments were designed to ensure that the views of the scrutiny committees should inform the Government's decision-making process.

The sixth report covers decisions taken over the period 1 December 2014 to 30 November 2015. In that period, decisions on UK participation in 23 EU JHA legislative proposals have been taken. The UK has decided to opt in under the JHA opt-in protocol in 11 cases and has decided not to opt in in 13 cases (this includes one decision on an international agreement where the UK

opted into one set of JHA provisions in the measure, and did not opt into another). The Government have not asserted the Schengen opt-out to any proposals during that period.

The seventh report covers decisions taken over the period 1 December 2015 to 30 November 2016. In that period, decisions on UK participation in 36 EU JHA legislative proposals have been taken. The UK has decided to opt in under the JHA opt-in protocol in 12 cases and has decided not to opt in in 24 cases. The Government have not asserted the Schengen opt-out to any proposals during that period.

These opt-in decisions are without prejudice to discussions on the UK's future relationship with the EU. The UK's relationship with the EU will change as a result of leaving the EU. However, the UK retains the rights and obligations of membership of the EU while we remain a member.

[HCWS94]

Publications: Former Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): In November 2013, the then Home Secretary asked David Anderson QC to conduct a review of the framework of the UK's deportation with assurances (DWA) policy, and to make recommendations on how the policy might be strengthened or improved, with particular emphasis on its legal aspects. I am pleased to be publishing his report today (Cm 9462). I can confirm that no redactions have been made to the report.

In accordance with section 36(5) of the Terrorism Act 2006, David Anderson QC, the former independent reviewer of terrorism legislation, prepared a report on the operation in 2015 of the Terrorism Act 2000 and part 1 of the Terrorism Act 2006, which was laid before the House on 1 December 2016. I have carefully considered its recommendations and observations. I am today laying before the House the Government's response (Cm 9489).

I am very grateful to David Anderson for his work on both reports

Copies of David Anderson's report into DWA, and the Government's response to his section 36(5) report will be available in the Vote Office and on gov.uk.

[HCWS105]

Immigration Rules

The Minister for Immigration (Brandon Lewis): My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is today laying before the House a statement of changes in immigration rules (HC 290).

The purpose of the changes is to give effect to the Supreme Court judgment in *MM (Lebanon) & Others*, handed down on 22 February 2017.

The changes, together with changes to the Secretary of State's guidance to decision makers, are intended to give effect to the judgment's findings in respect of, first, the income sources which may be relied upon to meet the minimum income requirement in specified exceptional

circumstances; and, secondly, the duty to have regard to the welfare of children under section 55 of the Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act 2009. They also make other minor amendments and clarifications to the family immigration rules.

[HCWS95]

Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): Section 19(1) of the Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures Act 2011 (the Act) requires the Secretary of State to report to Parliament as soon as reasonably practicable after the end of every relevant three-month period on the exercise of her TPIM powers under the Act during that period.

The level of information provided will always be subject to slight variations based on operational advice.

TPIM notices in force (as of 31 May 2017)	6
TPIM notices in respect of British citizens (as of 31 May 2017)	5
TPIM notices extended (during the reporting period)	0
TPIM notices revoked (during the reporting period)	1
TPIM notices revived (during the reporting period)	1
Variations made to measures specified in TPIM notices (during the reporting period)	10
Applications to vary measures specified in TPIM notices refused (during the reporting period)	3
The number of current subjects relocated under TPIM legislation (as of 31 May 2017)	6

The TPIM review group (TRG) keeps every TPIM notice under regular and formal review. The most recent TRG meetings took place on 26 and 30 June, and 3 and 4 July.

The case of Secretary of State for the Home Department *v.* EC and EG [2017] EWHC 795 (Admin) was heard again at the High Court between 24 January and 2 February 2017. In a judgment handed down on 11 April 2017 Mr Justice Collins upheld the Secretary of State's decision to impose a TPIM notice on EC and EG. This judgment can be found at: www.bailii.org/ew/cases/EWHC/Admin/2017/795.html.

[HCWS98]

Science Advisory Non-Departmental Public Bodies: Triennial Review

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): On 21 July 2014, my predecessor as Home Secretary my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), announced in Parliament, through a written ministerial statement, the commencement of the triennial review of the Home Office science advisory non-departmental public bodies: the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD); the Animals in Science Committee (ASC); and the National DNA Database Ethics Group (NDNADEG). I am now pleased to announce the completion of the review.

The ACMD, ASC and NDNADEG are independent bodies that advise ministers on scientific issues.

The review concludes that the functions performed by the ACMD, the ASC and the NDNADEG are still required and that they should be retained as non-departmental public bodies. The review concludes that the control and governance arrangements are robust

and compliant with the principles set out in the principles of good corporate governance for advisory NDPBs, the code of practice for scientific advisory NDPBs and the principles of scientific advice to Government.

The review recommends that the remit of the NDNADEG should be extended to cover the ethical issues associated with all forensic identification techniques including facial recognition technology and fingerprinting, and the collection and retention of biometric data. This recommendation has been accepted and therefore the name of the NDNADEG will change to the Biometrics And Forensics Ethics Group. The review also makes two recommendations in relation to accountability of Ministers for the bodies: that the chair of the NDNADEG should meet a Home Office Minister in the next 12 months; and an annual report should be published for the ASC and ACMD. Both recommendations have been accepted.

The full report of the triennial review of the ACMD, the ASC and the NDNADEG can be found on the gov.uk website and copies have been placed in the Library of the House.

[HCWS92]

JUSTICE

Lugano and Hague Conventions

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Lidington): The United Kingdom has opted in to the following Council decisions:

(i) Council decision of 7 February 2013, authorising the opening of negotiations on agreements between the EU and Denmark, Norway, Iceland and Switzerland in the areas of cross-border service of judicial and non-judicial documents and the taking of evidence in civil and commercial proceedings. (Norway, Iceland and Switzerland are commonly referred to as the Lugano States).

The negotiating mandates set out the position of the EU in discussions on the prospects for agreements between those states in the areas of cross-border service of judicial and non-judicial documents and taking of evidence in civil and commercial proceedings.

There have been three rounds of discussions so far, and final agreements have yet to be reached. The decision of the then Government in 2013 to opt in to the negotiating mandates does not commit this Government to opt in to future EU agreements in these spheres. I will update the House as further information becomes available.

(ii) Council decision authorising the opening of negotiations on a convention on the recognition and enforcement of judgments in civil and commercial matters (the Judgments Convention) in the framework of the Hague Conference on Private International Law.

The negotiating mandate of May 2016 sets out the position of the EU in discussions at a Hague conference level on the prospects for an international convention which would set out rules for the recognition and enforcement of judgments in civil and commercial matters, delivered by foreign courts.

Detailed discussions on the form of a convention text began in June 2016 and will continue among EU member states and at Hague conference level for some time to come. The next Hague conference special commission to discuss the project will take place in November 2017.

Opting in to the EU negotiating mandate does not commit the UK Government to acceding to any future convention.

Due to an oversight, a written ministerial statement on these Council decisions has not thus far been placed before both Houses, for which I apologise.

[HCWS102]

PRIME MINISTER

Home Buying Policy, Commonhold Law and Protected Persons

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): This written statement confirms three machinery of Government changes.

Responsibility for home-buying policy, including estate agent regulation, will transfer from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to the Department for Communities and Local Government. Responsibility for commonhold law will transfer from the Ministry of Justice to the Department for Communities and Local Government. These changes will be effective immediately.

Responsibility for protected persons policy will transfer from the Ministry of Justice to the Home Office. This change will be effective immediately.

[HCWS88]

SCOTLAND

Edinburgh and South East Scotland City Region Deal

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): In March 2016, the Government announced their intention to negotiate a city region deal for Edinburgh and south-east Scotland. As well as deals across England and Wales, this follows the successful agreement of city region deals for Glasgow and Clyde Valley, Inverness and the Highlands and Aberdeen city region.

I can today inform the House that the Government have reached agreement with the Scottish Government and regional partners on a heads of terms for a city region deal for Edinburgh and south-east Scotland.

This deal will bring in excess of £1 billion of investment into the Scottish capital city region. Local partners' aspirations are that this investment will create in excess of 21,000 good quality jobs.

Central to the investment is the UK Government contribution of up to £300 million, which is being matched by Scottish Government. This investment is expected to unlock a considerable further investment from the city region's universities, higher education sector and the private sector.

UK Government investment will support local partners in delivering their ambition to make Edinburgh a leader in data-driven innovation. Building on existing regional excellence in R and D and innovation, the investment will see significant investments in digital infrastructure and data storage as well as the development of five

R and D hubs across the city-region. These hubs will focus on growth in key sectors of the local economy such as data science, robotics, financial services, creative tech and agri-tech.

We will also deliver our manifesto commitment to support a new concert hall in Edinburgh, meeting the need for a mid-sized venue in the city.

Projects and programmes announced in the heads of terms document will be subject to the development and approval of business cases. Moving forward, the Government will work with the Scottish Government and the civic, academic and business leaders of Edinburgh and south-east Scotland to ensure the successful implementation of the deal.

This represents an important step in delivering the UK Government's commitment to a city deal for each of Scotland's cities, as we work to strengthen the Union and build a United Kingdom that works for everyone.

[HCWS103]

TRANSPORT

High Level Output Specification

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): I am today publishing my high-level output specification (HLOS) and initial statement of funds available (SOFA) for the railway for control period 6, which covers the years 2019 to 2024.

The Government are determined that the railway becomes more focused on issues that matter most to passengers—such as punctuality and reliability. A more reliable railway also plays a critical role in underpinning economic growth and bringing the country together. The Government are committed to taking action to achieve these outcomes.

The HLOS is therefore focused on the operation, maintenance and renewal of the existing railway—the areas of activity that will deliver a more reliable railway for passengers. The Government are already delivering significant enhancements to the railway, including High Speed 2 and Crossrail and expect to continue to invest in the enhancement to the wider rail network in the next control period. In the light of the findings of the Bowe review, which emphasised the need to enable better planning, cost control and alignment with the needs of users of the railway, Government will take forward the funding of these enhancements separately. The Government are developing a new process for delivering enhancements and intend to publish more information on this in the autumn.

On the basis of independent advice from the Office of Rail and Road, as well as from the rail industry, the Government have agreed that an increased volume of renewals activity will be needed over the course of control period 6, to maintain safety and improve on current levels of reliability and punctuality, which in places fall short of the levels that passengers rightly expect. This enhanced programme of renewals will be supported by appropriate volumes of operations and maintenance activity required to maintain safety and improve the reliability and punctuality of train services.

Before committing to the specific levels of funding required, I have decided that the Government require more assurance on the likely costs of the work programme. Network Rail's progress on improving its efficiency in recent years has fallen short of my expectations. Improving efficiency is vital if we are to maximise the value of taxpayer spending on the railway in driving improvements for passengers and freight shippers.

The Government will therefore carry out further work to examine the approach to setting appropriate levels of maintenance and renewals activity for control period 6 and to improving Network Rail's efficiency. This will enable me to confirm the extent of Government's funding envelope through the publication of a statement of funds available by 13 October 2017. This work will draw on a number of sources, including the new independent review of progress on efficiency planning which the regulator has commissioned.

Alongside the publication of the HLOS, I am issuing new statutory guidance to the independent Office of Rail and Road. This sets out my priorities for rail regulation. These include supporting the ORR's work to improve Network Rail's efficiency and improving the experience of users of the railway.

I am placing copies of the HLOS and SOFA, and of the statutory guidance to the Office of Rail and Road in the Libraries of both Houses.

Attachments can be viewed online at:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2017-07-20/HCWS86/>

[HCWS86]

Rail Update

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling):

I wish to inform the House about some important developments regarding the rail networks of the midland main line, south Wales and the north of England.

Passenger numbers on the UK rail network have more than doubled since privatisation 20 years ago and our country's railways need to adapt and change to be able to meet current and future demand. Therefore we are delivering the largest upgrade of the rail network since Victorian times, including modernising rail services and infrastructure on the Great Western main line, midland main line and in the north.

Technology is advancing quickly, and this Government are committed to using the best available technologies to improve each part of the network. New bi-mode train technology offers seamless transfer from diesel power to electric that is undetectable to passengers. The industry is also developing alternative fuel trains, using battery and hydrogen power. This means that we no longer need to electrify every line to achieve the same significant improvements to journeys, and we will only electrify lines where it delivers a genuine benefit to passengers.

These new technologies mean that we can improve journeys for passengers on the Great Western main line in south Wales, the midland main line, and on the lakes line between Windermere and Oxenholme sooner than expected with state-of-the-art trains, instead of carrying out disruptive electrification works along the whole of these routes.

Midlands

The competition to find the next operator for the midland main line is under way. Our goals for the next east midlands franchise are to improve journeys for passengers, drive even stronger economic growth and support investment across the whole region. We want to hear from passengers and local communities about the next rail franchise to ensure it delivers the services that passengers want. I am therefore pleased to inform the House that my Department is today launching a public consultation on the next franchise. The consultation, which will run for 12 weeks from today, will help to inform and develop the franchise specification for inclusion in the invitation to tender. The consultation is available online and will also include a number of local stakeholder events.

The next east midlands franchise will help drive the midlands engine and improve passenger journeys by maximising the passenger benefits of the significant upgrade of the midland main line, the biggest investment in the route since it was completed in 1870. The upgrade will enable reduced journey times and more seats for long-distance passengers during the peaks, as well as more capacity for commuters with dedicated services with longer trains. Journeys will improve from 2020 and, once the full benefits are realised, there will be almost twice as many seats into London St Pancras in the peak compared to today.

The next operator will be required to deliver modern, fast and efficient trains. This includes a brand new fleet of bi-mode intercity trains from 2022, delivering more seats and comfort for long-distance passengers. The provision of these trains will replace plans to electrify the line north of Kettering to Sheffield and Nottingham, improving journeys sooner, without the need for wires and masts on the whole route, and causing less disruption to services. We do not intend to proceed with plans to electrify the line from Kettering to Sheffield and Nottingham, and there will be further investment to come to ensure Sheffield is HS2-ready.

Wales

From autumn 2017, passengers in Wales will benefit from new intercity express trains which will each deliver over 130 more seats, faster journey times and improved connectivity for south Wales to London with 40% more seats in the morning peak once the full fleet is in service.

These innovative new trains switch seamlessly between electric and diesel power, delivering faster journeys and more seats for passengers without disruptive work to put up wires and masts along routes where they are no longer required.

Rapid delivery of passenger benefits, minimising disruption and engineering work should always be our priority and as technology changes we must reconsider our approach to modernising the railways. We will only electrify lines where it provides a genuine benefit to passengers which cannot be achieved through other technologies.

As a result, we no longer need to electrify the Great Western route west of Cardiff. In addition to the new trains, Network Rail will develop further options to improve journeys for passengers in Wales. These will include, but not be limited to:

Improving journeys times and connections between Swansea and Cardiff, and south Wales, Bristol and London

Improving journeys times and connections across north Wales

Direct services from Pembroke Dock to London via Carmarthen on new, state of the art intercity express trains

Station improvements at Cardiff station

Station improvements in and around Swansea including looking at the case for additional provision

I also support a proposal for Wales' first privately funded railway station at St Mellons. My Department will work with the promoters of the scheme as they develop their plans to the next stage.

The first new intercity express trains will enter service from this October and once the whole fleet is introduced and electrification to Cardiff is complete journey times between Swansea, London and other stations along the route will be approximately 15 minutes shorter.

The north

We are investing in the northern powerhouse, upgrading rail services across one of the country's largest networks to improve connections between towns and cities. Passengers in the Lake District will benefit from double the number of direct services to Manchester airport from May 2018. From 2019, there will be brand new trains with more seats and better on-board facilities including air conditioning, toilets, free wi-fi and plug sockets, subject to business case.

We have listened to concerns about electrification gantries spoiling protected landscapes. Northern, the train operator, will therefore begin work to explore the possibility of deploying alternative-fuel trains on the route by 2021, improving comfort and on-board facilities for passengers while protecting the sensitive

environment of this world heritage site. This trial will pilot an alternative-fuelled train, removing the need to construct intrusive wires and masts in this national park. Journeys between Windermere and Manchester airport will be improved sooner and with less disruption to services and local communities. This replaces plans to electrify the line between Windermere and Oxenholme.

This investment is a part of the great north rail project, which will deliver more frequent trains and new direct services on the west coast main line, with faster journeys and increased frequency into and through Manchester from across the north-west. It will boost access to jobs and new opportunities, growing the northern powerhouse by improving connections between the Lake District and the Manchester airport international gateway.

Train operators and Network Rail will need to work as one to deliver these upgrades and introduce the new fleets in a way which ensures passengers experience better journeys as soon as possible.

Rail franchise schedule

The Government have also today published the updated rail franchise schedule, which includes changes to the timescales for the east midlands, cross country and west midlands rail franchises. A copy of the schedule will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Attachments can be viewed online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2017-07-20/HCWS85/>.

[HCWS85]

Ministerial Correction

Thursday 20 July 2017

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Yemen: Political and Humanitarian Situation

The following is an extract from the reply by the Minister for Africa, the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), to the Westminster Hall debate on Yemen: Political and Humanitarian Situation on 5 July 2017.

Rory Stewart: The British Government are doing an enormous amount—probably more than we are being given credit for in this Chamber—but clearly all the things we are doing are not sufficient to solve this crisis. The problem is—the hon. Member for Leeds North

East pointed this out—although it is true that we are spending only about £180 million in Yemen, we have to bear it in mind that, unfortunately, the situation in Yemen is not the only situation in the world.

[*Official Report, 5 July 2017, Vol. 626, c. 169WH.*]

Letter of correction from Rory Stewart:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the Westminster Hall debate on Yemen: Political and Humanitarian Situation.

The correct response should have been:

Rory Stewart: The British Government are doing an enormous amount—probably more than we are being given credit for in this Chamber—but clearly all the things we are doing are not sufficient to solve this crisis. The problem is—the hon. Member for Leeds North East pointed this out—although it is true that we are spending only about **£139 million** in Yemen, we have to bear it in mind that, unfortunately, the situation in Yemen is not the only situation in the world.

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