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**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES**

**(HANSARD)**

**Tuesday 5 December 2017**

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# House of Commons

*Tuesday 5 December 2017*

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

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

## BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

### REPORT OF THE MACUR REVIEW

*Resolved,*

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, That she will be graciously pleased to give directions that there be laid before this House a Return of parts of a Paper, entitled The Report of the Macur Review (Revised Redacted Version): An independent review of the Tribunal of Inquiry into the abuse of children in care in the former county council areas of Gwynedd and Clwyd in North Wales since 1974, dated 5 December 2017.—  
(*Mike Freer.*)

## Oral Answers to Questions

### JUSTICE

*The Secretary of State was asked—*

#### **Leaving the EU: UK Legal System**

1. **Damien Moore** (Southport) (Con): What steps the Government plan to take to ensure the effective operation of the UK legal system after the UK leaves the EU.  
[902740]

17. **Robert Jenrick** (Newark) (Con): What steps the Government plan to take to ensure the effective operation of the UK legal system after the UK leaves the EU.  
[902756]

**The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Dominic Raab):** The Government have made it a top priority to ensure that there is a smooth legal transition, both in our negotiations with the EU and as a matter for our domestic implementing legislation.

**Damien Moore:** What steps will the Department take once we have left the EU to secure a review and possible reversal of European Court of Justice rulings that are affecting British companies and citizens?

**Dominic Raab:** We are taking back control over our laws—that is what the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill does—so that hon. Members in this House are properly accountable to the voters and the UK Supreme Court has the last word on the law of the land. From that point on, we can retain, revise or repeal any piece of retained law as we see fit for the British national interest.

**Robert Jenrick:** The Minister may have seen the recent TheCityUK report, which underlined the importance of the legal sector to the United Kingdom's economy

and the City. Will the Minister update the House on the negotiations in respect of the report's principal concern, which is whether contracts will continue to be enforceable and respected across the European Union after we leave?

**Dominic Raab:** In our negotiations with the EU, we have made it clear—for example, in our position paper on civil and judicial co-operation—that we want to maintain that win-win co-operation in areas such as recognition of contractual judgments, but also on decisions in family law disputes that support businesses and individuals on all sides.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister get out and meet more people in the justice system? I have been talking to judges, barristers and campaigners who are all terrified about what will happen to our justice system if we leave the European Union. Who is he talking to, and why does he not broaden his circle?

**Dominic Raab:** May I gently suggest that the hon. Gentleman does not engage in such scaremongering? I have been talking to practitioners, legal groups and the judiciary. We have set out our plans in our position paper, and I would have thought that he would welcome that. Through the EU (Withdrawal) Bill, which I hope he will support, we will make sure that we have a smooth legal transition.

**Sir Edward Davey** (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Will the Minister confirm to the House that it is his policy that the European Court of Human Rights will still have jurisdiction over Britain after we leave the EU?

**Dominic Raab:** The right hon. Gentleman will know, because it was in our manifesto and it has been repeated since, that we have no plans to withdraw from the European convention on human rights or the Strasbourg Court.

**Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): Does the Minister agree that we had a very effective legal system before we joined the EU, and we will have a very effective one for many years after we leave?

**Dominic Raab:** My hon. Friend is right. Of course, I take very seriously the concerns of those who think we need to mitigate the risks, and that is what our negotiations and the EU (Withdrawal) Bill will do. We also have a huge opportunity to promote UK legal services on a global level through trade liberalisation and by promoting the UK as a hub for international dispute settlement. We should grasp the opportunities as well as managing the risks.

**Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Last month—just two weeks ago—while the House debated the EU (Withdrawal) Bill, the Prime Minister's spokesman told journalists that the Government expect the role of the European Court of Justice to remain unchanged during an implementation period of two years after the Brexit date in March 2019. Will the Minister confirm to the House that that means that it will not be possible to bring into force large parts of the EU (Withdrawal Bill), including the repeal of the European Communities Act 1972, until the end of the implementation period?

**Dominic Raab:** The position is set out in the EU (Withdrawal) Bill, and the hon. and learned Lady will know from Committee debates that we have made it very clear that we are not going to pre-empt or prejudice the outcome of the negotiations on either the withdrawal agreement or the implementation period.

**Joanna Cherry:** Last week “Sky News” reported that the Government wish to stay in the European Aviation Safety Agency after Brexit and accept that that will mean remaining under the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice, because it is the ultimate arbiter of EASA rulings. Will the Minister now confirm that this means the Prime Minister’s red line of no ECJ jurisdiction after Brexit has been shown to be utterly and completely untenable?

**Dominic Raab:** I am afraid that the hon. and learned Lady is relying yet again on second-hand reports via the media. We will not pre-empt or prejudice the outcome of negotiations on the partnership deal, and I hope that she will support us in getting the very best deal for that sector and for the UK as a whole.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. The hon. Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) has an exactly similar question. I would have called him if he were standing, but he was not, so I did not, but if he does, I will. No? The hon. Gentleman does not wish to do so. So be it; it is his choice.

**Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con):** Can the Minister confirm that elements of our civil and criminal law go back to Magna Carta in 1215 and earlier, that our legal system is far more long established than any EU legal system, that we have one of the most respected legal systems in the world and that, as far as future laws in this country are concerned, Brexit holds no fears for us?

**Dominic Raab:** My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. We have a rather different legal system, through our common law, and we have variations across the UK, but I think that we should have the courage of our convictions and confidence in our democracy. When it comes to the judiciary, of course, we want the UK Supreme Court to have the last word on the laws of the land.

### Legal Aid

2. **Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab):** What assessment has his Department made of the cost-effectiveness of legal aid for early legal help. [902741]

**The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Dominic Raab):** The Government have published a post-legislative memorandum on the legal aid reforms introduced by the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012. We have launched a review of the operation of that Act, which will be thorough and will report by the summer recess.

**Emma Hardy:** I recently visited Hull chamber of commerce, where a solicitor explained to me that the cuts in legal aid are actually costing the courts so much

more money, because so many people in Hull are trying to represent themselves, and the President of the Supreme Court has said that the legal aid reforms are actually a false economy. Does the Minister agree that restoring early legal advice would not only help solve some legal problems, but save taxpayers’ money?

**Dominic Raab:** I understand the point that the hon. Lady is trying to make, and she has done so in a constructive way, but I am not sure that the evidence is there to back up her assertion. We provide a wide range of legal help, for example in civil and family cases. Last year we spent £100 million on legal help, including practical support and telephone helplines that provided advice on 20,000 occasions last year. There are also online tools to make it clear to people when legal aid is available, but other sources of legal advice are also available.

**Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con):** When changes were made to legal aid in family matters, it was anticipated that there would be considerable growth in the use of mediation. In fact, the numbers using mediation have dropped massively, and all the evidence indicates that that is because early legal advice is a gateway to mediation for assisted parties and reduces the burden of litigants in person in the courts. Is it not time that the Minister looked again at the issue?

**Dominic Raab:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right that we need to be encouraging more alternative dispute resolution, and I think that there is agreement on both sides of the House that we should incentivise cases being settled and not going through the courts, because of the cost and the trauma for those involved. The LASPO review provides an opportunity to look at all of this in the round, but I do not think that the answer will be exclusively about money; it will also be about the positive incentives that we put in place.

**Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab):** It is estimated that providing early legal help in family court cases would cost less than £14 million because, as the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) has just said, many cases would be resolved before getting to court. Why does the Minister continue to insist that this is not a cost-effective way of dealing with cases? Does he actually know how many cases are proceeding with litigants in person, and how much that is costing the courts system?

**Dominic Raab:** There is a range of support for early legal help, as I have already detailed—£100 million of support—and that can be online or telephone support, but also representation. Since 2015 we have invested £5 million in the litigants in person strategy. There is a range of support available, but of course we can review this in the round through the review.

**Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con):** We are a nation of laws, but we must be one nation too, with access to justice for people from all backgrounds. Does my hon. Friend agree that, post the LASPO review, the most careful thought should be given to bolstering legal aid resources so that we can have early advice and assistance for all?

**Dominic Raab:** My hon. Friend, as usual, makes a powerful point. We will be able to look at this in the round, but we do still spend £1.6 billion on legal aid, which is a quarter of my Department's budget. If we want to put more resources in, the money has to be found elsewhere. We will also be looking carefully at making sure we have the right allocation to support those in the greatest need.

**John Cryer** (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Was not the founding principle of legal aid full and free access to justice regardless of ability to pay? Has not that principle been eviscerated and ripped up by the Government, with the able assistance of Nick Clegg and his little Liberals?

**Dominic Raab:** The hon. Gentleman makes his point in his usual punchy way, but I have already detailed the support for early legal help and set out some of the support for litigants in person. The fact is that we provide £1.6 billion in legal aid. If we look at Council of Europe comparisons—I know that we cannot compare like with like exactly—we see that we are providing more legal aid per capita than any other Council of Europe country.

**Richard Burgon** (Leeds East) (Lab): We have heard from the Law Society and the president of the Supreme Court on early legal help, which Labour's manifesto also backs. My hon. Friends have asked questions about this and the Minister has said that the evidence is not there. I want to help the Minister, so will he show today that he is not driven purely by ideology and agree to a simple thing: to commission independent research into the savings that can come from early legal help to inform the Government's legal aid review before it reports back next summer? Will he do it?

**Dominic Raab:** We have got the review in place. We will take a wide range of advice and set up expert panels to ensure that we get the proper and best advice. The hon. Gentleman should feel free to contribute. However, his proposals would add £400 million to the cost, and he needs to explain where the money would come from because it does not just grow on trees.

### Victims and Witnesses: Court Experience

3. **Amanda Milling** (Cannock Chase) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve the court experience for victims and witnesses. [902742]

13. **Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): What steps he is taking to improve the court experience for victims and witnesses. [902752]

**The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Dominic Raab):** We are investing more than £1 billion in our court reform programme to make our justice system more sensitive to victims and witnesses and more accessible to the average citizen.

**Amanda Milling:** It is almost a year since I met Jill Saward, who sadly passed away at the beginning of this year. Jill was a tireless campaigner for victims of rape and sexual assault and she led the campaign that brought an end to accused rapists cross-examining victims. Will my

hon. Friend outline what progress is being made to extend the law to protect victims of domestic violence during trials in family courts?

**Dominic Raab:** I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the way in which she has championed this issue and to Jill Saward for her campaigning work. As part of our reform programme, we are rolling out section 28 pre-recorded cross-examination for vulnerable witnesses in the Crown courts. That will be rolled out initially in Leeds, Liverpool and Kingston upon Thames from next year, but the plan is for a national roll-out. We are also committed to extending section 28 to family law cases and we have announced legislation for that purpose in the Queen's Speech.

**Jim Shannon:** The Minister is right that the victims should be central to Government policy. What support is available for both adult and child rape victims after the verdict, and will he outline the process whereby support is offered, regardless of the verdict?

**Dominic Raab:** In 2017-18, the Ministry of Justice allocated around £7 million as a contribution to 97 rape support centres across England and Wales to provide independent specialist support. In the same year, we allocated £68 million to police and crime commissioners. The hon. Gentleman raised an important aspect of the support, which remains available to victims after as well as before the conclusion of a trial, regardless of the verdict.

**Angela Smith** (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): The Minister just said that legislation relating to this matter was outlined in the Queen's Speech. We are particularly concerned about domestic violence victims in the family courts. When will that legislation be introduced on the Floor of the House?

**Dominic Raab:** The announcement was made in the Queen's Speech. We are looking at the parliamentary timetable and we will be able to say something about that shortly.

**Liz Saville Roberts** (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Perpetrators of domestic violence can currently commit abuse of process by bringing vexatious court actions against their victims, often cross-examining them in person in civil and family courts. Will the Minister consider introducing legislation on that? When will he do it?

**Dominic Raab:** As I have just said, the legislation was announced in the Queen's Speech. Obviously, we have a packed parliamentary timetable at the moment, with the EU measure and other aspects of that, but we are committed to introducing legislation and we will announce details soon.

**Peter Kyle** (Hove) (Lab): Earlier this year, the Secretary of State generously agreed to amend the Courts legislation and introduce primary legislation to outlaw the cross-examination of victims by domestic abuse perpetrators. The principle of using primary legislation to tackle the matter has been agreed. When will he introduce primary legislation to tackle the issue?

**Dominic Raab:** As I have already made clear in two answers, we are committed to not only the courts Bill, but that specific reform. I look forward to the full-throated support of the hon. Gentleman and other Opposition Members.

#### Reoffending Rates: Custom House Building

4. **Mr Richard Bacon** (South Norfolk) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the potential effect of self-build and custom house building on reducing prisoner reoffending rates. [902743]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Sam Gyimah):** Accommodation is the foundation of preventing reoffending. Currently around 30% of people leave prison without a stable home to go to, and that is why my right hon. Friend the Justice Secretary has made employment on release and accommodation for offenders a key priority of our prison reform programme.

**Mr Bacon:** Given that the Self-build and Custom Housebuilding Act 2015 is now on the statute book, is the Minister aware that probation officers and ex-offenders can now register as associations of individuals under the Act? Will he meet me and the National Custom & Self Build Association's right to build expert taskforce, so we can brief him on how people building their own dwellings can transform lives and reduce reoffending rates?

**Mr Gyimah:** I would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend to listen to whatever creative solutions he can bring to the long-standing problem of accommodation for offenders.

**Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): The joint report of the chief inspectors of prisons and probation looked at through-the-gate services and revealed that 10% of prisoners were homeless on their first night out of prison. Having a home is key to reducing reoffending, so what assessment has the Minister made of reoffending rates?

**Mr Gyimah:** The hon. Lady makes a very important point. As I said in response to the previous question, this is a priority for us. We are looking at expanding bail accommodation and support services to include lower risk offenders, utilising spare MOJ capacity, expanding our approved premises programme, and working very closely with other Government Departments, such as the Department for Communities and Local Government, to solve this serious problem.

**Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): While strongly supporting the initiative of my hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr Bacon), will the prisons Minister tell the House which construction companies get this and actually offer fair opportunities to ex-offenders in the construction sector? Will he perhaps also tell us which companies need a bit of a nudge in this area?

**Mr Gyimah:** My hon. Friend is pre-empting our employment strategy, which we will announce very soon. He will be aware of the New Futures Network, which the Justice Secretary announced at party conference.

This will bring together employers and ex-offenders to help to create employment on release. The construction sector is a key sector and he will be hearing more from us in due course.

**Imran Hussain** (Bradford East) (Lab): A 2015 Ministry of Justice study found that community orders have a substantially lower rate of reoffending than short prison sentences. What is the Minister doing to reverse the sharp fall in community sentences that has taken place under his Government?

**Mr Gyimah:** Of course we want to reduce reoffending. The presumption in this country is against prison. It is up to the judiciary to sentence how they see fit. We want to make sure that there are appropriate interventions in the community and we are looking at that.

#### Litigants in Person

5. **Afzal Khan** (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking in response to recent trends in the number of people who represent themselves in court. [902744]

**The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Dominic Raab):** The Government's litigants in person support strategy provides a range of practical support and information to those without legal representation before the courts.

**Afzal Khan:** Senior judges are warning that the growing number of litigants in person is creating a huge burden on judges, lawyers and the litigants themselves. Will the Minister commit to restoring legal aid to the family courts, where this problem is most serious, as Labour has promised to do?

**Dominic Raab:** We have the LASPO review, which I have described. If I may, I will take this opportunity to point out that since 2015 we have invested £5 million in the litigant in person support strategy, which includes practical support such as: online and self-help resources, access to free or affordable legal advice, and, where possible, legal representation.

**Gloria De Piero** (Ashfield) (Lab): Representing themselves in court has been a real issue for domestic violence victims. Restoring legal aid is welcome, but that will not happen until January. I note the Justice Secretary is advertising for a second speechwriter at a rate of £70,000. As there is cash to spare, will he commit to ensuring that domestic violence victims who seek legal aid, as of yesterday's announcement, will be able to claim retrospectively under the new criteria?

**Dominic Raab:** We will be laying the statutory instrument shortly and I think, beneath the political point-scoring, the hon. Lady welcomed it. It will make it easier to apply for legal aid in family cases where there has been a victim of domestic abuse. More broadly, wider personal support units provide trained volunteers who give free independent assistance to people facing proceedings in the family sphere and beyond. There are 20 centres in 16 cities. I hope she would welcome that.

### Prison Officers

6. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect of the recent pay award on the recruitment and retention of prison officers. [902745]

**The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Lidington):** The Prison Service pay review body recommendations, which I accepted in full, were implemented in the October and November pay of officers. It is therefore too early to assess the effect of this particular award, but I can report to the House that at the end of September this year total prison officer numbers were up by more than 1,200 full-time equivalent staff compared with the previous 12-month period.

**Liz Twist:** Given that the leave rate among key prison officers in bands 3 to 5 is still running at 10%, does the Secretary of State not think it time to offer prison officers more than the 1.7% they have been offered in order to retain experienced prison staff and keep our prisons safe?

**Mr Lidington:** For those prisons, mostly in London and south-east England, experiencing particular challenges over both recruitment and retention, we are offering additional support and resources. I would have hoped, however, that the hon. Lady would have welcomed the significant increase in prison officer numbers over the last year. The prison officer pay recommendations were implemented in full, and prison officers received a pay rise of 1.7%. In terms of the total bill, that is more than was awarded to other public sector workers.

**Mr Gregory Campbell** (East Londonderry) (DUP): What assessment has the Secretary of State made of the impact of prison officers' terms and conditions and pay scales on their morale now compared with five years ago?

**Mr Lidington:** Prison officers certainly are working under very challenging conditions, not least because of how organised crime is promoting traffic in new psychoactive substances across prison walls, but we believe that not just the increase in numbers but the shift, in forthcoming months, to the new offender management model, under which each officer will take responsibility for about half a dozen named offenders, will contribute to increased morale.

**Richard Burgon** (Leeds East) (Lab): One in four prisons have seen a reduction in the number of prison officers over the past year, including a quarter of prisons the Government label as being of concern, so given their so-called recruitment drive, will the Secretary of State guarantee today that no prison, apart from those planned for closure, will have fewer staff at the end of the year than they did at the beginning?

**Mr Lidington:** As I said in response to the last question, the new offender management model, which we are implementing throughout the system, will reduce the pressure on individual prison officers. Where a particular prison has greater than average difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff, we will continue to put in extra resource and support to help them.

### Prisoner Rehabilitation: Sporting Activities

7. **Mike Wood** (Dudley South) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effect of prisoners participating in sporting activities on improving rehabilitation rates. [902746]

14. **Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effect of prisoners participating in sporting activities on improving rehabilitation rates. [902753]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Dr Phillip Lee):** There is strong evidence that physical education and sport improve the wellbeing and motivation of those in custody and ex-offenders in the community. Both improve their prospects of successful resettlement.

**Mike Wood:** Team sports promote the values of hard work, accountability and team work. Does the Minister agree that these are exactly the values we should seek to instil in offenders, particularly young offenders, to cut the risk of reoffending and give them a better chance in life after release?

**Dr Lee:** Yes, I do. I hope that every Member would agree. I have commissioned Professor Rosie Meek of Royal Holloway to compile a report on the impact of sport on offenders in custody and in the community so that I can get a complete picture of what I think are the positive benefits. I look forward to her report being published in the new year.

**Sir Edward Leigh:** What is the purpose of prison? Is it punishment or rehabilitation?

**Dr Lee:** The purpose of prison is to play its part in reducing crime. That is the fundamental challenge that our Department and the Home Office face, and I believe that sports clubs can play a part. For example, the Saracens project with Feltham young offenders institution has a recidivism rate in its small pilot of about 10%, which compares very favourably to the overall rate.

**Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): As well as sport, does the Minister agree that arts and crafts could also play a part in the rehabilitation of offenders? Prisoners in Hull Prison were involved in creating a replica of Jason, Amy Johnson's plane, for city of culture year. It is now in Hull Paragon train station. Unfortunately, the Ministry of Justice seems to want to move it to York. Will he look at that again and keep it in Hull to recognise what the prisoners have done?

**Dr Lee** *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. The hon. Lady has raised an ingenious point, which is at best tangentially related to the question on the Order Paper—rather as one might say that Hull is tangentially related to York, both of them being in the north of England. Given that she has been so ingenious, however, let us hear the Minister and find out whether he is comparably dexterous.

**Dr Lee:** Thank you for the opportunity, Mr Speaker.

I agree with the hon. Lady that it is not exclusively sport that can make an impact on the lives of young offenders in particular. I remember visiting Cookham Wood Prison and being overwhelmed by the quality of the artwork that was being undertaken there.

**Alex Norris** (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Prisoner wellbeing and rehabilitation at HMP Nottingham continues to be of major concern after five people died there in four weeks. When I raised the issue at the last justice questions, the Prisons Minister, the hon. Member for East Surrey (Mr Gyimah), echoed my concern and undertook to write to me. May I ask whether Ministers are still concerned about HMP Nottingham, and when I will receive that letter?

**Dr Lee:** If the hon. Gentleman would like to write to me about the matter, it would be very helpful.

**Alex Norris:** Write another letter?

**Dr Lee:** The matter is not specifically in my brief, because HMP Nottingham is not a young offender institution.

#### Prison Governors

8. **Craig Mackinlay** (South Thanet) (Con): What steps he is taking to empower prison governors. [902747]

**The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Lidington):** In April this year, governors were given authority to devise the daily routine in prisons—the way in which they organise staff—and to have a greater say in the health services received by prisoners. In October, governors gained control of the new family services budget, and next year we will devolve the prison education, careers advice and libraries budget to governors in England.

**Craig Mackinlay:** That is enormously helpful. Does my right hon. Friend agree that governors know their prisons and their prisoners best, and that many of the day-to-day operational decisions about such matters as the core regime, education and training are best devolved down from Governments into their local hands?

**Mr Lidington:** Yes, I do agree. I think it important for Ministers and officials in the Prison Service to trust the professionalism of governors who are in charge of individual establishments, which is why, as national contracts for particular services expire—for example, maintenance, repairs and food procurement contracts—we will seek opportunities to devolve them to establishment level.

**David Hanson** (Delyn) (Lab): The Secretary of State will have noted that comments made by chief inspector of prisons about one of his reform prisons are quoted in today's edition of *The Times* under the headline "‘Trailblazing’ jail is swamped with drugs". The prison is said to have deteriorated over the last 12 months. I am genuinely interested to know whether the Lord Chancellor can tell us who is responsible for that—the governor, the head of the prison and probation service, Michael Spurr, or the Lord Chancellor himself.

**Mr Lidington:** Ultimately, I am responsible for the Department and the services that it provides. As is the case with every inspection report, the Prison Service will take action to remedy the problems identified by the chief inspector, and a new scanner to detect drugs has already been installed at Holme House.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. There are plenty of other questions on prisons, to one of which we now come.

#### Prisons: Drones

9. **Luke Hall** (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): What steps he is taking to prevent the use of drones over prisons. [902748]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Sam Gyimah):** The organised criminals who use drones to smuggle drugs and phones are a major threat to the stability and safety of our prisons. We are taking decisive steps to tackle that threat through joint intelligence-led operations with law enforcement agencies to identify and disrupt the individuals involved.

**Luke Hall:** What more can be done to harness the power of intelligence-led work to track drones, not just to stop them coming into prisons but to find the criminals who are seeking to use them to disrupt our prison system?

**Mr Gyimah:** My hon. Friend is right to highlight the importance of not just stopping contraband coming into prisons, but stopping the organised crime networks that are behind that. The specialist staff in our regional and national intelligence teams are transforming the way in which we work with the police to that end. We have launched Operation Trenton, in which a specialist team of police and Prison Service investigators will work together to intercept drones and track down the criminals behind them. So far there have been at least 17 convictions related to drone activity, and those convicted are serving about 50 years in prison.

#### Prisons: Mobile Telephones

10. **Stephen Metcalfe** (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): What steps he is taking to prevent the use of mobile telephones in prisons. [902749]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Sam Gyimah):** Illicit phones erode the barrier that prison walls used to place between prisoners and the community. They can be used to harass victims and to support the trade in contraband that, as we know, drives violence and self-harm. We are working with law enforcement partners to identify and disrupt the organised crime networks that supply phones and other illicit items to prisons. For example, our recent joint operation at HMP Hewell recovered 323 items, including 79 mobiles and a large quantity of drugs.

**Stephen Metcalfe:** Does my hon. Friend agree that we must be constantly alert to the potential for new technology to deter, detect and disrupt the illicit use of mobile phones in prisons? Does he therefore welcome the potential



offered by the private Member's Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), which received its Second Reading last week and which will help to block mobile phone signals around prisons?

**Mr Gyimah:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The consequence of illicit items in prisons is violence and instability for the regime, and the way to counter that technological threat is through technology. The private Member's Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes, which the Government are backing, would give us more power to switch off mobile phones in prisons and therefore deal with the scourge that they present.

### Prison Officers: Safety

12. **Mrs Kemi Badenoch** (Saffron Walden) (Con): What progress he has made on improving safety for prison officers. [902751]

**The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Lidington):** In addition to strengthening the frontline by boosting prison officer numbers, we are using intelligence-led searches and joint operations with law enforcement agencies to disrupt the supply of drugs, phones and other illicit items that drive violence in prisons. We have invested in 5,600 body-worn cameras to help to protect prison staff, and we are working with the police and the Crown Prosecution Service to prosecute prisoners who assault officers.

**Mrs Badenoch:** On a visit to Rochester prison last Thursday, I heard that perceptions of prison officer safety were affecting recruitment. Can the Secretary of State tell us what the Department is doing to support the recruitment of prison officers?

**Mr Lidington:** We are meeting with considerable success in filling the 2,500 additional prison officer places that my predecessor, the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), successfully negotiated a year ago. We are also developing a graduate entry scheme for prison officers, and working with the armed forces to ensure that the service leavers scheme takes proper account of the opportunities in the prison service.

**Caroline Flint** (Don Valley) (Lab): The hon. Member for Saffron Walden (Mrs Badenoch) makes an important point about how the perception of safety can affect recruitment and retention in the prison service. Will the Secretary of State give me an update on the Government's workforce strategy for all justice sector staff—safety issues affect everyone in the sector—and commit today to involving all trade union stakeholders in the development of that workforce strategy?

**Mr Lidington:** The right hon. Lady makes a good point. Within Government, we continue to discuss how we might look at changes and reforms to the way in which the prison and probation workforces are structured, but irrespective of those discussions, we are proceeding with measures to give additional support to prison governors and prison officers by boosting regional management teams and trying to ensure that professional development is taken seriously at all ranks of the prison service.

**Dan Carden** (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): The reality of life in our prisons is one of inexperienced prison officers dealing with more violent and dangerous situations on a daily basis, and that is a direct result of this Government's cutting 7,000 prison officers. They have now slammed that into reverse to recruit 2,500 officers, as has been announced today. There are prison officers in the Gallery today who are visiting on a lobby with the Prison Officers Association. Will he agree to meet them to discuss prison officer safety?

**Mr Lidington:** My hon. Friend the Prisons Minister and I meet representatives of the Prison Officers Association both at national level and whenever we go to visit prisons, where we make a point of talking directly to staff and listening to their concerns. I believe that, as well as recruiting additional officers as promised, we need to ensure that anybody who attacks a prison officer is properly prosecuted, where there is good evidence available. That is what ought to happen, and I hope that the police and the Crown Prosecution Service will work with us to ensure that we get those outcomes.

### Female Offender Management

15. **Helen Whately** (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve the management of female offenders in the criminal justice system. [902754]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Dr Phillip Lee):** We are investing over £1 million between 2016 and 2020 to support local areas in developing multi-agency approaches to female offenders. We also developing a strategy for female offenders to improve outcomes for women in the community and in custody.

**Helen Whately:** East Sutton Park Prison in my constituency does a fantastic job in helping women offenders prepare for life after prison, and I look forward to welcoming my hon. Friend to the prison in the new year. What are he and the Government doing to help women across the country prepare to make a fresh start on leaving prison?

**Dr Lee:** I look forward to visiting East Sutton Park with my hon. Friend in the new year. It has an excellent record of building strong links with both national and local employers such as Timpson, Sainsbury's and Specsavers. We want to develop and spread such relationships across the country, because people who have a job on leaving prison are less likely to reoffend.

**Thangam Debbonaire** (Bristol West) (Lab): It is 10 years since the Corston report. Can the Minister update us on the progress the Government are making in meeting all 43 of Baroness Corston's recommendations, in particular funding for specialist units such as Eden House in Bristol?

**Dr Lee:** The Corston report was the very first document I read on being made the relevant Minister in July 2016, and it is a very good document. Since then I have worked tirelessly, along with my officials, to develop a women's strategy that goes some way to meeting the challenges set by Baroness Corston. I recently met the Corston funding group to discuss the proposals that we will bring forward when the strategy is published.

**Ms Nusrat Ghani** (Wealden) (Con): As female offenders are more likely than male offenders to have caring responsibilities for children, what role does the Minister think prison governors should play in maintaining and strengthening family ties?

**Dr Lee:** In my travels around the country, every governor of a women's prison I have met knows the importance of maintaining good family links. In the strategy, we have this in our minds in developing an infrastructure for the future, whereby women are held as close a possible to their families, if they have to be locked up.

**Kate Green** (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): What action are the Government taking to reduce the incidence of breach and recall, which is leading to an increase in the women's prison population?

**Dr Lee:** We are aware of the challenges around recall, and some of this is to do with the fact that women go back out into the community and into exactly the same situation they were in before going into prison. This is being considered in depth, and our approach to it will be part of the women's strategy.

**Tony Lloyd** (Rochdale) (Lab): The Minister will know that a disproportionate number of women are sentenced to very short prison terms, and judging by his previous statement he probably shares the view that they are generally ineffective in breaking the cycle of reoffending. Will the Government think seriously about adopting the Scottish system, under which short sentences have to be actively justified by the court before they are passed?

**Dr Lee:** We already have a presumption against custody in our system in England. I acknowledge, however, that Scotland is embarking upon an exciting path in managing its women offenders, which is why I am going there on Thursday.

**Yasmin Qureshi** (Bolton South East) (Lab): Given that half of all women in prison are there just for a few weeks, does the Minister agree that we can achieve a better outcome for the women themselves, and reduce the number of victims of crime, if we invest in women's centres, rather than sending non-violent women to prison?

**Dr Lee:** When visiting prisons and meeting prisoners, what is striking is that many of them have been victims themselves. I am very conscious of that, and the strategy will try to deal with it through the way in which we handle and manage women who have committed offences.

#### Exceptional Case Funding Scheme

16. **Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): What plans he has to review the criteria for the exceptional case funding scheme for coroners' inquests involving multiple deaths to ensure that close family members have legal representation. [902755]

**The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Dominic Raab):** We are looking at ways to make inquests more sensitive to the needs of bereaved families. The Lord Chancellor will update the guidance on exceptional

case funding by the end of the year, and we will also look at this issue as part of the wider LASPO—Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012—review.

**Tim Loughton:** My hon. Friend will be aware that I raised the case of the Shoreham air show crash with the Prime Minister at questions a month ago. The Legal Aid Agency has refused exceptional case funding to the families of the victims. Can it be right that the families of the victims of an event that at the time resulted in the largest civilian loss of life since 7/7 might be the only ones not to have legal representation at the coroners' inquest next year, not least when there is a wider public interest for the over 2 million people who attend 300-plus civilian air shows each year?

**Dominic Raab:** My deepest sympathies go to the victims of the Shoreham airshow disaster. My hon. Friend knows that I cannot comment on individual decisions, but I can say that we have protected early legal advice for inquests within the scope of legal aid, and there is an opportunity to look at the issue more broadly as part of the LASPO review. Legal aid is decided independently, but it was granted in over half of cases where inquest applications were made last year.

#### Youth Custody: Physical Restraint

18. **Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck** (South Shields) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the suitability of physical restraint techniques used on children in youth custody. [902757]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Dr Phillip Lee):** We are clear that restraint should be used only when it is absolutely necessary and when no other form of intervention is possible or appropriate. The number of incidents in which restraint was used reduced by 11% between the year ending March 2015 and the year ending March 2016.

**Mrs Lewell-Buck:** In September, I asked why the Ministry of Justice's approved methods for restraining children in young offender institutions and secure training centres can actually kill children or leave them disabled. I have since received a letter from the Minister stating that pain-inducing restraint techniques may be necessary in limited circumstances. The Department of Health launched a consultation last week about children in the care of the state, on the premise that restraint should not be used to punish or with the intention of inflicting pain, suffering or humiliation. What exactly is the Government's position on restraint?

**Dr Lee:** The restraint techniques that are used were developed in consultation with a medical panel and a medical adviser—[*Interruption.*] I must emphasise to the hon. Lady that we are dealing with sometimes quite violent individuals. Violence levels in the youth estate are 10 times that in the adult estate, and decisions are sometimes made, however difficult, to protect the individual concerned, other children in the unit and the staff. [*Interruption.*]

**Mr Speaker:** Order. The hon. Lady continues to chunter from a sedentary position in evident disapproval of the thrust of the reply provided from the Treasury Bench, but the hon. Lady has a recourse: she can apply

for an Adjournment debate and dilate on such matters at greater length, which I am sure will be of great satisfaction to her and, possibly, to others.

### Court System: Modernisation

19. **David Morris** (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): What steps he is taking to modernise the court system. [902758]

20. **Tom Tugendhat** (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): What steps he is taking to modernise the court system. [902759]

24. **Robert Courts** (Witney) (Con): What steps he is taking to modernise the court system. [902763]

**The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Lidington)**: With permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer Question 19 together with Questions 20 and 24. We are investing £1 billion in the modernisation of Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service. This summer, we launched the first online courts pilots, covering divorce, social security and civil money claims. In October, I visited the Manchester civil justice centre and saw some of that work first hand.

**Mr Speaker**: Order. The right hon. Gentleman had not asked in advance for my agreement to the grouping, but I am nevertheless happy to provide it. Presumably, the request was not made to my office on account of the expectation that we would not get this far, but Ministers ought to know better by now; we do tend to make quite quick progress. We will take supplementary questions from those who are here—I think at least one is not.

**David Morris**: Part of the problem with the courts system is that the lay person does not understand the jargon. Will my right hon. Friend examine how we can improve communication within the system so that the ordinary man on the street can understand what is going on in court proceedings?

**Mr Lidington**: I apologise to you, Mr Speaker, if there was a mess-up in communications with your office.

In response to my hon. Friend, as we test and pilot the online court proposals it is important to ensure that the process is stripped of legal jargon so that our constituents—men and women who may have no particular knowledge or experience of the technicalities of law—are able easily to understand, follow and use the process.

**Tom Tugendhat**: As co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on public legal education and pro bono, I was wondering whether my right hon. Friend had made any assessment of how the online process will save many people who go to small claims courts from unnecessary stress and hassle when all they are often trying to do is resolve a simple money claim.

**Mr Lidington**: Having tried out the small money claims process, my view is that it provides a user-friendly way for a consumer to seek redress from somebody against whom they have a claim. So far, more than 3,000 people have used the pilots that I have described, and they have received straightforward digital access to our courts.

**Mr Speaker**: Order. I would call Mr Courts to ask about courts if he were here and given the likely affinity that he would feel towards the subject, but he is not, so I cannot.

**Jim McMahon** (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I wrote to the Government in October to ask about the impact of the closure of Oldham magistrates court and county court, but they said they do not collect data on non-attendance. How on earth can the Government know about the impact of closures if they do not collect that data?

**Mr Lidington**: When a proposal is made to close any court centre there is a public consultation, which enables representations to be made and evidence to be looked at seriously. Such a consultation is always accompanied by an analysis of the travel times, both by car and by public transport, for people who use the court centre scheduled for closure to attend the proposed alternative. These things are considered in detail.

**Lucy Powell** (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): In the context of court modernisation, will the Secretary of State look at making the courts more transparent, particularly by allowing defendants and those who have been sentenced to get court transcripts and copies of the judge's direction to the jury? Especially in cases of potential miscarriage of justice, it can be incredibly difficult to get that information.

**Mr Lidington**: I would like to take away and reflect on the serious points made by the hon. Lady. Obviously the conduct of a trial in court is a matter for the trial judge, but I will look seriously at the issue and write to her when I have had the chance to take advice on the matter.

### Topical Questions

T1. [902765] **Mike Amesbury** (Weaver Vale) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Lidington)**: Since the last Justice questions I have introduced a new urgent notification process, which allows the chief inspector of prisons formally and publicly to notify me, as Secretary of State, where he judges that urgent action is required to improve a prison with significant problems. This new procedure will require a joint response from Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service and my Department to ensure that decisive action is taken to address immediate concerns, and we will demonstrate our commitment to transparency by publishing both the chief inspector's notification letter and my response within 28 days.

**Mike Amesbury**: I am sure the Secretary of State will join me in condemning the shocking and senseless attack on a police community support officer in my constituency. The PCSO was reportedly deliberately lured into some woods before being attacked with a knife. Will the Secretary of State agree to meet me and other relevant partners to discuss what more the Government can do to ensure that our justice system properly reflects the gravity of such serious crimes?

**Mr Lidington:** I am sure the hon. Gentleman will appreciate that it would be wrong for me to comment in detail on an individual case when it is a matter of investigation and, conceivably, a trial. In general terms, the Government are committed to ensuring that the law protects those dedicated, professional public servants, including PCSOs, who do their utmost to keep us safe. That is why the Government are supporting the Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Bill, introduced by the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), to give such greater protection.

T2. [902766] **Tom Tugendhat** (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): What does my right hon. Friend think can be done to make sure that community sentences are not just robust and effective but are seen as such?

**The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Dominic Raab):** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have a range of robust community sentence options, which can include the whole range from unpaid work and curfews to rehab programmes and treatment for mental health and substances misuse problems. We are working with the judges and magistrates, and with the national probation service, to make sure community sentences are as operationally strong as they can be and can command public confidence.

**Richard Burgon** (Leeds East) (Lab): I have repeatedly asked the Secretary of State how many staff have been axed since probation was privatised, and I have repeatedly been refused an answer. It is now being reported in the press that there was a 20% cut in the number of probation staff in the privatised community rehabilitation companies between 2015 and 2016. Can he confirm that CRC staff have been cut by a fifth?

**Mr Lidington:** It is for individual community rehabilitation companies to take decisions about the staffing and what kind of staff they need to deliver on their contractual obligations to the Government. The Government's responsibility is for staff in the national probation service, and we are recruiting additional staff to it.

T6. [902770] **Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): Given that a rise in fraudulent claims can push up the cost of insurance for all, what assessment has the Minister made of the levels of holiday sickness insurance claims and the impact of false claims on the cost for honest holidaymakers?

**Dominic Raab:** My hon. Friend raises a good point. The Association of British Travel Agents reported a sixfold increase in gastric illness claims against tour operators between 2013 and 2016, but reports in resorts of illness were declining. This cost operators about £240 million last year, which of course hikes the cost for holidaymakers. We are calling for evidence on our plan to fix the legal cost to make it easier to defend dishonest claims, which will mean that honest families pay less for their hard-earned holidays.

T3. [902767] **Anna McMorrin** (Cardiff North) (Lab): The current prison system is failing young people and women. Youth and female offending needs a different approach, based on the community and community services, rather

than simply imprisonment. What will the Secretary of State do to help ensure education and rehabilitation, not punishment and not prisons?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Dr Phillip Lee):** I was in Cardiff last Thursday, when I met the pathfinder team there who work with women offenders, both in the community and when they are in custody, and I was very impressed by the work they do. I went on to the youth offending establishment at Parc, where I was particularly impressed during the visit. On both youth and women, our strategy is that if we can keep people out of custody, we will, but if they need to be in custody, we will make that decision.

T7. [902771] **Eddie Hughes** (Walsall North) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend advise me as to what steps are being taken to reduce reoffending levels among young people in the west midlands, including in my constituency?

**Dr Lee:** The current rate of reoffending among the youth population is way too high, and I have taken measures to address it. Part of that has been investing £64 million in the youth custody reform programme, which includes better training for staff.

T4. [902768] **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): Does the Justice Secretary not share my concern that handing over powers on court fine collection to private bailiffs will place the safety and finances of vulnerable people at risk from rogue operators?

**Dominic Raab:** No, we are making sure we have robust and rigorous regulation in place. The most important thing is to make sure that precious taxpayers' money is put to the best use and that the debts are most effectively recovered.

T8. [902772] **Sir Henry Bellingham** (North West Norfolk) (Con): Is the Secretary of State aware that there remains a serious illegal drugs problem in Norwich and Wayland prisons? Many Ministers talk about creating drugs-free prisons, but when is that going to become a reality in Norfolk? I would like the Secretary of State to answer, please.

**Mr Lidington:** Norwich prison, like all prisons in the system, is being challenged by new psychoactive substances, which are causing behavioural problems that add to potential aggression on the part of prisoners. These are being actively promoted by organised crime. We are addressing that, both by the provision of improved health and detoxification methods in prisons, and by active intelligence work to disrupt the supply of drugs into prisons, because rolling up those supply chains is what gives us the real opportunity to crack down on drugs.

**Mr Speaker:** It has to be said that normally hon. Members get the Minister they are given, but the hon. Member for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham)—I say this for the benefit of new Members—is an old hand and a wily fellow, and he knows how to get what he wants.

**Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): They bump off Prime Ministers.

**Mr Speaker:** One of his ancestors might have bumped off a Prime Minister, but the hon. Gentleman cannot be held responsible for the behaviour of his distant ancestor.

T5. [902769] **Carolyn Harris** (Swansea East) (Lab): We all know that too many women are being given short custodial sentences for minor crimes when rehabilitation through women's centres would be far more productive. Will the Minister assure me that there are no plans for a women's prison in Wales or, even worse, for a female offender unit annexed to a male prison, and that there are plans for women's centres in Wales?

**Dr Lee:** I can confirm that no decision has been made to build a female prison in Wales. As I keep emphasising, the strategy is about what more we can do in the community to help women. I understand and recognise that short sentencing is not delivering the goods, and I also recognise that a number of women are victims themselves. Ultimately, the women's justice estate is about security for the wider public—to keep people who have done things wrong away from the public—and reducing crime in the longer term by working better with the women concerned.

**Mr Speaker:** Time at last to hear the voice of Clacton.

**Giles Watling** (Clacton) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that it is as much in the interests of the EU 27 nations as it is in the interests of my constituents in Clacton and, indeed, people throughout the UK, for there to be a seamless continuation of civil co-operation between the EU 27 and the UK to provide companies, individuals and families with confidence that judgments can and will be enforced across borders? Will he update me on what is being done to secure that co-operation?

**Mr Speaker:** I was going to suggest that the hon. Gentleman seek an Adjournment debate on the matter, until I realised that in fact he had just conducted one.

**Mr Lidington:** These days, there are tens of thousands of families and businesses that live and operate across national borders within Europe. A comprehensive and ambitious civil justice co-operation agreement between the United Kingdom and the EU 27 will be very much in the interests of all parties.

T9. [902773] **Ellie Reeves** (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Last week, I visited Medway secure training centre for 12 to 17-year-olds which, in 2016, was the subject of a "Panorama" report that exposed widespread abuse while it was run by G4S. The centre is now run by Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service and things are improving. Young people talk positively about rehabilitation and staff are motivated. Many STCs and secure children's homes remain in private hands. Given the lessons of Medway STC, will the Government now commit to reversing the privatisation of the youth justice system?

**Mr Speaker:** The hon. Lady is not to be outdone by the hon. Member for Clacton (Giles Watling). This Adjournment debate fetish is rather catching, I think.

**Mr Lidington:** If one looks back at inspection reports over the years, one can see examples of good practice and poorer practice at both state-run and privately operated prisons and secure training centres. There are good reports on, for example, how G4S has operated HMP Parc for adult and young offenders. When there

are problems with privately operated prisons, my hon. Friends and I take them up directly and firmly with the company concerned.

**Michael Tomlinson** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I warmly support and welcome the Secretary of State's and the prisons Minister's support for and implementation of the Farmer review. How will the Minister ensure that the policy will be implemented across the board to ensure that reoffending is reduced? I would be very happy for the prisons Minister to answer.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Sam Gyimah):** My pleasure. The Farmer review is absolutely key to highlighting the importance of family connections in not only preventing self-harm in prisons but turning around lives. We have accepted all its recommendations and are going through the process of implementing them. I would be happy to update my hon. Friend personally.

T10. [902774] **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): You will know, Mr Speaker, that girls and vulnerable women were subject to horrendous abuse and rape by a sexual exploitation gang in Newcastle. Some of the perpetrators were recently convicted as part of Operation Sanctuary, but there are victims who feel that they have not had justice. I know of at least one who has been denied compensation for horrific abuse, because of time spent in juvenile detention as a consequence of that abuse. Does the Minister think that is just? If not, will he amend the criminal injuries compensation scheme to ensure justice?

**Dr Lee:** I recently met the chief executive of the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority and was convinced that it has in place systems to deal appropriately with all cases. However, if there is a particular case that is of concern to the hon. Lady, would she please write to me? I will respond.

**Robert Neill** (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Repeated failures in facilities management contracts are discovered every time the Justice Committee visits a prison. The latest example is the 22 showers left unrepaired for months at Rochester that we saw last week. Will my right hon. Friend conduct an urgent review of the operation of the contracts and the appropriateness of penalties, and will he speed up the work that is required to be done?

**Mr Lidington:** My hon. Friend makes a good point. When an inspector or, for that matter, my hon. Friend's Committee draws attention to problems of that kind, we certainly take that up firmly with the contractor concerned. I am also keen that we learn and apply lessons about how previous contracts were negotiated to ensure that we get better performance in future.

**Mohammad Yasin** (Bedford) (Lab): It was confirmed in the Budget that the Ministry of Justice will be cut by 40% in the decade to 2020, which is more than any other Department. We have already seen a significant reduction in judges, lay members and accessible tribunal hearing services. Will the Minister confirm today that enough is enough and that there will be no more cuts in the south-east region?

**Mr Lidington:** The figures that were issued at the same time as the Budget simply repeated those that featured in the current public expenditure round, so there was actually no change. Within our budget, we are investing £1 billion in the modernisation of the courts and recruiting 2,500 additional prison officers.

**Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con):** I thought that we had signed up to the all-singing, all-dancing EU prisoner transfer directive, so why, still, are 42% of the 10,000 foreign nationals in our prisons from EU countries? Why do we not send them back to where they came from?

**Mr Gyimah:** I thank my hon. Friend for that question—again. I think he asked the same question at the previous justice Question Time. As he is aware, even with prisoner transfer agreements, it is down to the receiving country to take those prisoners. We cannot force them to do so even when we have an agreement in place. The majority of prisoners who we send back to their home countries are sent under the early removal scheme, and 40,000 prisoners have been sent back home since 2010.<sup>1</sup>

**Mr Speaker:** Members regularly ask the same question again, as I am often wont to observe. Repetition is not a novel phenomenon in the House of Commons.

**Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op):** I have been approached by a constituent whose vulnerable daughter was raped by a male under the age of 18 who was not given a custodial sentence. I am concerned that the lenient sentence sets a precedent for lesser sentences and does not give sufficient regard to the suffering of the victim. Will the Minister agree to meet me and the family of this rape victim to discuss the sentencing guidelines for those who commit rape when under 18?

**Dominic Raab:** I thank the hon. Gentleman. I totally understand the anguish of the victim and the family in these kinds of cases. He will know that sentencing guidelines—not just the sentences—are set by the Sentencing Council and not the Ministry of Justice, but I can confirm that the new guidelines on sentencing under-18s for sexual offences came into effect in June, and he may wish to take a look at those.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** There are very few Scottish National party Members in the Chamber. I will take a couple more questions.

**Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con):** In my constituency, we have a higher level of road traffic incidents, including fatalities, compared with the rest of Sussex. I have long campaigned for increased sentences for dangerous driving. What signal does my hon. Friend believe was sent by the Government's recent announcement on proposed increases to dangerous driving sentences?

**Dominic Raab:** We consulted extensively on that matter. Bearing in mind the seriousness of the worst offences and the anguish of the families, we have set out proposals to increase the maximum sentence for dangerous driving to life imprisonment. That is the reality for those engaged in such wilful acts.

**Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP):** My constituents, Mr and Mrs Fleeting, lost their brave son, Robert, in a non-combat death when he was serving in our forces at an English base. There cannot be closure for them as there was no inquest by jury. After a positive initial meeting with the Minister, there has been no follow-up, and that is compounding Mr and Mrs Fleeting's grief. Will the Minister today agree to meet my constituents to address this appalling issue?

**Mr Lidington:** I or one of my ministerial team will be happy to discuss the case further. The hon. Lady will appreciate that we need to understand all the detail before we make any public comment.

**Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab):** On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

**Mr Speaker:** I believe that the point of order flows directly from questions. I will take it if it is dealt with very briefly.

**Conor McGinn:** Mr Speaker, you will be aware of my campaign to introduce Helen's law. On 14 September, I wrote to the Justice Secretary, asking him to meet Marie McCourt, Helen's mother, and victims' families about this issue. Having not received a reply two months later, I tabled a parliamentary question to ask when that meeting was likely to happen. That parliamentary question was answered on 1 December and said that the correspondence had been sent to my office on 16 November. After a trawl of my correspondence, I found that none such had been received. Having contacted the Ministry of Justice, it transpired that, in fact, none had been sent because it was still waiting on ministerial approval. What does that say about the Government's attitude to the families of victims who have suffered so grievously? Can you advise me, Mr Speaker—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I can certainly give him two pieces of advice. First, a very important matter though this is, it does not flow from this oral questions session, as I had, perhaps wrongly, understood it to do. Secondly, may I offer the hon. Gentleman a tip, which he could learn from many a senior hand in this place? If what the hon. Gentleman described happens again, he should table a question to the Minister—

**Conor McGinn:** I did.

**Mr Speaker:** Let me finish. The hon. Gentleman should table a question to the Minister, demanding to know when that which was promised will be delivered. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Gentleman is gesticulating from a sedentary position to give the impression that that is precisely what he did. If he still did not get a response, as he should have done, my advice is that persistence pays; he should just keep going until he gets there. Alternatively, he should approach the Minister's office and seek a meeting. This is a very unsatisfactory state of affairs. However, knowing the Secretary of State for Justice as I do, I know that he is polite to a fault. Therefore, the error will have been inadvertent. It is extremely incompetent, but no further time of the House should be taken up today. I suggest that the hon. Gentleman and the Secretary of State meet, but I readily acknowledge to the hon. Gentleman that the situation is most unsatisfactory.

1. *[Official Report, 21 December 2017, Vol. 633, c. 6MC.]*

## EU Exit Negotiations

12.40 pm

**Keir Starmer** (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union if he will make a statement on progress of the Brexit negotiations between the UK and the European Union.

**The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis)**: I start by apologising for my voice. Once again, I have acquired the single European cough, but I hope that it will pass.

Negotiations regarding our exit from the European Union are ongoing as we speak. Indeed, we are in the middle of an ongoing round. As such, I have to be a bit more circumspect than usual. We held further talks in Brussels over the past few days and progress has been made, but we have not yet reached a final conclusion. However, I believe that we are now close to concluding the first phase of the negotiations and moving on to talk about our future trade relations. There is much common understanding, and both sides agree that we must move forward together.

Our aims in this negotiation remain as they have always been. In particular, on the issue of Northern Ireland and Ireland, we have been clear that we want to protect all elements of the Good Friday/Belfast agreement to maintain the common travel area and to protect associated rights. We want to ensure that there is no hard border between Ireland and Northern Ireland. We recognise that, as we exit, we must respect the integrity of the EU single market and the customs union, but we are equally clear that we must respect the integrity of the United Kingdom.

There remain some final issues to resolve that require further negotiation and consultation over the coming days. Our officials are in continuous contact, and we expect to reconvene in Brussels later this week for further negotiations. I or the Prime Minister will formally update Parliament once this round of negotiations concludes, as I have done for every round so far. As was made clear by the comments from President Juncker and President Tusk yesterday, all parties remain confident of reaching a positive conclusion in the course of the week.

**Keir Starmer**: What an embarrassment. The last 24 hours have given a new meaning to the phrase “coalition of chaos”. Yesterday morning, No. 10 was briefing that a deal would be signed. There was high expectation that the Prime Minister would make a triumphant statement to the House. By teatime, we had a 49-second press conference saying that the deal was off. It is one thing to go to Brussels and fall out with those on the other side of the negotiating table; it is quite another to go to Brussels and fall out with those who are supposedly on our own side of the negotiating table. If ever there was a day for the Prime Minister to come to this House to answer questions, it is today.

But let us not be fooled that yesterday was just about choreography. There are two underlying causes of this latest and most serious failure. The first can be traced back to the Prime Minister’s conference speech in October last year, when she recklessly swept options such as the customs union and the single market off the table,

and ruled out any role for the European Court of Justice, yet maintained that she could avoid a hard border in Northern Ireland. Well, yesterday the rubber hit the road. Fantasy met brutal reality. Labour is clear that there needs to be a UK-wide response to Brexit, so the question for the Government today is this: will the Prime Minister now rethink her reckless red lines and put options such as customs union and single market as back on the table for negotiations? If the price of the Prime Minister’s approach is the break-up of the Union and the reopening of bitter divides in Northern Ireland, that price is too high.

The second major reason for yesterday’s failure is that we have a Prime Minister who is so weak that the Democratic Unionist party has a veto over any proposal she makes. What precedent does it set when the Prime Minister is called out of negotiations at the 11th hour to be told by the DUP that the deal is off? What signal does that send to the EU about the Prime Minister’s ability to deliver Brexit?

Yesterday confirmed what we already knew: the DUP tail is wagging the Tory dog. This is now deeply serious, so what assurance can the Secretary of State give to the House that a deal will be agreed by the end of the week? Will he now drop the proposal for a fixed deadline in law for exit day of 29 March 2019? If ever there was an example of why that would be absurd, yesterday was it.

**Mr Davis**: The right hon. and learned Gentleman’s speeches in such proceedings are becoming rather repetitive—they are always crowing and carping. [*Interruption.*]

**Mr Speaker**: Order.

**Mr Davis**: Given my voice, I will wait it out, Mr Speaker.

Let us start with this issue of the single market and customs union. I am glad to see the shadow Chancellor in the Chamber, because he said earlier this year that remaining in the single market would be interpreted as “not respecting” the referendum result. The shadow International Trade Secretary—I cannot see him here—said that a permanent customs union is “deeply unattractive”. He said that as a “transitional phase”, it

“might be thought to have some merit. However, as an end point it is deeply unattractive.”

In fact, he described it rather later as “a disaster”. So much for Labour policy on this matter; we can see why it has changed 10 times in the course of the last year.

On the question with respect to the United Kingdom, I said in my response to the urgent question that I would be circumspect, and I intend to be. I am not going to go in for tit-for-tat comments—that would be very bad for our negotiations—but I will take the opportunity to rebut one falsehood I saw being stirred up by various of our political opponents yesterday: the suggestion that we might depart the European Union but leave one part of the United Kingdom behind, still inside the single market and customs union. That is emphatically not something that the UK Government are considering. So when the First Minister of Wales complains about it, the First Minister of Scotland says it is a reason to start banging the tattered drum of independence, or the Mayor of London says it justifies a hard border around the M25, I say they are making a foolish mistake. No UK Government would allow such a thing, let alone a Conservative and Unionist one.

**Sir William Cash** (Stone) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend appreciate that, whether it is in relation to regulatory alignment in Northern Ireland, or in relation to citizens' rights in respect of these negotiations, there is a serious danger that the European Court of Justice will get itself into every nook and cranny? There is no way in which it can be contained under article 344 of the treaty or, for that matter, in relation to the interpretation of all the matters I have just referred to.

**Mr Davis:** My hon. Friend, who has a long history of wisdom in this subject—*[Interruption.]* Wisdom—he saw it before most Opposition Members did. He has a long history with this subject, and he explains better than I could why we said that no divergence is a bad option.

**Peter Grant** (Glenrothes) (SNP): On reflection, I think I prefer the phrase “the rubber has hit the road” to the one that I was going to use to describe yesterday's fiasco.

It is no surprise that leadership contenders are now circling the Prime Minister. I can reveal that there is a vacancy coming up, because the Prime Minister is today being interviewed for the job of Scotland football manager, where her fantastic ability to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory could be put to very good use.

A Government who said they would bring sovereignty back to Parliament are now being controlled by someone who is not even a Member of this Parliament. A Government who refuse to give Parliament any say in the development of our negotiating position are now allowing that negotiating position to be dictated by the leader of a minority Parliament in the smallest of the four nations of this Union. I could not put it better than the shadow Minister: what a shambles; what a complete mess.

Will the Secretary of State now go back to “Scotland's Place in Europe”, the document published by the Scottish Government that his Government rejected out of hand a year ago, and use that as a basis to produce a solution to an otherwise intractable problem? The fact is that the Government's red lines are not compatible with each other, as the Brexit Committee concluded only last week. We were therefore unable to see how it is possible to reconcile leaving the customs union with avoiding a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic. Will the Secretary of State go back to that paper and use it as a basis for reopening negotiations?

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I think the hon. Gentleman has concluded his remarks. *[Interruption.]* The problem is that he has taken one and half minutes plus, and there is huge pressure on time, so I think we must now proceed.

**Mr Davis:** Shall I reply?

**Mr Speaker:** Yes, that is only fair, as I allowed the hon. Gentleman to blurt out his question to allow the Secretary of State briefly to answer.

**Mr Davis:** I will answer very briefly. First, I am very surprised by the hon. Gentleman, of all people, being so dismissive of small nations. Secondly, the Scottish Government document to which he refers was read carefully, and many of its elements are consistent with

our negotiating strategy, not least the aim of protecting employment rights. I really think he should recognise that.

**Mr Owen Paterson** (North Shropshire) (Con): The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency states that only 5% of Northern Ireland's sales cross the border south and only 1.6% of the Republic's exports go north. The Government paper, confirmed by the head of Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, says that that is easily surmountable without a hard border. The Belfast agreement confirmed Northern Ireland as an integral part of the United Kingdom with standard regulation throughout. We are going to leave the single market and the customs union. Will the Secretary of State confirm that this week the integrity of the United Kingdom comes first, and that, if necessary, no deal is better than a bad deal?

**Mr Davis:** My right hon. Friend makes his point well. I have already confirmed that the integrity of the United Kingdom comes first. That is why we have adopted the strategy of saying that the issue of maintaining a free border—an open border; a frictionless border—is best dealt with in the next phase: phase 2. Indeed, that is not just my view, but the view of the Taoiseach, who said on 20 August:

“I think the suggestion that”  
has been made

“to a certain extent, is common sense. If we are able to have a trade agreement between the EU and UK then of course it will be much easier to sort out issues around any border between Ireland and Northern Ireland.”

I have suddenly realised that the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) has also said the same thing: “To be fair to David Davis, he is right on issues like Northern Ireland. There is only so far you can get before you move to the next phase.”

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. If I am to accommodate a significant number of colleagues, there will be a premium on brevity, which is always brilliantly exemplified by the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn).

**Hilary Benn** (Leeds Central) (Lab): We all hope that the Government find a form of words that enables the negotiations to move on to phase 2, but do they not have to realise that the reason why there is this problem is because of their decision to leave the customs union and the single market? Given that the leader of the Scottish Conservatives and the Mayor of London have both suggested that whether it is convergence or no divergence, it should be applied to the whole of the United Kingdom, is it not time for the Government finally to recognise that they need to make a different decision if they are to avoid the imposition of a hard border in Northern Ireland?

**Mr Davis:** I am afraid that, uncharacteristically, the right hon. Gentleman is just wrong about that. I just read out the comment from the Taoiseach in August and a comment from his own Front-Bench spokesman about this subject, and I have set out the views of other Labour Front Benchers who are completely dismissive of being in the customs union in the long run. They are right, I am afraid, in this respect.



**Anna Soubry** (Broxtowe) (Con): The British people are fed up to the back teeth with all this. They want a solution. It might be that regulatory alignment is the solution, but if it is good enough for Northern Ireland, it is good enough for the rest of the country. We are a Union, and we will not allow a deal for one part of our great Union and not for the other. May I gently say to the Secretary of State that there is a consensus in this place? Even though, when we had a debate on a motion, Labour Front Benchers, including the shadow Chancellor, voted against the customs union, we are—over here, over there and down there—as one. There is a solution. I do not care how we wrap it up in whatever fancy words, but if it conveys the effect on British business of the single market and the customs union, let us grab it, seize it, rub out the red lines, move on, work together, build a consensus, and get a deal for our nation.

**Mr Davis:** My right hon. Friend makes her case with her characteristic tenacity. She can have this as a guarantee from me: we will not be treating any part of the United Kingdom differently from any other part.

**Liz Kendall** (Leicester West) (Lab): The way to solve the border issue, to protect the Good Friday agreement and to hold our United Kingdom together is to stay in the customs union and single market. Is it not the case that the Government only have themselves to blame for choosing—choosing—to rule this option out when they do not have to, which is putting the future of our country at risk?

**Mr Davis:** I think that the hon. Lady was elected on a manifesto pledge to respect the result of the referendum, and her own shadow Chancellor said that staying in would not respect that result.

**Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg** (North East Somerset) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend share my sense of gratitude to our friends in the Democratic Unionist party who have helped Her Majesty's Government to stick to their own policy in these negotiations? Is it not essential that the red lines on maintaining the United Kingdom, and on regulatory divergence whence the benefits of leaving come, are indelible red lines?

**Mr Davis:** The red line, for me, is delivering the best Brexit for Britain, and that is what we will do.

**Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): Actually, there is not a consensus in this House about what should happen. The Government are making a choice. They are choosing a majority that is based on the DUP and trying to keep the Conservative party together, whereas in actual fact there is a vast majority in this House, in the country and in the House of Lords in favour of us staying in the customs union so that we keep the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland together and do not harm our trade. Why will not the Secretary of State just see that?

**Mr Davis:** As ever, the hon. Gentleman asks an intelligent question, and I will answer it as clearly as I can. He said that we are making a choice. We are, and it is based not on any one party, but on 17.5 million votes that were cast to leave the European Union.

**Mr Bernard Jenkin** (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): May I point out to my right hon. Friend what I know he will agree with: the consensus that we must deliver is the consensus that was delivered in the referendum vote last year; and that was not for some half-in, half-out solution now being advocated by Her Majesty's official Opposition?

**Mr Davis:** My hon. Friend is of course right. The other thing we can say is that 85% of the Members of this House were elected on manifestos that said they would respect that referendum. *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I just make two points. First, there is a lot of noise in the Chamber. Members must be heard. Secondly, may I say very gently to the Secretary of State that I appreciate that he has trouble with his voice, but that accentuates the importance of his facing the House so that we can all hear him?

**Yvette Cooper** (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): In the chaos that was yesterday, it did at least seem to be clear at 9 o'clock in the morning that the Government believed in the idea of regulatory alignment for Northern Ireland and for the Republic, but what is their position now? Have they now ditched any idea of regulatory alignment for Northern Ireland, or do they recognise that actually regulatory alignment is really important not just for the Good Friday agreement, but for businesses right across the United Kingdom? That is what the Secretary of State should be trying to achieve for all of us.

**Mr Davis:** I refer the right hon. Lady to the speech that the Prime Minister made in Florence, because in it she dealt with—*[Interruption.]* Clearly, if Opposition Members cannot read, that is not a problem. I refer the right hon. Lady to that speech, because in it the Prime Minister made a very plain case for the sorts of divergence that we would see after we left. She said that there are areas in which we want to achieve the same outcomes, but by different regulatory methods. We want to maintain safety, food standards, animal welfare and employment rights, but we do not have to do that by exactly the same mechanism as everybody else. That is what regulatory alignment means.

**Mr John Baron** (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): The Secretary of State is absolutely right to remind the House that the only way of respecting the result of the referendum is by leaving the customs union and single market, which are part and parcel of the EU. Does he accept that in any negotiation there will be ups and downs, and that we should remember that both sides in this negotiation have agreed to the principle that nothing is agreed until everything is agreed?

**Mr Davis:** My hon. Friend is right, and that was part of the text that we discussed yesterday. Of course there will be ups and downs and pressure points—that is what negotiations are like. I have to tell the House that yesterday it was not London but Brussels that forecast an instant outcome. We had said that Monday's discussion was a "staging post", and we want to get to the outcome by 15 December—full stop.

**Kate Hoey** (Vauxhall) (Lab): I am sure that millions of members of the public think that our Government are not being tough enough with the European Union,

[Kate Hoey]

and that in these negotiations, we should say clearly that the EU is stopping the continued co-operation—  
[*Interruption.*]

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I am very keen to accommodate colleagues, and please rest assured that I will do everything I can to do so, but the hon. Lady must be heard.

**Kate Hoey:** The EU is stopping the co-operation, which has been very good, between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. That could continue, but the EU is stopping it. Is it not time that the Government said so?

**Mr Davis:** The hon. Lady makes a point that is, I am sure, supported by many members of the public. I said at the beginning of the process more than a year ago that I would be unusually courteous and polite to the other side in this negotiation. I will continue to be so, because that is the best way to advance the British cause.

**Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con):** Yesterday's difficulties demonstrate how hard it will be to get an overall agreement. If there is no trade agreement, there will be no transition period beyond 2019. Will the Secretary of State ensure that the necessary contingency planning takes place in case that happens, and that that planning includes identifying the best way of making sure that the border between the north and south of Ireland is as soft as possible?

**Mr Davis:** I think I said to my hon. Friend when he was Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee that we had a great deal of contingency planning under way to deal with all options, from the option we are seeking—the free trade agreement—right down to the option we are not seeking, which is no agreement. That is the whole range, and we are looking at and planning for all those outcomes. More than 150 projects are already under way, and there will be more.

**Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP):** It should come as no surprise that Dublin and the Irish Government wish to advance their interests. The aggressive and anti-Unionist way in which they have gone about doing so is disgraceful. It has set back Anglo-Irish relations and damaged the relationships built up within Northern Ireland in relation to the devolution settlement. That damage will take a long time to repair.

It should also come as no surprise that the Democratic Unionist party stands strong for the Union and stands strong for Northern Ireland's place in the Union under the terms of the devolved settlement. We will not allow any settlement to be agreed that causes the political or economic divergence of Northern Ireland from the rest of the United Kingdom. To do so would be not only politically damaging, but economically catastrophic for everyone in Northern Ireland—Unionist, nationalist, remainder or Brexiteer.

The reality is that one of the good things that came out of yesterday was an agreement from Members on both sides of the House—from Labour and Conservative Back Benchers—as well as from Ruth Davidson, Carwyn

Jones and everybody else, that the United Kingdom stands together and that nothing will happen that will cause the breakup of this great United Kingdom.

**Mr Davis:** The right hon. Gentleman is dead right. It is no surprise that the Democratic Unionist party stands for the United Kingdom. So, equally, does the Conservative and Unionist party.

**Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con):** Tens of thousands of jobs in my constituency are in sectors that are urging the Government to adopt regulatory alignment. May I therefore support the Prime Minister in making that offer to the European Union, on the condition that it applies, as others have said, to the whole United Kingdom?

**Mr Davis:** The presumption of the discussion was that everything we talked about applied to the whole United Kingdom. I reiterate that alignment is not harmonisation. It is not having exactly the same rules; it is sometimes having mutually recognised rules, mutually recognised inspection and all that sort of thing. That is what we are aiming at.

**Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op):** In his response to my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall), the Brexit Secretary intimated that staying in the customs union and single market would betray the referendum result. No one told my constituents or the country before the referendum that Brexit would entail leaving the customs union and the single market. In the light of yesterday's shambles, will the Brexit Secretary look again at the Government's decision and move towards staying in the customs union and the single market?

**Mr Davis:** If the hon. Lady will forgive a factual correction, people certainly did. The Prime Minister at the time did so, as did the Chancellor at the time and, I think, the leaders of the leave and remain campaigns. I suggest that the hon. Lady looks at the records of "The Andrew Marr Show", on which they all said that.

**Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con):** May we return to the Prime Minister's original intention that there would be no running commentary? This discussion is driving the Opposition into a state of apoplexy when strategic patience is required.

**Mr Davis:** I thank my right hon. Friend for his inducement to my patience.

**Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab):** If the Secretary of State is serious about wanting a solution in the national interest that commands majority support in Northern Ireland, the rest of the United Kingdom and this House—I am delighted to say that that would seem to include my own Front Benchers—why does he not bring to this House a motion, on a free vote, on staying in the customs union and the single market?

**Mr Davis:** We were elected on a manifesto that said that we would leave the customs union and single market—full stop.

**Mark Pritchard** (The Wrekin) (Con): Does the Secretary of State believe that it is possible to leave the single market and the customs union, yet have UK regulatory alignment?

**Mr Davis:** As I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach), yes, but using things such as the mutual recognition and alignment of standards. That does not mean having the same standards; it means having ones that give similar results.

**Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I understand that yesterday the Prime Minister had to withdraw her agreement to her own agreed text as a result of the DUP's intervention. Does the Minister really think that it is acceptable for a British Prime Minister to have to conduct herself in such a way in international negotiations?

**Mr Davis:** I refer the hon. and learned Lady to the short speech given at the press conference by Jean-Claude Juncker, who clearly thought that the Prime Minister had carried herself off with great dignity and effectiveness.

**Stephen Crabb** (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that this discussion demonstrates that no workable solution to the border conundrum will satisfy the purists, wherever they stand in the debate? Does he therefore agree with the point made by Bertie Ahern and William Hague in recent days that the way through this is to show a much greater appetite for using technology-based solutions—*[Interruption.]* Does he agree that on the problems that technology cannot overcome, all sides will just have to show flexibility and adaptability about how rigidly they enforce and interpret their own principles and border rules?

**Mr Davis:** My right hon. Friend is absolutely on the nail, although what he said clearly did not go down very well with the luddite tendency in the Opposition. The other thing that is required is for us to get on to the second phase and talk about a free trade agreement, which will do more than anything else to facilitate this.

**Mr Chris Leslie** (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): Perhaps the Secretary of State could accept the constructive offer made by many hon. Members on both sides of the House. The right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) and the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach), as well as Opposition Members, have said that there is a majority in favour of the regulatory alignment that the Prime Minister proposed for Northern Ireland, the Republic and the rest of the United Kingdom. With a few exceptions, the Secretary of State would get a lot of votes from Opposition Members if he put that question. Why does he not just do so?

**Mr Davis:** We have talked at great length about what we mean by regulatory alignment—I have just done so today. It is not harmonisation, being in the single market, or having exactly the same rules; it is this House exercising its democratic right to choose our own laws in such a way as to maximise our ability to sell abroad. That is how it will work.

**Sir Hugo Swire** (East Devon) (Con): Is it worth gently reminding the Taoiseach and the Government in Dublin how we behaved when they were in financial trouble and we helped bail them out? Is it also worth

gently reminding them that, post Brexit, Irish nationals will continue to have the right to live and work in the UK? Finally, is it not worth gently reminding them that the UK is the most important economy to the Republic of Ireland? We wish to be good and productive neighbours, and they should enter into these negotiations with that long-term view in mind.

**Mr Davis:** I am sure that the Irish Government are conscious of all those things, but let me pick one point that my right hon. Friend made. When I last reported to this House—on 17 November, I think—I reiterated that the common travel area, which allows absolute freedom of movement between the two countries and absolute equality of treatment between our citizens, will remain in place, as will the constitutional protections allowing people from Northern Ireland to choose which nationality they wish to adhere to. We are protecting those rights very carefully.

**Heidi Alexander** (Lewisham East) (Lab): I put it to the Secretary of State that his Government's dogmatic insistence on pulling us out of the single market and the customs union threatens not only our future jobs, rights and prosperity, but the future territorial integrity of our country. When he looks back in a few years' time and reflects on his role in creating this mess, how does he think he will feel?

**Mr Davis:** I say to the hon. Lady what I said at the beginning of this urgent question: all these stories put about by her Labour party co-members yesterday were just nonsense. The Conservative and Unionist party puts the integrity of the United Kingdom at the forefront of its aims.

**Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, as with the Ashes test match, the week is not yet over? It is in the interests of Ireland as well as the UK to avoid a no-deal Brexit and find the long-term strategic partnership, and therefore all parties need to keep talking.

**Mr Davis:** My hon. Friend, who has a long and distinguished record in the European Parliament and knows the institutions there as well as anybody, brings great wisdom and insight to this discussion, and she is of course absolutely right.

**Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The Government's sheer incompetence is turning the Brexit negotiations into a national humiliation. Is it not time that the Secretary of State agreed that staying in the single market and the customs union is the only way to solve the Northern Ireland border, and indeed by staying in permanently—I say that as much for the benefit of Labour Front Benchers as for his—and that he should give the people a vote on the deal, to secure popular support for that stance?

**Mr Davis:** I will break the habit of a lifetime and pay the right hon. Gentleman a compliment: he is at least standing by the manifesto on which he stood at the general election. Of course, being a Liberal Democrat manifesto, it was completely wrong.

**John Stevenson** (Carlisle) (Con): Will the Minister reassure me that when it comes to negotiations with the EU, the Government will pursue a flexible policy that

[John Stevenson]

includes the possibility of establishing a model similar to that of Norway or Switzerland, which would undoubtedly benefit the Irish issue?

**Mr Davis:** No, the Prime Minister has made it clear that we are not going to take any off-the-shelf model. We are a very large country in European terms, and we have very great trade reach—and very great reach in other respects—so we will choose a model that is appropriate to us.

**Mr Pat McFadden** (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): The Prime Minister's humiliation yesterday, when she was forced to disagree with herself, shows that this is less a negotiation and more a set of decisions, and those decisions are being framed by the contradictory red lines that the Government have thrown out, without regard to the consequences, on a hard border, the single market and the customs union. The Secretary of State's colleague Ruth Davidson said this morning:

"If regulatory alignment in a number of specific areas is the requirement for a frictionless border, then the Prime Minister should conclude this must be on a UK-wide basis."

She is right, is she not?

**Mr Davis:** What I will say to the right hon. Gentleman, given that he is a Labour party member, is that he must have much greater experience than I have of disagreeing with himself. Look at his own Front Benchers and the 11 different positions they have taken.

**Mr Peter Bone** (Wellingborough) (Con): Did you notice, Mr Speaker, that the shadow Minister, just at the end of his question, committed the Labour party to dropping 29 March 2019 as the date on which we come out of the European Union? Will the Secretary of State confirm that it is the Government's policy that we are definitely coming out by 29 March 2019?

**Mr Davis:** It is not just the Government's policy; it is the law of the European Union.

**Alison McGovern** (Wirral South) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State confirm when the Cabinet took the decision that our country would leave the single market and the customs union?

**Mr Davis:** Effectively—[*Interruption.*] As someone behind me says from a sedentary position, it was 24 June 2016. I cannot remember the exact date when that specific decision was taken, but it reflects the judgment of the British people.

**Mr David Jones** (Clwyd West) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that maintaining the integrity of our country requires that there should never be any internal borders, economic or otherwise, within the territory of the United Kingdom?

**Mr Davis:** Yes, my right hon. Friend is absolutely right.

**David Simpson** (Upper Bann) (DUP): The Secretary of State will know that the Democratic Unionist party and businesses in Northern Ireland have advocated a

sensible Brexit deal with Northern Ireland, but does he also agree that the Republic of Ireland, through its intransigence, could risk everything and lose the most out of this?

**Mr Davis:** The hon. Gentleman is asking me to break my vow of courtesy, so I say, "Get thee behind me, Satan"—this time anyway.

**Paul Masterton** (East Renfrewshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that if regulatory alignment in certain specific areas is a requirement to solve the Northern Ireland border issue, then protecting the constitutional integrity of the United Kingdom requires that solution to be adopted UK wide?

**Mr Davis:** Every approach we take will treat the whole United Kingdom as a single constitutional entity and a single economic entity.

**Ms Angela Eagle** (Wallasey) (Lab): Yesterday, our Prime Minister was humiliated by having the rug pulled from under her by the DUP. Was she not naive even to attempt to do a deal of the sort she tried to do, knowing that the DUP would inevitably veto it? With the negotiations in such fantastic hands, will the Secretary of State now admit that the only way to move forward without a hard border in Northern Ireland, to protect the jobs of my constituents, is for us to stay in the customs union and the single market?

**Mr Davis:** No.

**Richard Graham** (Gloucester) (Con): This urgent question is spectacularly badly timed, in the middle of talks to move to the next phase—[*Interruption.*] The truth is—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. The hon. Gentleman will resume his seat. [*Interruption.*] Order. I will deal with this. The hon. Gentleman is unfailingly courteous. He is entitled to criticise a Member for submitting an urgent question, but it is not for him to question the judgment of the Chair. I took the view that this matter warranted the attention of the House of Commons today. If the hon. Gentleman wishes to depart from that view, he should not express it on the Floor of the House. If he has a serious question to ask, I am happy to hear it, but I seek his assurance that he is not arguing the toss with the Chair.

**Richard Graham:** I would never dream of it, Mr Speaker. My point was that many negotiations, if not most, come good towards the end. Therefore, rather than sledging the Government, I urge the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister to maintain their resilience and patience and see this through, which will require compromises on all sides to reach a good solution.

**Mr Davis:** My hon. Friend makes a very good point.

**Chuka Umunna** (Streatham) (Lab): The Secretary of State talks about the will of the people, but of course the Government put leaving the customs union and the single market to the electorate at the general election and lost their majority. Can I ask him a very specific question? Clearly, there is no consensus on having an arrangement whereby only Northern Ireland is part of

the single market and the customs union, and no business or Government I have spoken to think that technology is the answer. He has said that he does not think that keeping the UK overall in the customs union and the single market is the answer, so what does he believe is?

**Mr Davis:** A comprehensive free trade agreement, a customs agreement and all the associated regulatory alignment. While I am on my feet, let me pick the hon. Gentleman up on his comment about the result of the general election. I remind him that 85% of Members of this House were elected on manifestos that said we should leave the European Union.

**Stephen Hammond** (Wimbledon) (Con): My right hon. Friend will of course know that the UK has a large surplus in services with the EU. Does he agree that, for the continued success of legal, professional and financial services post Brexit, not only mutual recognition, but UK-wide regulatory alignment with the EU will be necessary?

**Mr Davis:** If by alignment my hon. Friend means mechanisms such as mutual recognition, yes, I agree entirely.

**Lucy Powell** (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am slightly confused now. Yesterday, the Government seemed to accept the principle that the only way to achieve no border or a soft border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland was through regulatory alignment. Does that principle still stand today? Do the Government accept that that is the only way to deliver the frictionless border?

**Mr Davis:** I can understand the hon. Lady's confusion if she has not been listening for the past half hour. The simple truth is that we will need to establish arrangements whereby we get the same or similar outcomes for some areas of industry and service—no more, no less.

**Dr Andrew Murrison** (South West Wiltshire) (Con): What can be done to help our good friends, the Irish Government, to climb down from the position that they were unwittingly misled into adopting yesterday?

**Mr Davis:** The aim of the negotiation is together to get to an outcome that serves our interests, the EU27's interests and particularly Ireland's interests because, as my hon. Friend says, they are our good friends and the people who, in some ways, are closest to us.

**Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): If the Secretary of State is so confident that we in this place, the media and the general public are misinterpreting what may or may not have been in the draft agreement, will he publish it to clear things up?

**Mr Davis:** I cannot imagine that the hon. Gentleman thinks that that would advance the negotiations one jot.

**James Cartlidge** (South Suffolk) (Con): The EU Trade Commissioner, Cecilia Malmström, has today tweeted that when we leave, our existing free trade agreements will not be rolled over. That is obviously a significant point, so further to the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (John Stevenson), does that

not add weight at least to considering those trade models whereby we can negotiate our own trade deals globally, but remain part of those that the European Free Trade Association currently has?

**Mr Davis:** There is more than one benefit to departing from the European Union. One is trade arrangements, and we are well advanced in our plans for dealing with those ongoing trade arrangements and ensuring that we do roll them over.

**Albert Owen** (Ynys Môn) (Lab): Yesterday, for the first time, the Secretary of State realised that the importance of the Irish border issue extends beyond the island of Ireland. To unite the United Kingdom, will he meet the Scottish and Welsh First Ministers to discuss regulatory alignment because it impacts on everyone? If he wants to unite the United Kingdom, he must do better.

**Mr Davis:** In response to the first half of the hon. Gentleman's question, I recommend that he read *Hansard* for my statements here, which will prove that he is absolutely wrong. It is really quite a calumny.

As for the First Ministers, there is a body called the Joint Ministerial Committee, which includes representatives of all the devolved Administrations and meets regularly. Sadly, the Northern Ireland Executive are not there at the moment, which is one of the difficulties we have to deal with.

**Richard Drax** (South Dorset) (Con): We leave the EU in 16 months. Will my right hon. Friend assure the House and the country that the EU delegates are well aware that we are preparing to fall back on World Trade Organisation rules if negotiations fail?

**Mr Davis:** I think that that has been apparent for some time.

**Stephen Doughty** (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Secretary of State think that it furthers the cause of the Union to refer to the actions of the First Ministers of Wales and of Scotland as "foolish", as he did a moment ago? They are not foolish. When it comes to the single market and the customs union, they are absolutely right.

**Mr Davis:** Perhaps the hon. Gentleman wants to give advice to them about how they describe other people.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): One of the big prizes to be gained from being free of the European Union is enabling us, as a United Kingdom, to negotiate our own free trade deals across the world. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that nothing in these agreements will fetter our ability to do that?

**Mr Davis:** Yes.

**Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): Will the Secretary of State accept that leaving the customs union was not on the ballot paper on 23 June 2016?

**Mr Davis:** It was said earlier that nobody voted for that; nobody knew that that was a consequence. In fact, both sides in the referendum campaign made it plain that departure from the European Union meant departure from the customs union.

**Chris Philp** (Croydon South) (Con): Given that in European negotiations nothing is agreed until everything is agreed, does the Secretary of State agree that any concessions that we may now make are contingent on reaching a satisfactory end state free trade deal in future?

**Mr Davis:** Yes, my hon. Friend is right that in every European negotiation, that phrase, “nothing is agreed till everything is agreed” is a mantra, and it matters.

**Mike Gapes** (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Secretary of State tell us the difference between regulatory convergence and regulatory alignment?

**Mr Davis:** One is about harmonisation; one is not.

**Hon. Members:** What?

**Mr Speaker:** The Secretary of State said that one is about harmonisation and the other is not. Somebody suggested that he or she could not hear.

**Mike Wood** (Dudley South) (Con): Will the Secretary of State confirm that, in the negotiations, the Government still aim to conclude an agreement on an implementation phase as early as possible in the new year and that that agreement would similarly benefit the European Union?

**Mr Davis:** Yes, my hon. Friend is exactly right on both counts.

**Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Despite trying to cave in on every EU ask so far, the Government have not been able to conclude the preliminary negotiations in 18 months, yet we are to believe that they will conclude the substantive negotiations in 15 months. They have not been able to agree a good deal with the DUP, yet we are to believe that they will get a good deal from the 27 member states. It is obvious that they do not know a good deal from a bad deal and we are heading towards a no-deal scenario, so when will they start planning and present transparent information on the implications?

**Mr Davis:** The hon. Gentleman seems to be having an argument with himself in that question. It is seven months of negotiation so far and it will be concluded.

**Robert Halfon** (Harlow) (Con): Where are the Government, in terms of our post-club membership, on handing over a bill to the European Union? What is the amount that has been decided: £40 billion, £50 billion, more, or less?

**Mr Davis:** I am afraid that I will not be drawn on numbers at the moment, but we are pretty close to alignment on that.

**Karin Smyth** (Bristol South) (Lab): The Irish issue has never been about wandering cows or static cameras. It is about what is written behind me: we have “more in common”. The Irish are our closest neighbours and that is the basis of the Good Friday agreement, which I am disappointed that the Secretary of State did not mention in his opening remarks.

I repeat the same question that I have asked the Secretary of State, the Prime Minister and other Ministers six times since January. When will the Prime Minister show courtesy to the people of Northern Ireland and put a date in her diary at least to visit? If she had been there and listened and talked to people, she might not have ended up in the farce that was yesterday.

**Mr Davis:** Let us start with the hon. Lady’s opening comments. She said that I did not mention the Northern Ireland agreement. I will read the paragraph from my opening statement: “In particular, on the issue of Northern Ireland and Ireland, we have been clear that we want to protect all elements of the Good Friday/Belfast agreement to maintain the common travel area and the protected associated rights.” So much for that. *[Interruption.]*

**Michael Tomlinson** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): Despite the noise from many Opposition Members, is not it right that, at this stage of the talks, we are closer to an agreement than we have ever been, that that is a good thing—progress has been made—and that we should want to move on to talks about trade, which will be in our national interest and also in the EU’s interest?

**Mr Davis:** Yes, my hon. Friend is exactly right. That is pretty much what Jean-Claude Juncker said yesterday.

**Lady Hermon** (North Down) (Ind): Although I readily accept that there are 10 duly elected DUP Members in this House, nevertheless the DUP does not speak for or represent all the people of Northern Ireland. Will the Secretary of State therefore take a few moments to explain to the House, and particularly to all the people of Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom, the benefits for the whole country of the proposals the Prime Minister took to Brussels yesterday? I was profoundly embarrassed on her behalf.

**Mr Davis:** The aim for the whole country, as the hon. Lady says, is to maximise the trade benefits of being outside the customs union and the single market, while maintaining as much as possible the benefits we currently enjoy. That is the aim and that is what we are heading towards. I am pretty confident that that is what we will achieve.

**Catherine McKinnell** (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): It is increasingly clear to anyone watching that the Government are incapable of focusing on anything but Brexit, and even then they are making a complete Horlicks of it. What reassurance can the Secretary of State give that the Government are ready to put country before party, not just on the border issue but on our crucial trade negotiations with the EU and the rest of the world?

**Mr Davis:** Is Horlicks a parliamentary word, Mr Speaker? I might use it in future. I am the Brexit Secretary, so that is of course what I focus on most of the time. The simple fact is that the free trade agreement the hon. Lady talks about is precisely what we are aiming for. It is exactly where we and Brussels want to get to as quickly as possible.

**Mr Speaker:** The word is certainly not unparliamentary. It could be said to constitute a form of advertising, but it is not disorderly.

**Mr Davis:** Or a euphemism.

**Mr Speaker:** Or indeed a euphemism, as the right hon. Gentleman pertinently observes from a sedentary position.

**Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith) (Lab): When will we have a decision on the rights of EU nationals in the UK? The Secretary of State has yet again forgotten about them amidst the current chaos. More than 3 million people are in limbo with regard to their future rights, including many Irish citizens to whom we have a particular and long-standing duty.

**Mr Davis:** We recognise that duty. Indeed, I have said from the Dispatch Box that we view it as a moral imperative. We have made plain that we are doing everything possible to ensure that they carry on with their lives as they do now. We have made that plain and I really wish the hon. Gentleman would not frighten people by taking the opposite view.

**Stephen Timms** (East Ham) (Lab): The customs union was not on the ballot paper in the referendum. The Prime Minister was right yesterday to be willing to sign up to regulatory alignment between Northern Ireland and the EU. From the Secretary of State's answers today, I think he is suggesting that regulatory alignment should apply to the whole UK. Will he confirm that that is the point he is making, and will he explain how he sees that being delivered?

**Mr Davis:** Of course the referendum question was a short question, but it was a very long campaign. In that campaign, both sides made it plain that being outside the union meant being outside the customs union and outside the single market. Both sides made that plain and, if need be, I can point the right hon. Gentleman to the television programmes on which that was said. I have explained to the House that regulatory alignment is not harmonisation. It is a question of ensuring similar outcomes in areas where we want to have trade relationships and free and frictionless trade. Anything we agree for Northern Ireland in that respect, if we get our free trade area, will apply to the whole country.

**Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State confirm today that Brexit is the "easiest thing in human history"?

If it is, how is it that the Government are incapable of making it so?

**Mr Davis:** As the House can see, it is a complete cinch.

**Helen Goodman** (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Of course the British people voted to leave the European Union, but the common market is extremely popular with the public. We joined the customs union in 1973. Not only would staying in it help to resolve the Irish issues, it would boost British exporters across the country.

**Mr Davis:** I say to the hon. Lady that if it was still just the common market I suspect the vote might have been different.

**Wes Streeting** (Ilford North) (Lab): The Secretary of State says a vote to leave was a vote to leave the single market and the customs union, but that is not what leavers said. He says that the Conservative manifesto committed to pulling us out of both, but that is not what the majority of the public voted for. Is it not time to accept that he will have a majority in this House for a Brexit based on membership of the single market and the customs union, but that we will never give him a majority for a destructive hard Brexit?

**Mr Davis:** Nobody wants a majority for a destructive Brexit. We want a majority for a constructive Brexit.

**Drew Hendry** (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): The Prime Minister pushed the Secretary of State to one side to take personal responsibility for leading the negotiations yesterday. Why is she not here today to update the House? Did Arlene Foster say no?

**Mr Davis:** I do not know—they complain when I come and they complain when I do not come.

**Peter Kyle** (Hove) (Lab): The choices the Secretary of State has made have led him into a cul-de-sac where he now has to make a choice between honouring the spirit of the Good Friday agreement or pleasing the right wingers on his own side and the DUP. Which choice is he going to make?

**Mr Davis:** I have to make a choice that preserves everything in the Good Friday agreement and preserves the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

**Ian Paisley** (North Antrim) (DUP): May I thank the Secretary of State for proving yesterday that he can listen and that when he tells Europe no, he means no? We thank him on behalf of the Northern Ireland. Will he take the next available opportunity to speak to the Dublin Government and let them know that if they continue down this reckless path and do not get a trade deal with us, they will end up stumping up a further £1.5 billion in membership fees to the European Union? Better to move to a trade deal sooner rather than later.

**Mr Davis:** As I said, I am not going to go in for any tit-for-tat with other Governments. What I will say is that the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that the best outcome for Ireland is a free trade deal and a customs agreement. That will preserve by far and away the largest portion of its trade and protect its economy. That is what we are trying to do.

**Mr Adrian Bailey** (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): Yesterday's events were a shambles that must undermine our credibility in our negotiations with the EU. However, if there are two positives, they are, first, the Government's belated recognition of the importance of regulatory alignment with Europe in going forward; and secondly, the display of unity, with all parts of the United Kingdom demanding that what is good for one is good for all. Will the Secretary of State recognise the logic of that, change his position and negotiate on the basis of access to the single market and the customs union?

**Mr Davis:** First, the hon. Gentleman does not need to point out to a member of the Conservative and Unionist party the importance of the United Kingdom. Secondly, the Union does not require membership of the single market. As far as I remember, the United Kingdom existed well before we were a member of the single market.

**Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): Article 50 was designed to be harsh on the country that triggered it. Its author, Mr Giuliano Amato, a former Italian Prime Minister, described it as a

“safety valve that was there”

but should never be used. Are we not setting an unrealistic timescale and is it not time for us to seek to delay the implementation of leaving the European Union, so we can resolve issues around the customs union and the single market?

**Mr Davis:** I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman, and if I were to give him one piece of advice about negotiations, it would be not to give up before they start.

**Alex Sobel** (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): As Arlene Foster now seems to be running the rule over the Government’s EU exit negotiations, are we to expect that a Member from the DUP Bench will join the Secretary of State’s team in a confidence and supply arrangement?

**Mr Davis:** Perhaps the hon. Gentleman should address that question to those on the DUP Bench, not to those on the Government Benches.

**Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): The Secretary of State says he is serious about delivering the best for the United Kingdom and that he thinks Brexit

is a cinch. The EU Commissioners estimate that there are currently 142 areas of north-south co-operation that depend on EU law. Is the plan for Northern Ireland to remain aligned in each of those 142 areas, or more widely?

**Mr Davis:** First, the hon. Lady should not take sarcasm as fact. Secondly, the 142 areas do not all rely on EU law. I am afraid she is factually wrong.

**Paul Farrelly** (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): Presuming that the Government do finally make progress at some stage and we leave the single market, will the Secretary of State outline to the House what sort of agreement he expects to reach on UK access to the European market for services?

**Mr Davis:** First, we have made a lot of progress. The question this week is sufficient progress—on that, by the way, I am quoting Jean-Claude Juncker again. On the hon. Gentleman’s substantive question, we would expect the free trade agreement to include the services sector.

**Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) rightly raised the issue of citizens’ rights. Thousands of people in my constituency, and millions across Britain and the EU, are worried about their futures. Last year, we were told that this would be sorted out swiftly and that it would be simple, but it turns out that it is much more complicated. What is the position now in relation to the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice?

**Mr Davis:** That is one of the elements being discussed this week. The main aim is not around ECJ jurisdiction but to get the treatment of both British citizens and European citizens to be symmetrical—to be similar.



## Report on Recent Terrorist Attacks

1.40 pm

**The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd):** With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on David Anderson's report published today on recent terrorist attacks in London and Manchester. The attacks that took place this year shocked us all. Our thoughts remain with the victims of the attacks and all those affected by them. I am conscious that many will still be suffering acutely. However painful, it is essential that we examine what happened so that we can maximise the chances of preventing further attacks.

At the outset, I would like to remind hon. Members of the context. Andrew Parker, the director general of MI5, recently said that we were facing "a dramatic upshift" in terrorist threats. As the so-called caliphate in Syria and Iraq has weakened, so Daesh has increasingly turned its attention to encouraging people to launch attacks in their home countries. Indeed, there is more terrorist activity, partly inspired and also enabled by terrorist propaganda and instructional videos online. Plots are developing more quickly from radicalisation to attack and threats are becoming harder to detect, partly due to the challenge of accessing communications that are increasingly end-to-end encrypted.

MI5 and counter-terrorism policing are currently running well over 500 live operations—up one third since the beginning of the year—involving roughly 3,000 subjects of interest. In addition, over 20,000 further individuals—closed subjects of interest—have previously been investigated and may again pose a threat. I pay tribute to MI5 and the police, who work tirelessly to keep us safe. I can announce today that they have now disrupted 22 Islamist terrorist plots since the murder of Lee Rigby in May 2013, including nine since the Westminster attack this March.

I will now turn to the reviews. Counter-terrorism policing and MI5 have conducted a thorough review process, and I have received from them 10 highly classified documents that analyse the attacks and potential improvements to operational practices. In June, I commissioned David Anderson QC to provide independent assurance of, and external challenge to, the reviews. I am today placing a copy of his unclassified assessment of the reviews in the House of Commons Library. Copies will also be made available in the Vote Office.

David Anderson concludes that the reviews have been carried out in an "impressively thorough and fair" manner, and he endorses, so far as he feels qualified to do so, the conclusions and recommendations. Based on the MI5 and police reviews, David Anderson explains that, in the case of the Westminster attack, Khalid Masood was a closed subject of interest at the time of the attack and that neither MI5 nor the police had any reason to anticipate the attack. Regarding the Manchester Arena attack, Salman Abedi was also a closed subject of interest at the time of the attack and so not under active investigation. In early 2017, MI5 none the less received intelligence on him that was assessed as not being related to terrorism. In retrospect, the intelligence can be seen to have been highly relevant. It cannot be known whether, had an investigation been reopened at the time, Abedi's plans could have been stopped. MI5 assesses that it would have been unlikely.

Across the attacks, including Manchester Arena, David Anderson notes that MI5 and counter-terrorism policing got a great deal right. In relation to Manchester, however, he also commented:

"It is conceivable that the...attack...might have been averted had the cards fallen differently".

In the case of London Bridge, Khuram Butt was an active subject of interest who had been under investigation since mid-2015. A number of different investigative means were deployed against him, but they did not reveal his plans. His two conspirators had never been investigated by MI5 or counter-terrorism policing. In regards to Finsbury Park, neither MI5 nor the police had any intelligence about this attack.

Taken as a whole, MI5 and counter-terrorism policing conclude that they could not

"find any key moments where different decisions would have made it likely that they could have stopped any of the attacks".

None the less, they go on to make a total of 126 recommendations. The recommendations made in the MI5 and police operational review fall into four broad categories. First, there needs to be a concerted effort to enhance the ability of MI5 and the police to use data to detect activity of concern and to test new approaches in the acquisition, sharing and analysis of data. Secondly, MI5 should share its intelligence more widely, and work with partners such as local authorities on how best to manage the risk posed by closed subjects of interest in particular. We are considering undertaking multi-agency pilots in a number of areas, including Greater Manchester, and I have already started discussing how to take this forward with Andy Burnham. Thirdly, there should be a new approach to managing domestic extremism, particularly extreme right-wing groups, where their activity meets the definition of terrorism. Fourthly, a large number of detailed and technical changes could be made to improve existing operational counter-terrorism processes.

David Anderson ends his report with several reflections. The first is that intelligence is imperfect and that investigators are making tough judgments based on incomplete information. This unfortunately means that not every attack can be stopped. As we do not live in a surveillance state, it will always be a challenge to law enforcement to stop determined attackers getting through. Despite this, we should remember that most attacks continue to be successfully disrupted. Lastly, David Anderson concludes that even marginal improvements are capable of paying dividends that could tip the balance in favour of the security forces in future cases.

I have discussed these reviews at length with David Anderson, and separately with Andrew Parker and the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Cressida Dick, as well as their senior teams. I am grateful for all their work and am confident that they have asked the right questions and drawn the right conclusions. I am clear, as are they, that the implementation of the recommendations is crucial. There will be those who seek to apportion blame for the attacks. We should be united in our clarity that it lies squarely with those whose cowardly acts killed 36 innocent people this year and with those who encouraged them. At the same time, we must learn all that we can from these attacks and make sure that our overall counter-terrorism response is equal to the shift we have seen in the threat.

[Amber Rudd]

I want to turn briefly now to the next steps. Bringing those responsible to justice is our priority. We must not do anything that jeopardises criminal prosecutions being pursued in relation to Manchester and Finsbury Park. The coroners' investigations will probe the matter further and independently assess the circumstances of the deaths. Inquests have already been opened into the attacks and suspended where criminal investigations are continuing. It is right that those inquests proceed wherever they can. If the coroners consider that they cannot fully deal with the relevant issues, that is the point to decide whether an inquiry is needed. We are ruling nothing out.

I welcome the Intelligence and Security Committee's intention to make these attacks its top priority, and I have already discussed this with my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve). As I have already outlined, implementation of the recommendations will be crucial. I have asked David Anderson to provide an independent stock-take of progress in a year's time. Linked to implementation, however, are resources. We will shortly be announcing the budgets for policing for 2018-19, and I am clear that we must ensure that counter-terrorism policing has the resources needed to deal with the threats we face.

These recommendations need to fit into the broader Government review of our counter-terrorism strategy. That review reaches well beyond MI5 and counter-terrorism policing to look at the whole of government response and at how we can work better with communities, the private sector and international partners. I would like to conclude by thanking David Anderson for his independent assurance of these reviews, and I again pay tribute to the excellent work of the police and MI5. I end as I started. The thoughts of everyone in this House and the other place are with the victims, their families and all those affected by the attacks. I commend this statement to the House.

1.50 pm

**Ms Diane Abbott** (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for prior sight of both the report and her statement. It was sad to read the report and to reimagine, and almost relive, the terrible terrorist incidents that we have seen this year, but it must be infinitely sad for the relatives of the victims and for the survivors. As the Home Secretary has said, the thoughts of everyone in the House are with those relatives and survivors today.

The report is by way of a quality assurance of a series of internal reviews. As David Anderson himself points out,

"internal processes have potential downsides: complacency, the concealment of unpalatable facts and slowness to see the need for change."

It is important that David Anderson endorses, as far as he feels qualified to do so, the conclusions and recommendations of the internal reviews. As the Home Secretary observed, David Anderson notes that MI5 and counter-terrorism policing got a great deal right in relation to the attacks as a whole. However, he also says that

"the Manchester attack in particular might have been averted had the cards fallen differently".

Labour Members believe that that is a telling phrase.

As the Home Secretary noted, Salman Abedi was a closed subject of interest and was not under active investigation, but MI5 came by intelligence in the months before the attack which—as David Anderson puts it—had its true significance been properly understood, would have caused an investigation into him to be reopened. He was identified as one of a small number of closed subjects of interest who merited further consideration, but, sadly, the meeting to discuss that was scheduled for 31 May, and the attack on the Manchester Arena took place on 22 May.

One of the most important recommendations in the report is the need for better sharing of intelligence. Will the Home Secretary say more about the multi-agency pilots, and about where her discussions with my colleague Andy Burnham, the former Member of Parliament for Leigh and the Mayor of Manchester, are going? I think that he would like to know that as well.

The Home Secretary concedes that linked to the implementation of review recommendations are resources. As we say on this side of the House, you cannot keep people safe on the cheap. The Home Secretary will shortly be announcing the budgets for policing in 2017-18. She talks about ensuring that those involved in counter-terrorism policing have the resources that they need, but David Anderson comments that

"the indicative profile of their grant allocation over the next three years sees a reduction of 7.2% in their budgets."

Does the Home Secretary accept that comment, and does she agree with David Anderson's remarks about the reliance of MI5 and counter-terrorism agencies on community policing? Does she accept that proper funding for community policing is at least as important as resources for counter-terrorism proper?

Community policing is the frontline of the community's defence against terror. I thank MI5 and the counter-terrorism agencies for their great work on these matters and convey to them the respect in which they are held by Labour Members, but I must repeat that this comes down to resources, not just for counter-terrorism as such but for community policing.

**Amber Rudd:** I thank the right hon. Lady for her questions. Let me say in response to her point about the run-up to the decision making on the Manchester attack that David Anderson also said that the decision made by MI5 at the different points during the run-up to that attack was "understandable", based on the volume of intelligence that was coming through and the operational decisions that were made.

The right hon. Lady asked about the better sharing of data. There is already substantial sharing of data, but the report signals that more could be done. Learning from the actual attacks and from the attacks that have been foiled gives a particular momentum to that initiative. She also asked about the multi-agency pilots. For some years, people have been saying that we need to ensure that more information about closed subjects of interest, in particular, flows across local authority areas, and we are now addressing that head-on. Of course policing, particularly community policing, plays a key role, but there will also be interaction with health and education authorities. We want to work on pilots that address the multi-agency approach, so that we can collect information in a way that will not only support communities, but ensure that we have more information on the closed subjects of interest.

I would not want the right hon. Lady to imply that the report contains any suggestion that the attacks would not have taken place if there had been more resources. It is fine to ask about more resources, and I have acknowledged that more will be needed, but I should point out that in 2015 the Government recognised the need for more resources, and increased their investment in the counter-terrorism budgets from £11.7 billion to £15.1 billion in 2015-20 to ensure that this country, through this Government, is always properly resourced in that regard.

**Mr Dominic Grieve** (Beaconsfield) (Con): It is a truism, but one that I think must sometimes be remembered, that we are in no position to guarantee 100% safety from terrorism for the population of this country. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary may agree with me that what we must strive to do is run a system of counter-terrorism and intelligence that is as efficient and effective as is humanly possible, so that we can provide as much protection as possible against the type of dreadful attack that we have seen in past months.

In that context, does my right hon. Friend agree that what appears to shine through the Anderson report is first that there is a high level of efficiency, which he was able to recognise, and secondly that there is a need for change in the way in which the work of the counter-terrorism agencies and MI5 is linked in the sharing of intelligence? The main focus of the Intelligence and Security Committee, of which I am Chairman, might most profitably be directed towards ensuring that that happens.

I assure my right hon. Friend that the Committee will undoubtedly review what has been done in considering what lessons are to be learnt. However, rather than just trying to reinvent the wheel in respect of what Mr Anderson has done, we will endeavour to establish whether we can maximise the efficiency of both services.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I indulged the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) with some latitude on account of both his senior position in the House and the fact that the statement had referred to him. May I very politely suggest to Members that they should always seek to imitate the eloquence of the right hon. and learned Gentleman, but they need feel no obligation to match his length?

**Amber Rudd:** I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for his approach. We should be very grateful for his review of the implementation phase that will now take place. He is absolutely right to say that ensuring that the 126 recommendations are implemented during the next year is critical to the benefits that we can secure and the learning that we have as a result of the review. As David Anderson says in his report, making those changes could make a really significant difference in the future, potentially stopping attacks, but, as he also says, not necessarily stopping every attack.

**Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I thank the Home Secretary for giving me advance sight of her statement, and I join her in paying tribute to our police and security services, and in remembering the

dead, the injured, their loved ones and all those affected by these terrible attacks. I commend David Anderson for his usual thorough and excellent work, and I welcome his recommendations and reflections, which will be studied in detail by my colleagues in the Scottish Government.

The Home Secretary has spoken of next steps. I suggest to her that international co-operation is vital in the fight against terrorism. As the House has often heard, organised crime and terrorism do not respect borders, and it is essential that our police and security services can access the information systems, support and technical expertise that are available through Europol, not only to make people in the UK safe but to contribute to making Europe safer. Unfortunately, at the security conference in Berlin last week, Michel Barnier said that it would not be possible for the United Kingdom to remain a member of Europol after Brexit. In the light of today's report and the unprecedented threat that we face from terrorism, if European Court of Justice jurisdiction has to be accepted in order to maintain our membership of Europol and access to our current levels of data sharing, surely the matter of security should be our first priority, rather than a red line over European Court of Justice jurisdiction.

**Amber Rudd:** The hon. and learned Lady makes an important point about the international nature of these matters. We have seen some of the examples that David Anderson reviewed, and international travel was one of the elements that led up to these attacks. It is incredibly important that we continue to have access to the systems that keep our people, and our people in Europe, safe. The best way to do that is to continue to have the sort of close relationship that we have with Europol and with other instruments such as the second generation Schengen information system—SIS II—and the European arrest warrant. That is why we have proposed a third-party treaty, through which we hope we can dock into the European Union and continue to work with EU countries to ensure that we keep their people and our people safe. I am hopeful that we will be able to arrive at such an agreement. Early indications from my conversations with other Home Secretaries across Europe are that we can do that, and I would say respectfully to Monsieur Barnier that I disagree with his interpretation that the UK is stepping away from keeping Europe safe. We remain just as committed to ensuring that we keep Europe safe, and that reflects the view of the Home Office and of the Government.

**Mr Keith Simpson** (Broadland) (Con): I am also a member of the Intelligence and Security Committee. I should like to ask the Home Secretary two questions. First, resources are obviously crucial, but this is also a matter of how our intelligence agencies are able to cope with the changing threat. Does she think that the agencies are capable of making that move? Secondly, we have had recommendations in the past, but they have not been implemented. How is she going to make certain that the recommendations in the Anderson report are implemented?

**Amber Rudd:** My right hon. Friend raises two important points. Yes, the intelligence agencies are capable of making those changes. They have done a thorough review themselves and, as David Anderson has said,

[Amber Rudd]

they have released information to him and been candid in their approach. They have shown themselves to be willing to embark on the changes that are needed. We all want to ensure that the recommendations are implemented, and I am pleased to say that David Anderson has agreed to participate in that. We will ensure that the review continues with external assurance from him. I also hope that my right hon. Friend's Committee will play a role in ensuring that that implementation takes place.

**Yvette Cooper** (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I join the Home Secretary in condemning the terrorists who commit these vile attacks, and in extending our thoughts to the families affected. I also pay tribute to the work of MI5 and the police. They have very difficult judgments to make, and they do that with great integrity and expertise. I welcome their willingness to reflect on where there might have been an operational response that needed to change or to be improved, and we have to enable them to do that. I have already raised with the Home Secretary my concern about whether Salman Abedi should have been on watch lists. Can she tell me now, in the light of this report, what action she will take to ensure better co-operation between MI5 and the Border Force in all cases where suspects should be on watch lists?

**Amber Rudd:** I thank the right hon. Lady for her question. She is right to say that the security services have taken an unflinching look internally to see what they could do better, and I know that we all welcome that. This is an area that is covered in the report, and we must do better. We must have better alert systems relating to people coming and going, and ports alerts will be one area in which we will see a marked change.

**Lucy Frazer** (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): The shadow Secretary of State referred to resources, but that involves not only money but powers. I had the privilege of sitting on the Investigatory Powers Bill Committee. Does the Secretary of State think that the powers in that legislation have helped the security services to thwart the 22 attacks that she identified?

**Amber Rudd:** I thank my hon. and learned Friend for drawing attention to the important assistance that we can give to the security services and the police to enable them to keep us safe. She is right to say that the Investigatory Powers Act 2016 is crucial in that regard. We are also looking ahead to a new counter-terrorism Bill next year, to ensure that we can have additional, carefully thought-out powers to keep people safe, and I hope that the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) and her team will consider supporting that legislation, because keeping people safe should be our priority.

**Sir Edward Davey** (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I strongly agree with the Home Secretary that all our thoughts are with those affected by and suffering from these vile crimes. In September, the Met Police Commissioner, Cressida Dick, said that counter-terrorism work

“puts a strain not just on counter-terror police but neighbourhood officers and all our officers and staff”.

Does the Home Secretary agree with the commissioner?

**Amber Rudd:** I bow to no one in the admiration I have for the work of the police in supporting counter-terrorism policing and the security services. Their work is a critical part of defending this country and dealing with counter-terrorism, and we recognise that the increase in the number of threats puts additional strain on them as well.

**Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): I welcome the Home Secretary's statement, and particularly her reference to the evolving threat that might emerge as the caliphate that Daesh declared collapses. What work is she planning to do with our “Five Eyes” partners at international level to tackle that emerging threat?

**Amber Rudd:** That is an important point. A lot of the radicalisation of those people takes place online, which means that we need to take an international approach to ensure that more of that information is taken down, to stop people becoming radicalised. The “Five Eyes” have been leading on this, and the UK's relationship with the US, in particular, has led to the first global internet forum for counter-terrorism being set up in the summer of last year. This is leading the way in ensuring that the sort of information we all want to see taken down is indeed removed.

**David Hanson** (Delyn) (Lab): The Home Secretary has rightly said that there has been an increase in attacks by right-wing extremists over the past 12 months. She said in her statement that she plans a new approach to domestic extremism, and I am sure that the Intelligence and Security Committee, on which I also sit, will look at that. Will she give us an indication today of how that new approach will manifest itself?

**Amber Rudd:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question, and I know that he does great work on the ISC, which will provide important oversight of this report. One of its recommendations is that MI5 should oversee and engage with extreme right-wing terrorism in the same way that it does with international terrorism. That is the recommendation, and there are some clear implementations that go alongside it. We will be following that up, with his Committee and with the security services, to ensure that that takes place.

**Rebecca Pow** (Taunton Deane) (Con): I, too, welcome today's statement. One of its main planks relates to data, and that involves not only sharing data but checking for concerning activity. Will the Home Secretary tell us whether she is having talks with internet companies about their platforms being used for terrorist purposes?

**Amber Rudd:** This has come up on a number of occasions before. All of us in the House want the internet companies to do more to take down potentially radicalising material and to engage more with the security services by telling us when people are looking at material or are buying things that could help to make bombs. There is a lot more we can do with these companies, and I hope that they will engage with us to ensure we deliver on that.

**Tony Lloyd** (Rochdale) (Lab): What more can we insist that the social media providers do, and what more do we have to do internationally? If we get this partnership

right, it will help greatly in defeating the terrorists. If we do not get it right, frankly, the social media providers will be negligent in their responsibilities and will ultimately be responsible for terrorist attacks and potential deaths.

**Amber Rudd:** That is a good point, which Governments are trying to make constantly to the social media companies. I am encouraged by the work so far, but in no way complacent. Today, Google announced it will be putting in additional investment, and many of the larger companies have said they are beginning to recruit many more people—hundreds, sometimes thousands. Critically, they are investing in machine-learning, so that the videos we all hate and do not want—the information that radicalises some young people—do not have to be seen in order to be taken down. We want the social media companies to invest in machine-learning and artificial intelligence so that this material can be taken down before it is seen.

**Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con):** I thank the Home Secretary for her statement. Will she update the House on the Government's work to combat the terrorist threat from extreme right-wing groups?

**Amber Rudd:** We want to stop all sorts of terrorism, including extreme right-wing terrorism. That is why I was the first Home Secretary to ban an extreme right-wing group last year, National Action, and I will make sure that we always proscribe groups where we have due cause to do so.

**Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab):** The head of the German intelligence agency this week raised his concerns about those returning from Syria as the Daesh heartland is degraded. How confident is the Home Secretary that the important intelligence co-operation with Germany and our other European partners will continue into the future?

**Amber Rudd:** We share the concerns of most of my opposite numbers throughout Europe about returning foreign fighters. We are vigilant in making sure that, where we know they are coming back or have information on them, we track them, restrict them, monitor them if we can and stop them if we can, and we work very well across Europe with other partners to share information on that. I should also point out that on the intelligence side, a lot of the information shared is outside the EU, through the Counter Terrorism Group.

**Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con):** It is right that the Government have increased funding for GCHQ, the Security Service and the Secret Intelligence Service. The Home Secretary mentioned announcing new police budgets soon. What can the Government do to encourage chief constables, city mayors, and police and crime commissioners in the West Mercia, West Midlands and Greater Manchester regions and elsewhere to ensure that those police budgets are targeted in such a way that they support regional and smaller Special Branch units, not just the national agencies?

**Amber Rudd:** My hon. Friend is right: it is important not to lose sight of the local support and local impact that is needed. From 2015, we set up the counter-terrorism units, which are units that are based locally and have

local information available to them and the sort of local community-based engagement that I know all Members expect.

**Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab):** The Home Secretary and shadow Home Secretary are right that this House stands firmly in opposition to the terrorism that scarred Manchester and London earlier this year. In a welcome move, the Home Secretary has made resources available for the Greater Manchester Police to deal with the attack on Manchester Arena; will she now do the same for the Metropolitan police, because they might otherwise face a bill of up to £32 million, and that will mean fewer police officers going forward?

**Amber Rudd:** My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister was clear that we would make those resources available to Manchester, and we have done that. We will look carefully at the proposal from the Mayor of London, to see how we can assist. We will have to see the evidence first, but are likely to give the same sort of support.

**Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con):** Does my right hon. Friend agree that our security services are second to none in being proactive through the use of initiatives such as Prevent, without which we would probably be far worse off?

**Amber Rudd:** That is an interesting point, and we do need to safeguard individuals who might become victims of radicalisation. The Prevent programme strives to do exactly that, and between 2015 and 2016 has diverted over 300 people through the Channel programme, who might otherwise have sought to do us harm on the streets.

**Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op):** May I add my tribute to that of the Home Secretary, not least given the experiences in my constituency with Islamist and far-right extremism? As the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), said, concerns have been raised about individuals travelling in and out in the cases of both Salman Abedi and one of the alleged London Bridge attackers, who was apparently detained by the Italian authorities in Bologna, and that was reported to the UK. Will the Home Secretary say a little more about her plans to strengthen border checks and information sharing, particularly on exit, as well as on entry?

**Amber Rudd:** The hon. Gentleman is right: in those two attacks there is evidence of the attackers moving around, and, as is highlighted in the report, we need to do better at recording and communicating that information. It is crucial that that recommendation is implemented. The recommendation also dovetails with the general recommendation of better use of data. I hope that the ability to access such information more effectively and efficiently will prove to be one of the incremental improvements that will help to keep us safe.

**Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con):** My right hon. Friend's Department will have received a letter from west midlands mayor Andy Street on our police funding, which I hope she will consider appropriately. Will she

[Mike Wood]

also ensure that local police forces, including mine in the west midlands, have all the resources they need to do their important counter-terrorism work?

**Amber Rudd:** Police budgets for 2018-19 will be set shortly, before Christmas. I reassure my hon. Friend that we will always bear in mind police forces' needs in dealing with counter-terrorism.

**Lucy Powell** (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): I echo the tributes paid to the police and security services and the comprehensive report brought before the House today. I agree with the Home Secretary that data sharing is key. When information about Salman Abedi was flagged in early 2017, that was not shared with local police services. If it had been flagged with those on the ground, who perhaps had the fuller view of what was going on in the community, further action could perhaps have been taken.

On resources, I echo what has been said: the frontline of counter-terrorism is community police, and also youth services, community groups, charities and others who operate on the frontline. We need a holistic view of that.

On the costs incurred, in Greater Manchester in particular, I thank the Home Secretary for making sure that the policing budget will be fully reimbursed, and thank her colleague, the hon. Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy), for working with me to make sure that was the case. Can we make sure that we never have to ask again, and that it will from now on just be something that is done automatically?

**Amber Rudd:** I agree with much of what the hon. Lady said, but would point out that it is not just about policing, important though policing and community policing are; it is about the wider community as well, which is why we are approaching this differently and saying that we want to have a multiagency approach. We will be trialling that—including in Manchester, we hope—so that we can work out how best to yield the information in a supportive, positive way, so that we have better ears and eyes on the ground. I hope the hon. Lady will engage with us positively to support that.

**Mims Davies** (Eastleigh) (Con): Hampshire police recently undertook anti-terrorism training at its headquarters in Hamble in my constituency. It was absolutely fascinating and deeply reassuring for my constituents, and it highlighted the cross-border work with Thames Valley police following what happened in London and Manchester. Will the Home Secretary also consider the marine threat around the Solent and the risk of threat coming over the water, ensuring that that is highlighted in any approach that she takes to counter-terrorism?

**Amber Rudd:** My hon. Friend raises an important point. It is reassuring to hear of her positive experience of the training, but we are of course looking at what more we can do in the marine environment. We work closely with Border Force to ensure that we always stay on top of evolving crime, and I hope that we can continue to make progress there, as we do in other areas.

**Lady Hermon** (North Down) (Ind): The Home Secretary will be well aware of the serious continuing threat from dissident republicans in Northern Ireland. We also have no Assembly and no Justice Minister. When she reviews the finances of the police forces that have to tackle terrorism, I urge the Home Secretary, for whom I have enormous regard, to give the Police Service of Northern Ireland additional funding for its counter-terrorism role. The other budgets are controlled by the Assembly, but PSNI should have further funding for that role.

**Amber Rudd:** The hon. Lady makes such an important point. I am of course aware of the ongoing terrorist attacks, which we take as seriously as any terrorism throughout the country. I also take seriously her point about ensuring that there is sufficient funding.

**Heidi Alexander** (Lewisham East) (Lab): The Home Secretary talked about the process that authorities follow when new intelligence becomes available about closed subjects of interest. Will she say what, if any, changes have been made to that process over the past six months?

**Amber Rudd:** I reassure the hon. Lady that this is not a case of stopping or pausing, doing a review and making changes. As is shown in David Anderson's report, a copy of which I have just put in the Library, MI5 has already started to make many changes, one of which relates to ports alerts, as mentioned by several hon. Members today. We are already ensuring that action is being taken to make improvements, as set out in the report.

**John Woodcock** (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): With British combatants already arriving back on these shores after having fought for Daesh in Iraq and Syria, will the Home Secretary fast-track the new terrorism Bill? Will she consider including a reversal of this Government's decision to permanently lower the limit on pre-charge detention to 14 days? The whole House will agree with the Government's position that such people should face trial, but is there not a significant danger that many will be allowed to roam free in their communities while the Government and law enforcement agencies build a case against them?

**Amber Rudd:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his support for the counter-terrorism Bill. We have already announced several changes that we will be bringing forward in that legislation to ensure, for example, that we have tougher sentencing so that convicted terrorists stay away for longer and that not just streaming, but downloading radicalisation videos online will also be a criminal offence. The hon. Gentleman's last point is interesting, and I will have to come back to him on that, but I welcome his support for a CT Bill, because I am not convinced that I will get it from the entire Opposition. I will single him out as someone who supports us.

**Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): The Home Secretary has to accept that £1 billion-worth of cuts to the Metropolitan police has had an impact on counter-terrorism. She said that she intends to increase funding for counter-terrorism, but will she guarantee that that will not come at the expense of essential community policing?

**Amber Rudd:** I caution the hon. Gentleman on suggesting that resources are in any way to blame for the attacks this year—the ones that were foiled and the ones that were not. If he takes a careful look at the document—it has only just been placed in the Library, so I suspect he has not seen it yet—he will see clear recommendations and issues that are not specific to resources. We recognise that there has been an upshift, as David Anderson called it, or change in the number of attacks that we are seeing in this country, and that will require not only a change in powers—the CT Bill that we have proposed—but potential additional resources.

**Mike Kane** (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): Every Greater Manchester MP, Mayor Andy Burnham and Richard Leese, the leader of the city council, have signed a joint letter to the Chairman of the Intelligence and Security Committee expressing our concern that Salman Abedi's name was shared with our colleagues in America and subsequently leaked, placing Chief Constable Ian Hopkins and the investigation in an intolerable situation. Does the Home Secretary share our deep concern about that?

**Amber Rudd:** Many of us—not least my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister—raised that issue with our opposite numbers, and such leaks are completely unwelcome and inappropriate. However, we must not underestimate our incredibly important close relationship with the US on intelligence sharing and support, and we must be cautious of any eventuality that might endanger that relationship. That sort of close intelligence sharing saves lives in this country.

**Peter Grant** (Glenrothes) (SNP): Every day, we are bombarded with a torrent of hate-filled, intolerant and sometimes downright violent language from the pages of mainstream newspapers and websites and elsewhere. Does the Home Secretary agree that that in itself is a form of non-violent extremism? Does she believe that we have the right balance between respecting free speech and freedom of expression and preventing those freedoms from being abused in a way that inevitably incites others to convert violent words into violent actions?

**Amber Rudd:** Whether we have the right balance is a very big question indeed. From a legislative point of view, we will always look carefully at what is inspiring people to take violent action and, where we can, we will take action against it, such as proscribing National Action. It is critical that we remember the victims and their families, who are the ones who suffer following attacks, and we will take whatever action we can to ensure that they are well supported, which they always will be under this Government.

## Point of Order

2.27 pm

**Nia Griffith** (Llanelli) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am sure that you are aware of the worrying reports that the Chancellor has proposed cutting the Army down to just 50,000 personnel—a clear breach of the Government's commitment to maintain the size of the armed forces. The decision will be taken as part of the national security capability review, which is expected to report early in the new year. If the Secretary of State for Defence can find the time to pose for photographs with dogs, I hope that he might find time to come to the House before a final decision is made. Madam Deputy Speaker, have you had any indication from the Government that the Defence Secretary intends to come to the House to make a statement on the matter?

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** I thank the hon. Lady for giving me notice that she intended to raise this matter. There has been no indication from the Government that they wish to make a statement at this point but, as she says, a review is ongoing, and I am sure that there will be a statement once the review has concluded. I am also sure that she will use every opportunity between now and then to impress upon on the Defence Secretary how important it is that a statement is made to the House.

## Service Animals (Offences)

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

2.28 pm

**Sir Oliver Heald** (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make it an offence to attack service animals, including police dogs and horses; to make certain offences aggravated when perpetrated against such animals; and for connected purposes.

I am asking for leave to bring in a Bill containing what is known as Finn's law, which arises from the experience of police dog Finn and his handler, my constituent Police Constable Dave Wardell from Buntingford. When on duty in the neighbouring town of Stevenage, PC Wardell and Finn were called to an incident involving a robbery suspect. He started to run and they followed. Eventually, the suspect hid in a garden and Finn was searching for him when a garden light came on and lit him up. PC Wardell shouted for him to stop, but the male jumped up a fence and, at this, Finn took hold of his lower leg and restrained him.

As PC Wardell looked down, he saw the man lunge forward towards Finn's chest with a hunting knife with a blade about ten inches long. Finn was stabbed in the chest with the full length. The dog stayed to protect his handler, and PC Wardell remonstrated with the man, who replied, "What do you expect?" The man then lunged forward with the knife, this time not towards Finn but up towards the officer's head. The officer did not have time to react but Finn did, lifting his head and putting himself between his handler and the knife. Due to Finn's actions, the knife sliced open Finn's head and cut PC Wardell's hand. The officer believes that, by this action, Finn saved his life.

Other officers arrived, and the offender was taken under police control. Finn was badly injured and bleeding, and he was immediately taken in the dog van on blue lights first to a local vet and then to a specialist in chest injuries. Despite everything that was going on, and despite all the pain he was in, Finn started tending to the officer's wound by licking it. Finn was struggling to breathe, his lungs punctured in four places. He later underwent four hours of surgery.

The incident happened in the early hours of Wednesday 5 October 2016. Finn made a remarkable recovery, with the vet commenting on his bravery and spirit. Three days later, the vet was able to remove the drains from Finn's chest before sending him home to recover. PC Wardell slept downstairs at home with Finn for the next four weeks.

From being close to death, Finn started back training after eight weeks and, by week 11, Finn and PC Wardell were ready to start their first shift. They went back to work on 22 December 2016 for a night shift. On his very first job, Finn put his nose to the ground and found the scent of a fleeing suspect. He tracked until he found the suspect hiding, perhaps appropriately, in a stable block—it was a starry night three days before Christmas.

I have met Finn, and he is an amazing dog. Recently retired, he is one of the most successful dogs Hertfordshire police has ever had. PC Wardell feels privileged to have been his partner for seven years. Finn is action animal of the year. Finn's story, his bravery and his desire to

work are not unusual. There are 1,200 police dogs in the UK. They get kicked, punched and strangled, but rarely is a charge brought because of a gap in the law. It is difficult to shoehorn such criminal circumstances into the available offences.

When it came to charging the offender in Finn's case, there was an offence of assault occasioning actual bodily harm of the officer, but there were only two potential charges for the injuries to Finn himself: causing unnecessary suffering to an animal, contrary to section 4 of the Animal Welfare Act 2006; or a charge under section 1 of the Criminal Damage Act 1971. Neither offence really captures the seriousness of an attack on a service animal, where the animal is part of a law enforcement team acting in accordance with duty and the attack aims to prevent the apprehension of a suspect, to evade the law or to remove protection from a police officer in dangerous circumstances.

Equally, where an animal is providing a vital service to a person with a disability, the seriousness of an attack is not simply in the damage to the animal but in the effect it has on the person reliant on the animal's service. To accept such attacks on animals as just damage to property is distasteful.

My hon. Friend the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service, who is in his place, said in correspondence with me that it is

"unpalatable to think of police animals as 'equipment', as inferred in a charge of criminal damage".

He promised that the Home Office will continue to work with the police on this issue. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has said that he will investigate what more might be done.

There are legal problems with the current offences. For offences under section 4 of the Animal Welfare Act there is a defence of acting in response to a fear of harm from an animal. Of course, there is no recognition in the offence of the role of a service animal. The mental element of offences under section 1 of the Criminal Damage Act—what is the offender's intent?—has also posed difficulties. The courts have also found difficulty in quantifying damage to animals. Normally with criminal damage it is a question of the financial value of the damage that has been done, but a seven or eight-year-old police dog is not that valuable in monetary terms. Retired police dog Finn's injuries could not have been more serious but, when it came to sentencing, the offender was sent to custody for the offence of assault occasioning actual bodily harm—the court felt that Finn's injuries were insufficiently serious to warrant a separate penalty.

There are new sentencing guidelines, but they do not resolve the problems of establishing a primary offence and quantifying the damage. Finn's case suggests that the courts struggle with that. My proposal is to follow countries such as Canada, where the Justice for Animals in Service Act is now in force.

The Bill I am proposing would create a clear offence of attacking a service animal, triable either way, with appropriate sentences and a maximum of five years' imprisonment on conviction by a Crown court. The term "service animals" provides sufficient scope to include not only animals in public service, such as police dogs and horses, but guide dogs and assistance dogs that help those with disabilities.



We are lucky in Britain to have fantastic and brave service animals like Finn, but there is a gap in the law. These animals should not be treated as equipment, but as what they really are: key members of the law enforcement team and providers of essential services. It is time for Finn's law.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Ordered,*

That Sir Oliver Heald, Sir Roger Gale, Sir Paul Beresford, David Hanson, John Spellar, Mr Ben Bradshaw, Neil Parish, Gareth Thomas, Jack Lopresti, Maggie Throup, Mr Nigel Evans and Jim Fitzpatrick, present the Bill.

Sir Oliver Heald accordingly presented the Bill.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 February 2018, and to be printed (Bill 138).*

## Opposition Day

[6TH ALLOTTED DAY]

### Universal Credit Project Assessment Reviews

2.38 pm

**Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I beg to move,

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, That she will be graciously pleased to give directions that the five project assessment reviews, carried out into universal credit between 2012 and 2015 by the Government's Major Projects Authority now known as the Infrastructure and Projects Authority, and any subsequent project assessment reviews carried out into universal credit by the Infrastructure and Projects Authority between 1 January 2016 and 30 November 2017 that have been provided to Her Majesty's Ministers at the Department for Work and Pensions, be provided by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to the Work and Pensions Committee.

The purpose of today's debate on universal credit, the fourth in nearly eight weeks, is to seek the release of the project assessment review reports on universal credit to enable this House to scrutinise the Government's flagship social security programme.

**Lucy Frazer** (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): The hon. Lady has just said that this is the fourth debate in eight weeks. Can she clarify whether she asked for the documents in any of those four debates, or indeed on any other occasion in this House? *[Interruption.]*

**Debbie Abrahams:** As some of my colleagues are saying, we are asking for the documents now. We are pleased the Government finally acknowledged that their universal credit programme is not fit for purpose, and now we need to understand the extent to which it is not fit for purpose through the publication of these reports.

I wish to start by giving some context to today's debate and then set out why it is so important that we have access to these project assessment reviews. For many months now, Labour has been calling on the Government to pause and fix universal credit. This is a direct response to the mounting evidence that the full service programme is driving hardship in the areas where it has been rolled out. I am sure hon. Members from across the House will now be aware of the figures, but the realities of the misery being caused by this programme bear repeating: half of those in rent arrears under UC report that their arrears started after they made their claim; 79% of those in debt are recognised as having priority debts by Citizens Advice, putting them at higher risk of bailiffs and evictions; and two in five have no money to pay creditors at the end of the month.

**Ms Karen Buck** (Westminster North) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend aware of research published today by the Residential Landlords Association on this point, which found that 73% of landlords remain reluctant to let properties to people on UC? That is vital context. We need to understand what the Government know about the pressure on landlords in the context of UC.

**Debbie Abrahams:** Absolutely. My hon. Friend makes such a pertinent point. I was going on to say that demand for emergency food parcels in areas where

[Debbie Abrahams]

UC has been rolled out is up 30%. Disabled people, single parents and families with children have been particularly affected. Initially, the Government's impact assessments said that UC would reduce child poverty by 350,000, but then it was to be by 150,000. Now, the Child Poverty Action Group has estimated that by 2022 an additional 1 million children will have been pushed into poverty by as a direct result of cuts to UC. We have identified three drivers for these widespread problems: policy design issues; implementation flaws; and funding cuts.

As I have mentioned, at the recent Budget the Chancellor was forced to respond to Labour's concerns about UC, as well as concerns from across the House—I acknowledge everybody's work on this. As I said in my response to the Secretary of State's statement on this, the measures in the Budget are welcome, not least in finally acknowledging that UC was not fit for purpose. But they are not nearly urgent enough, as they do not come into effect until next year; they do not address key issues, such as the assessment and payment periods or the single household payment; and fundamentally they do not redress the cuts and restore work incentives. Only £1 in every £10 that has been cut has been restored. Though he refused to pause the programme, as we had demanded, the roll-out of UC has been slowed considerably, meaning that the roll-out to all jobcentres will now not be completed until December 2018.

That brings us to the project assessment review reports and today's motion. Five reviews on UC were carried out by the then Major Projects Authority between 2012 and 2015. As Members know, such reviews are independent ones that provide assurance to major projects. They contain in-depth analysis of the implementation of the project, including detailed assessment of the risks faced and the progress that has been achieved against the Government's objective: to deliver their flagship social security programme, universal credit. Although these review reports have never been made public, the National Audit Office's report on UC in 2013 stated that

"the Major Projects Authority's project assessment review expressed serious concerns about the Department having no detailed 'blueprint' and transition plan for Universal Credit. In response to these concerns, the head of the Major Projects Authority was asked to conduct a 13-week 'reset' between February and May 2013"

In other words, it was clear that all was not well even then. The announcement of a "reset" was buried in the MPA annual report of that year, accompanied by a single sentence of explanation. This is how UC has limped on ever since.

To try to uncover the extent of the issues, freedom of information requests were submitted to the Government to access these project assessment reviews; but they were refused. The doughty campaigners appealed to the Information Commissioner, and on 30 August this year, the Information Commissioner's Office ruled that this information must be disclosed by the Department in full, with the exception of the names of the civil servants named in the reports. The ICO's judgment is important and worth reflecting on here.

**Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op):** My local authority, Wigan Council, was part of the pilot for UC, which subsequently caused rent arrears, payment delays and

increasing financial pressures on the local authority. Does my hon. Friend agree that if these project assessment reviews had been released when the Information Commissioner ruled, the Government could have paused the flawed UC system, thus preventing undue hardship for my constituents?

**Debbie Abrahams:** Absolutely. My hon. Friend makes such as a good point. This is what we have been calling for all along. We need to have an in-depth understanding of what the real issues are. We have outlined a number of those, but it is clear that the programme contains deep flaws. If we are serious about resolving these problems—I believe the Secretary of State is genuine in his offer to do so—we must understand exactly what the extent of the problems are.

**Lucy Frazer:** The hon. Lady referred to the decision of the Information Commissioner, rightly saying that there was a limitation in that the names of non-senior officials were not disclosed. However, there were two other things in that decision. First, there was an acceptance that it was reasonable to argue that routine disclosure of PAR reports would reduce their effectiveness. Secondly, and more importantly, it was stated that they were disclosed because six months had passed since the reports had been put together and therefore officials could feel that they had been able to give free and frank advice. But six months has not passed since the date of the reports that the hon. Lady has requested in this motion.

**Debbie Abrahams:** I do not think that gets away from the ultimate ruling, which was that these things should be published. I understand exactly what the hon. and learned Lady is saying, but at the end of the day the ICO ruled that these PAR reports must be published.

**Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD):** I make no apologies for raising this point repeatedly in this place. In a rural and remote constituency such as mine, the lack of ability for people to link up online is surely impeding any roll-out of UC. I am sure the hon. Lady recognises that, and the issue has to be taken on by Her Majesty's Government. Meanwhile, it is of great concern in my constituency.

**Debbie Abrahams:** The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point. Again, we need to know the extent of the issues. I am sure the information system is one of those concerns. The Information Commissioner described the PARs as giving

"a much greater insight than any information already available about the Universal Credit Programme."

**James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con):** Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Debbie Abrahams:** I am going to finish this point. The ICO describes the programme as having "been subject to a number of high-profile failings".

In its judgment, the ICO weighed the public interest carefully and determined that the balance supports disclosure of these five reports, not least because UC could affect up to 11 million people, by the estimation of the ICO, with nearly 7 million relying on the programme once it is fully rolled out. The commissioner noted that

the Department for Work and Pensions had not complied with the law in its handling of the original request for information and gave it 35 days to release this information into the public domain, with a failure to comply resulting in a written certification to the High Court. So we cannot underestimate the importance of this ruling.

**Heidi Allen** (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): Nobody is more interested than I am in universal credit and in its being a success. Does the hon. Lady acknowledge that even if we do get the reports, because the roll-out has been very slow—I am glad it has—some of them are really old and the system has been significantly improved since then? They might give us a window into the past, but I sense that they will not give the opportunity that she is hoping for to identify flaws in the system, because I think we have fixed a lot of them.

**Debbie Abrahams:** But we do not know, do we? I recognise the hon. Lady's commitment and drive—

**James Cartledge:** Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Debbie Abrahams:** May I just finish responding to the intervention?

We need to understand what is in the reports. I absolutely understand the commitment of the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) on this issue, but we do not know until we have seen them.

**James Cartledge:** This is all fine, but the key stats are in the public domain. The purpose of universal credit is to help people into work. We have record employment and record low unemployment. Those are the stats that matter. Does the hon. Lady celebrate them?

**Debbie Abrahams:** Well, where to start with that? First, unless the hon. Gentleman has a crystal ball and has been able to read the reports, I do not think he is in a position to say that they will reveal nothing else. Secondly, on the stats he mentioned, I think there is enough on the record to refute those points.

**Stephen Timms** (East Ham) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government's insistence on cloaking this project in secrecy, right from the start, has been one reason why it has gone so badly wrong?

**Debbie Abrahams:** My right hon. Friend hits the nail on the head. We must have greater openness and transparency about this and other Government schemes. For universal credit especially, the effect it is having on people now means that we must do the right thing. As I said, the ruling must be complied with.

**Justin Tomlinson** (North Swindon) (Con) *rose*—

**Debbie Abrahams:** I shall give way in a moment.

As the ICO ruled, any failure to publish the reports would result in a High Court judgment.

**Wendy Morton** (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Debbie Abrahams:** I am going to carry on making these points, if I may.

I understand that, regrettably, the Government have appealed the ruling and are awaiting the outcome of a first tribunal hearing. This is the second time—

**Alex Burghart** (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Debbie Abrahams:** I am just going to carry on for a moment, if that is all right.

This is the second time in two years that I have brought to the House's attention Information Commissioner rulings concerning the DWP that the Government have tried to thwart. The first time was when the Government refused to publish data on the number of people who had died after being found fit for work. Those data were shocking and vindicated those who had pushed for their release for several years. They gave cold comfort for the families and friends of those who had died and to those who were still going through the assessment process.

I appreciate that neither universal credit nor the project assessment review reports were initiated under the tenure of the current Secretary of State, but I do urge him to rethink and publish the reports forthwith. Taxpayers' money must not be used to hide the Government's embarrassment.

**Ruth George** (High Peak) (Lab): When the only impact assessment of universal credit we have seen was published five years ago this month, it committed to a post-implementation review within five years and said:

"A comprehensive evaluation programme is being developed for Universal Credit"

to inform and evaluate long-term policy. Are we not now trying to get some crumbs of the evidence the Government committed to providing five years ago and should have provided?

**Debbie Abrahams:** My hon. Friend makes absolutely the right point. I commend her for her work on the Work and Pensions Committee to expose how important it is to get this right.

**Justin Tomlinson:** The hon. Lady is being generous in taking interventions. On the point about transparency, each and every single one of us can at any time visit jobcentres and talk to staff and claimants. I have done that three times and brought a Minister with me to visit, too. The overwhelming response I have had is that universal credit is positive and is making a genuine difference.

**Debbie Abrahams:** I thoroughly agree with the hon. Gentleman that our seeking the publication of these reports does not detract from the valuable work that jobcentre staff are doing under difficult circumstances.

The Information Commissioner's Office found that "the withheld information would provide valuable insight into the management of the UCP"—  
universal credit programme—

"and allow for greater understanding of what the UCP did to identify and tackle the issues that it encountered."

It found that the reports we are discussing

"provide a distinct insight into the governance of the UCP and allow for even greater transparency."

[Debbie Abrahams]

That is in addition to the findings in National Audit Office, Select Committee and Office for Budget Responsibility reports.

The Government's Budget announcements were a welcome step in the right direction, but not nearly enough. They still need to pause the roll-out of universal credit, not just slow it down, and they need to release the project assessment reviews so that we can fix the multitude of issues that still exist. The reports will help us to understand what needs fixing and how.

**Wendy Morton:** Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Debbie Abrahams:** I am sorry, but I am going to continue.

If the Government are so sure that a slow-down will suffice, that they can continue to ignore work incentives, that no changes are necessary before Christmas and that a five-week wait is sufficient, why will they not publish their own workings, as the Information Commissioner has instructed? It is a clear matter of public interest that the Government abide by the ruling of the Information Commissioner and publish these five assessment reviews, and any others in the subsequent period. That will allow the House the proper scrutiny it deserves and shine a light on the implementation failures of the universal credit programme, which have caused so much hardship for so many. I call on the Government to abide by that ruling now.

2.56 pm

**The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mr David Gauke):** Let me deal first with the motion. The challenge for any Government—and, one would think, for any aspiring Government—is to strike the right balance between transparency, and encouraging candid evaluation and debate. There is a reason why project assessment reports commissioned by the Infrastructure and Projects Authority, and formerly the Major Projects Authority, have not been released by Governments. The Public Accounts Committee has already recognised that there is a need to protect information that is commercially sensitive, and for there to be a safe space for candid evaluation and debate. The assessments we are discussing represent an important period of reflection and, by their very nature, are useful only if everyone involved is able to offer their views freely and frankly to evaluate fairly the project on which they are working. Ultimately, this is about protecting the interests of the taxpayer.

Successive Governments have continued to improve project delivery. The PAC supported the creation of the Major Projects Authority, and its objectives of strengthening project assurance and improving the transparency of information on the costs, risks and performance of major Government projects. The PAC recognised the challenges that the Government face in improving project delivery within government. Supporting all that is the rigorous scrutiny of individual projects by the National Audit Office, with full access to all papers.

Parliament has consistently directed the Government to manage projects professionally, more efficiently and effectively, and with due consideration for commercial imperatives. Consequently, I hope there is a consensus that the disclosure of information beyond the existing

well-established and robust transparency policy that the PAC supports must not undermine the integrity and validity of the review process, risk weakening our commercial negotiating position, or expose us to possible legal challenge.

**Stephen Timms:** The Secretary of State refers to the National Audit Office, which he will know at one stage characterised the universal credit project as having a “good news” culture in which staff were not allowed to acknowledge and draw attention to problems. Does he agree that that should not have prevailed? Will he reassure the House that that culture has been dealt with?

**Mr Gauke:** I very much agree about the importance of a culture in which problems can be identified and passed up the command chain, with that system understood across the board. Clearly, when that does not happen, something needs to be addressed. When I entered this House in 2005—the right hon. Gentleman was a Minister at the time—we were wrestling with the problems of the tax credit fiasco, which was causing misery for vast numbers of people. If Members want an example of a project that failed because there was not a willingness to identify problems early, that is it.

The Infrastructure and Projects Authority's policy that review reports remain confidential is founded on the position that an effective and trusted system of assurance in government is in the public interest, and that the premature disclosure of review reports undermines that public interest. Those considerations must be balanced with the desire for transparency and parliamentary scrutiny. In exceptional cases, sharing information with a Select Committee, in confidence, can be appropriate.

The motion refers to a number of reports, many of which date back some years, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) pointed out. To disclose those papers without subsequent reports showing how well universal credit has progressed would give a partial picture. In line with the motion, I will provide, by the time the House rises for the Christmas recess, the reports directly to the Work and Pensions Committee. Let me point out to the shadow Secretary of State that her motion does not require us to publish these reports or to lay them before the House. Specifically, it says that those reports should be provided to the Committee. In those circumstances, it is acceptable for us to do so. As is customary, I will need to consider redacting any appropriate material, such as the names of junior officials and information that is commercially sensitive. I wish to emphasise that it is the Government's view that this is an exceptional request that will be agreed to on an exceptional basis, and does not set any precedent for future action. Against that background, I shall provide the reports to the Select Committee on a confidential basis. In those circumstances, I hope and expect that the documents will not be disclosed further.

**Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab):** The Secretary of State has hit on a very important distinction between the motion that we are debating today and the one about Brexit documents. That motion said that the documents should be made available to the Brexit Committee and then laid before the House. Today's motion does not say that; it says that the reports should

be given to the Work and Pension Committee. We are not a Committee of Privy Counsellors. We have never been in a position like this before so, if I catch your eye, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to develop this theme, because we are in totally new constitutional waters. The motion, which has now been accepted—we can all go home in a minute, or bring on the next business—is different, and puts us in a different constitutional position than the one that was outlined for the Brexit Committee.

**Mr Gauke:** The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I can only assume that those who tabled the motion worded it carefully. They chose its wording on the basis that it was about providing information to the Work and Pensions Committee. As I have said, I do believe that, in these circumstances and for the reasons that I have set out, the Select Committee will treat this matter confidentially, but he is absolutely right to draw attention to that distinction.

**Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con):** I thank the Secretary of State for pointing out the collective amnesia of some about the fiasco of tax credits, although I am absolutely sure that many Conservative Members have not forgotten it. I was told by my Jobcentre Plus staff, who have been training Basingstoke Jobcentre Plus staff, that this extremely agile system allows them to feed in impacts and changes, and to listen and to learn. The Government are doing this because it is right for everybody.

**Mr Gauke:** My hon. Friend hits the nail on the head. That is exactly how we are rolling out universal credit, which is why we are able to make changes and why the process is being done gradually. As my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire pointed out, these reports go back some years, since when there have been a number of changes. At one level, I would love to be able to publish the most recent IPA report because it makes it very clear that we were right to expand the roll-out of universal credit in the autumn. I am not publishing it, however, so in effect, I am tying one hand behind my back, because I respect the principle that these reports as a whole should not be published. None the less, in accordance with the motion, I am prepared to provide the reports to the Select Committee.

**Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP):** The Secretary of State is very generous in giving way. He says that he is unhappy that he cannot publish the most up-to-date report, because it would give the Government—I am paraphrasing here—a glowing report card. I wonder what was assessed. Is he not aware that housing providers, housing associations and others say that every single one of their tenants who has moved on to universal credit is now in arrears or has increased rent arrears? Is he not aware of what is actually happening on the ground? I would like him to publish that report, because it would contradict everything that all of us on the Opposition Benches are seeing in our communities.

**Mr Gauke:** Let me turn to the substance of universal credit then. Universal credit is the biggest modernisation of the welfare state in a generation. The old system traps people in a cycle of benefits dependency, incentivising working only 16 hours or fewer a week and preventing people from reaching their potential. Universal credit

frees people from those hours limits and lets them keep more of what they earn. Under universal credit, people are moving into work faster and staying in work longer than under the previous system. Once universal credit is fully rolled out, it will boost employment by around 250,000, which is equivalent to 400 extra jobs per constituency. It is improving the welfare system and the lives of those who use it.

**Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con):** My right hon. Friend was talking about transparency. One thing that we do know for certain is that, in each constituency, 400 people are able to go back to work when they are on universal credit. The new system helps people back into work. There is nothing more demoralising for people than to be told to lower their gaze, stay in line, stay on welfare, and not even to try to go for a job, because the risk is too great that if they try to secure a job, they might lose their benefit. If people lose their job, the palaver of getting their benefits back can be incredibly demoralising and time-consuming.

**Mr Gauke:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. One problem with the legacy system is that it does not cope with those people whose hours might fluctuate below and above 16 hours. The difficulties of moving from one regime to another can discourage people from taking extra hours. That is why it is so disappointing that we do not have cross-party support for these reforms. The Labour party has consistently called on us to pause and fix universal credit. It has done it again today, but in doing so, it has, on more than one occasion, resorted to scaremongering. It is increasingly clear that when it says pause and fix, it means scrap and rewind to the failed system of the past.

**Ruth George:** If the Minister is so convinced of all the facts about universal credit that he claims, why does he not release the post-implementation review that the Department was apparently putting together and give us the full details of how universal credit is working, instead of relying on a study of a tiny sample of single people without jobs that was conducted more than two years ago, before the cuts, in order to make these wild claims?

**Mr Gauke:** What we have released is analytically robust. It enables us to compare with a matched sample, which becomes harder to do as there are fewer single people on jobseeker's allowance. The reality is that the evidence points to universal credit getting people back into work quicker and ensuring that people are more likely to progress in work.

**Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab):** We have had a number of debates about the roll-out of universal credit throughout the autumn. Government Ministers, including the Secretary of State, said from the outset and subsequently that the system was working fine and going very well indeed, but they recently made a number of concessions. If everything was working so well, why did they make any concessions at all?

**Mr Gauke:** Before any of the policies we announced at the Budget, universal credit was a better system than the legacy system. I am delighted that we are going even further to ensure that universal credit becomes a better system, and we will continue to do so.

**Alex Chalk** (Cheltenham) (Con): Is it not also critical that we send out clear and accurate messages? Can we put to rest the myth that if a claim is made today, it will not be possible to get benefits before Christmas? Is it not the case that advance payments mean that people can get the payments they need on time? This is a humane system.

**Mr Gauke:** My hon. Friend is exactly right. He highlights just one of the examples of what we have heard from the shadow Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. She said in *The Times* on 28 November that new claimants would not receive any money before Christmas, and that anyone claiming universal credit in 2018 would

“wait five weeks for any support”.

That is simply not accurate.

Under universal credit, any claimants can access support within days. Advances are currently available at 50%. They will be available at 100% in the new year, effectively providing a full payment within five days if that is what the claimant wants. Let us draw a contrast. If people were going on to jobseeker’s allowance, they might enrol several weeks before Christmas but receive no money until after Christmas.

**Neil Gray** (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): The Secretary of State has announced the partial publication of these reports. Of course, the fact remains that there is a live case from the Information Commissioner’s Office. Will he confirm whether he will release these reports to John Slater, who has campaigned for them for two years?

**Mr Gauke:** We will continue with due process on that. I have said today that I will comply with the motion, which requires us not to publish the reports, but to provide them to the Work and Pensions Committee.

Let me give another example of scaremongering. On Friday, *The Daily Mirror* ran a piece about a woman who had been scared by all the media and political attacks on universal credit. She was so worried about her universal credit payments being stopped that she felt that she would have to cancel Christmas. Thankfully, we looked at her case. It turned out that the family’s universal credit payment for December would be £20 lower than that for November, but that the family’s total income and earnings alongside universal credit would be higher this month than last month. The conclusion is clear: the Opposition’s irresponsible scaremongering is causing unnecessary anxiety for people who are getting support from the system as they should. Let me give another example.

**Alex Chalk:** Gloucester City Homes.

**Mr Gauke:** I will come to that one.

The shadow Secretary of State has promoted the BBC “Money Box” piece that suggested that 100,000 people would lose their benefits over Christmas. The BBC subsequently apologised for the story and admitted that it was misleading. Will the hon. Lady do the same? I am happy to give way to her if she wants me to. She also suggested in *The Times* that only 600,000 people would receive the housing benefit transitional payment. I was clear in the House on 23 November that all of the 2.3 million people currently on housing benefit would be eligible. Will the hon. Lady therefore retract her assertion?

Let us not forget—my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) has clearly not forgotten—that the Leader of the Opposition suggested that Gloucester City Homes had

“evicted one in eight of...its tenants”—[*Official Report*, 11 October 2017; Vol. 629, c. 324.]

One in eight is 650 people. In fact, eight people on universal credit had been evicted by Gloucester City Homes, and all had significant debt arrears before universal credit was introduced. One had moved out of their property 18 months earlier and another had moved abroad. I hope that the shadow Secretary of State will take the opportunity to correct the record and apologise on behalf of the Leader of the Opposition.

**Jo Churchill** (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): We have had a number of conversations about the roll-out of universal credit, which in fact started in my constituency six or seven weeks ago when we first debated the issue. Some 148 claimants have gone through the system in my constituency. I speak to them regularly, and I also speak to everybody involved in dealing with vulnerable people around my constituency. So far, universal credit has been successful, and people very much welcome what was done in the Budget to ensure that as we change the system, it will be flexible, and something that looks after people positively and helps them to move back into work. I thank the Secretary of State for what he has done.

**Mr Gauke:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for highlighting the experience in her constituency. Members of Parliament have a role in ensuring that people are aware of the advances system and the support that is available. That is the responsible role for us to play, instead of trying to scare people with concerns that do not necessarily materialise.

**Drew Hendry** (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Since 2013—as leader of the Highland Council and then as an MP—I have been reporting the difficulties of rent arrears. Rent arrears with the Highland Council are now approaching £2 million, and a number of people have been put directly into rent arrears due to universal credit. We have invited the Secretary of State to come to Inverness to hear about this directly. In the light of what he said, will he now come to the highlands and hear about the experiences of rent arrears since 2013?

**Mr Gauke:** Let me assure the House that I visit many parts of the country to see how universal credit is operating. The response I get back, which is consistent with the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), is that it is working on the ground, providing more support to people, and giving jobcentres better tools with which to help people into work.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Gauke:** Let me make a little bit of progress.

In the autumn Budget, the Chancellor announced a comprehensive package of improvements to put more money into claimants’ hands earlier and to ensure that there is extra support for those who need it most. This month, new guidance will be issued to staff to ensure that claimants in the private rented sector who currently have their housing benefit paid directly to landlords will

be offered that option when they join universal credit. In January, we are making changes to advances by extending the recovery period from six months to 12 months, and increasing the amount of support a claimant can receive to up to 100% interest-free. In addition, from spring next year, we will be making it possible to apply for an advance online. From February, we are removing the seven-day waiting period. From April, we are providing an additional two weeks of payment to new claimants already receiving housing benefit as they transition on to universal credit, which, for the avoidance of doubt, will benefit 2.3 million people.

**Jamie Stone:** I know that I am beginning to sound like a stuck record, but the Secretary of State talks about doing things online. I am a new Member—I am not a Privy Counsellor; I do not go to these smart Committees—but I still have the problem that there are people in my vast and remote constituency who cannot go online. This is a big problem. What discussions has the Secretary of State had with the Scottish Government about trying to get broadband rolled out exactly where we need it?

**Mr Gauke:** The hon. Gentleman raises an important point about broadband roll-out, which obviously, as he knows, is not my responsibility. I understand that there are significant concerns about how that is progressing. It is the case that jobcentres provide the ability for people to complete forms, and they can also provide information about the availability of wi-fi.

**Rachel Maclean** (Redditch) (Con): My right hon. Friend touched on the measures announced in the Budget. Does he agree that this £1.5 billion has been found to prioritise help where it is most needed in our society? Given the pressures on the public finances, that demonstrates that this Government really care about getting this right for the people who really need it.

**Mr Gauke:** My hon. Friend puts it very well. We are determined to deliver this policy successfully and to ensure that it helps more people to have better opportunities. That is what universal credit is about. That is why we have allocated £8 million over four years to conduct a number of tests and trials to support the development of evidence about what works to help people progress in work—this is about not just getting into work, but progressing in work.

This comprehensive package responds to concerns raised inside and outside the House. Our clear objective is to ensure that as many people as possible get the opportunity to work and to maximise their potential to better their circumstances. This is Labour Members' last Opposition day of the year, and what have they achieved?

**Alex Cunningham** (Stockton North) (Lab): We got what we asked for—the report published.

**Mr Gauke:** We are not publishing reports, but we have been able to highlight the inaccurate scaremongering by the Labour party. We have underlined the benefits of the policies announced in the Budget. We have underlined the wholehearted support for universal credit among Conservative Members, and we have further confirmed Labour's position as a roadblock to welfare reform—seeking not to pause and fix, but to scrap and rewind.

As the evidence builds that universal credit is positively transforming lives, it will become clearer and clearer that Labour Front Benchers are on the wrong side of the argument. So I say this to whomever had the idea for the debate: thank you, because I welcome the chance to argue the case for universal credit—a reform that puts work at the heart of our welfare system; a reform that increases opportunity; and a reform that will positively transform the lives of millions of our fellow citizens.

3.22 pm

**Neil Gray** (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I will endeavour to abide by your request to be brief, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I thank the Labour party for choosing today's debate topic. I congratulate the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) on her speech, and I am grateful to her for our discussions ahead of today's debate. Of late, our parties have been united in our critical but constructive opposition to the UK Government's roll-out of universal credit not just here but up the road.

To give credit where it is due, this is an excellent motion for a debate, and it has forced the welcome partial publication just announced by the Secretary of State. The only criticism I would make is that it should not just be the Work and Pensions Committee that sees the reports. I would have preferred to see at the end of the motion the words "for public consumption". Why keep these reports private and just to the Select Committee? The UK Government reckon that this announcement in some way gets them out of hot water, but it changes nothing. The reports that are being requested by this House for public consumption are the DWP's assessment of how the roll-out of universal credit is progressing. They are like the Department's scorecard for universal credit.

Campaigner John Slater has been challenging the UK Government to release these reports for almost two years. In August this year, the Information Commissioner's Office ruled that the UK Government had to release the reports. In its ruling, it said it agreed that

"the DWP is correct that section 36 of the Act is engaged, but finds that the balance of the public interest supports disclosure of the requested information."

**Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Is my hon. Friend also aware that the Department for Work and Pensions appealed to the first-tier tribunal about a 2011 project assessment report? Should we not know what the cost of that was to the taxpayer?

**Neil Gray:** Absolutely, and I will be coming to the cost to the taxpayer later in my speech.

It is also worth noting that the ICO gave the DWP a rap over the knuckles for not replying to Mr Slater "within such time as is reasonable".

However, for me, paragraph 38 of the ICO ruling is the most important and sums up why the UK Government must publish the reports in full. It says:

"The Commissioner's decision is that the balance of the public interest favours disclosure of all of the PAR reports. The age of the reports show that the need to protect free and frank advice is lessened...the reports provide a much greater insight than any information already available about the UCP...there are strong arguments for transparency and accountability for a programme

[Neil Gray]

which may affect 11 million UK citizens and process billions of pounds, which has had numerous reported failings in its governance. These arguments outweigh the need to protect advice provided in the now historic PAR reports.”

Essentially, the UK Government said these reports should be kept confidential to protect those who wrote them, but the ICO disagreed and said not only that the UK Government should publish, but that the names of the senior civil servants involved should not be redacted.

The ICO gave the DWP 35 calendar days from its judgment, which was on 30 August, or the Department would face being taken to court. The Secretary of State has essentially confirmed to me just now that it is his intention to take this matter to the High Court. Therefore, the position we are now in is that the UK Government are happy to see taxpayers’ money being spent to have this issue heard at the High Court. A Tory Government who say there is no money to properly fix universal credit find the money to go to court to stop the publication of reports on universal credit. It really makes me wonder what they are so desperate to hide.

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald** (Glasgow South) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend share my concern that there is a worrying pattern? During a campaign led by myself and other hon. Members from Glasgow to save city jobcentres, the same Department refused to publish equality impact assessments on those closures.

**Neil Gray:** Absolutely. The Department does not have a very good record in this regard.

If the reports were as glowing about universal credit as Ministers have been—indeed, just now—surely Ministers would have released them publicly. Perhaps we will find that, actually, the UK Government know just how bad UC is in its current stripped-back and cut-to-ribbons form. Perhaps the reports will confirm what all the expert charities and MPs from all corners of this House have been saying. Perhaps they will confirm the need for the UK Government to finally invest in universal credit and properly fix it.

The SNP is not opposed to the idea of universal credit—we have said that for a number of years. We gave universal credit a cautious welcome when it was first mooted: a welcome because the idea of simplifying the social security system was good, and cautious because it is a Tory Government in charge of social reform.

The “cautious” element has proven to be canny. The universal credit we see before us now is unrecognisable from that first presented in the early days of the coalition Government. Work allowances have been decimated, housing benefit stripped and child tax credits cut and given a disgusting two-child limit. The rape clause is surely the ultimate low of any social reform in these isles since the poll tax. The resulting campaign by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) deservedly saw her named as the best Scot at Westminster at the recent *Herald* politician of the year awards. Unison and some Labour MPs are now looking to pick up that campaign, in support of the work my hon. Friend has been leading for 18 months, and that is welcome.

All these cuts to aspects of universal credit have been compounded by the welfare cap and, of course, the benefits freeze. From expert charity after expert charity

and think-tank after think-tank, every time we see a public report on universal credit, it is damning. Even now, the Government accept that universal credit is failing in its current form. The Chancellor accepted that when he made his Budget announcements on minor changes to universal credit—minor but welcome first steps to fix it.

The Government have taken pelters on this for months. The SNP Scottish Government, SNP MPs, Labour MPs and even Tory MPs have been calling for a pause and fix—and it is the “fix” part that is so important. Sadly, the well-trailed intervention from the Chancellor does not go far enough or fast enough. It does not address the main issues with universal credit, which are not just about payment delays but payment cuts. Universal credit was vaunted as the benefit to make work pay, and it could have gone some way towards doing that. However, work allowances—the money recipients can keep as they return to work—have been cut to ribbons. Coupled with this decade being the worst for 210 years in terms of wage growth, we clearly see that the UK Government’s narrative is a faint hope rather than any policy-driven ambition.

Universal credit is about making recipients pay—pay for the economic failure of this Government and pay for the failure of austerity. Making work pay is important. The stagnation of wages was cited by former Social Mobility Commission chair Alan Milburn as he resigned from it. He also said that the UK Government have been so preoccupied with Brexit that they do “not seem to have the necessary bandwidth to ensure the rhetoric of healing social division is matched with the reality”.

Recipients of universal credit are being let down by this Government as they seek expert advice and support. Citizens Advice Scotland is concerned about the removal of implicit consent for it to act on clients behalf on UC.

**Heidi Allen:** I have been working very closely with Citizens Advice throughout this whole campaign. Is it not true that Citizens Advice in Scotland and in England have both welcomed the announcement that was made in the Budget and said that it is an excellent improvement?

**Neil Gray:** I just welcomed it, but I said that it does not go far enough and needs to go further. Citizens Advice Scotland is concerned about the removal of implicit consent for it to act on clients’ behalf on UC. Clients are now required to provide explicit consent and therefore to be present when their cases are being discussed. We, as MPs, have implicit consent—why has it not been extended to advocates like our local CABs? When I recently visited Airdrie CAB and spoke at its annual general meeting, it was concerned about its ability to represent its clients on universal credit in practical and in volume terms. We, as well as Conservative Members, get that feedback when we go to our local CABs and jobcentres.

It is not just the former Social Mobility Commission chair who has intervened in the past few days on universal credit. In Scotland, our Children’s Commissioner, Bruce Adamson, has suggested that legal action against the UK Government may be required to protect the human rights of children and to stop them being impoverished. Mr Adamson was damning in his criticism of universal credit, saying that there are “a number of issues around the way in which Universal Credit is calculated and how it is paid. But this leads to a much, much deeper issue... We are talking about things like having a warm



and secure place to live, having regular hot, nutritious meals and also the ability to access things like transport to get to school and to enjoy social and cultural activities that we know are so important to their development.”

He wants to avoid legal action, and said:

“We really need political leadership here and we need to make sure that we are never in a situation where children are going without the basics that they need.”

I absolutely agree.

Given Scotland’s Children’s Commissioner’s comments about the impact of universal credit on child poverty, we have to wonder what are in those DWP project assessment reviews, especially when the Joseph Rowntree Foundation reported this week that 400,000 more children and 300,000 more pensioners are living in poverty now than five years ago. The JRF says that while there are still significant challenges for Scotland to face regarding poverty levels and the impact of poverty, levels of poverty are lower in Scotland than in the rest of the UK. It also found that falls in poverty among pensioners and families with children have been greater and more sustained in Scotland than elsewhere. That shows that our approach is working. But imagine what we could do on poverty in Scotland if, instead of spending hundreds of millions a year on mitigating the effects of the bedroom tax and other Tory cuts, we spent that money on proactive anti-poverty measures or on the council tax reduction scheme, which has been shown today to benefit one in 10 Scots.

**Luke Graham** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con)  
*rose—*

**Neil Gray:** I am really pressed for time now; I do apologise. [*Interruption.*] I have taken interventions. Madam Deputy Speaker has indicated that I was to keep within 10 minutes.

When the likes of the Child Poverty Action Group, the Poverty Alliance and others predict that further roll-out of universal credit in its current form, coupled with the benefits freeze, will force even more children into poverty in the coming years, the UK Government need to wake up to the evidence that their policy choices make them an agent in rising poverty, as opposed to the Scottish Government, who are working hard to protect low-income families.

In conclusion, the reports may well be as glowing about universal credit as Ministers have been, but the Government’s desperate obstinacy and obfuscation over a period of two years would suggest otherwise. Given the intense pressure that has been put on Ministers in recent months by the Scottish Government, MPs from across the House and expert charities, I imagine that had the reports been positive, they would have found their way into the public domain to support the Government’s position. It is normally the cold light of day shining on harsh truths that forces people from their entrenched positions, so the Government should make these reports public. Let us see the DWP’s assessment of universal credit, and let us all come together to find a way to fix universal credit and help those who need help the most.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle):** I advise Members that we will start off with an eight-minute limit and hope that we can make sure that everybody gets the same amount of time.

3.35 pm

**Lee Rowley** (North East Derbyshire) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to contribute to this important debate. Universal credit is a vital reform for our country and for those who rely on the system to live. Universal credit enables people to get off that system and find the jobs they need to provide for their families and children in the long term.

I have been listening with interest to the debate since it began, and I welcome the Minister’s decision to release the reports to the Work and Pensions Committee. As my right hon. Friend said, there is a balance to be struck between transparency—releasing everything into the public domain, or into the semi-public domain of the Select Committee—and ensuring that people in the forum of implementation can talk with candour, honesty and openness about the challenges that are coming.

By default, a project assessment review—I say this as someone who worked on this kind of thing as a project manager in industry for 15 years—is an assessment of the challenges in a project. It does not necessarily focus on the overall principle, which is very sound in this case. It does not focus on the successes, the targets that have been hit or the achievements that have been made. It focuses, rightly, on the challenges. However, my concern is that the tenor of this debate, and previous such debates that I have attended, suggests that some Members and some others outside the Chamber will not take the reports in that context or spirit. I fear that the focus will be on the challenges as the most terrible and outrageous things ever, and that there will be no recognition of the fact that there is a balance to be struck. I hope that hon. Members will reflect appropriately on that.

I do not understand why a request is being made for project assessment reviews that were carried out in 2012 when, by the common consent of everybody in this House, this innovation has changed dramatically and totally since then. Any project assessment review from 2012 will be completely archaic and irrelevant to any decision on what happens in 2017. That suggests to me that the intention of Opposition Members who are pushing this activity is to embarrass, rather than to be constructive in their criticism.

I noted that the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) stated on at least two separate occasions that universal credit had been acknowledged to be not fit for purpose. I am not aware of anybody on my side of the debate who has acknowledged that. Therefore, I can only assume that the Labour party’s intention is to push an incorrect narrative, which reflects the analysis in articles that have been written in *The Guardian* and elsewhere, and which does not accurately reflect the changes that have been made.

Let me be clear: I do not stand here today and suggest that universal credit is absolutely perfect. No Government Member is suggesting that. We recognise that in our complicated and difficult benefit system, which has been created over decades, there will be complexities, challenges and problems. I sat here on 18 October and listened to hon. Friends and Opposition Members speak in the first debate on universal credit during my time here. The principle behind universal credit is that we are fixing forward—we are assessing the problems, looking for ways to solve them and putting the solutions in place. That is exactly what the Chancellor did when he made his announcement two weeks ago.

[Lee Rowley]

I welcome the decision to release the documents to the Work and Pensions Committee. I hope that people who have an interest in the debate will take the documents in the spirit in which they were intended, although I fear that not everybody will do so. I welcome the Chancellor's decision to make changes, and I hope that additional changes will be made, if necessary, to move our welfare system on. The system has not worked for decades, and it has kept millions of people on welfare and ensured that they do not go out to work.

I am dealing right now with constituents on legacy benefits who have given up work, or who are about to, because housing benefit does not pay and cannot cope with the kind of variability in their earnings. If universal credit can solve those kinds of problems, which is what I understand it will do and what my jobcentre tells me will be achieved when it is implemented, I welcome it coming to North East Derbyshire and the surrounding area.

3.40 pm

**Frank Field** (Birkenhead) (Lab): I want to make three points. First, universal credit is not being introduced in isolation; it follows so-called welfare reforms that were made under the Labour Government, the coalition Government and this Government. The cumulative impact for many of my constituents has been destitution. We have made decisions in this House to pay for pensioner households rather than ordinary families.

I have been running constituency surgeries for 38 years. At the most recent surgery, just last Friday, for the first time ever a gentleman rose after we had spoken and I had to try to persuade him not to commit suicide. Such was his desperation at the future he saw for himself. I realised that the hand that shook my hand was wet, because he had been crying. The hand that shook my hand was the hand that had wiped away those tears.

On Friday, Feeding Birkenhead—a brilliant organisation, but one that ought to be unnecessary—reported a family coming in, a husband and wife and their young child. The child was crying with hunger. The family was fed. The father said that it had been a lucky week for him, because neighbours had taken pity and invited them to a funeral, so that they could finish off the food after the other guests had been fed. When their little boy was shown the shelf where the toys and lunch packs were kept, he chose the lunch pack. That is the background of growing destitution that I see in my constituency, and against which we have to judge universal credit and the debate we are having today.

Many DWP staff do not share the Secretary of State's confidence in this benefit. Feeding Birkenhead is putting considerable food through schools, which get it home where it is needed. On Saturday we will be filling thousands upon thousands of Christmas hampers, and among the volunteers will be 146 DWP staff. They know where this benefit is going and they are unhappy. [Interruption.] The Secretary of State is mumbling. Their inability to show their normal compassion by having discretion is an issue of such importance that we will return to it soon.

Against that background, we come to the request for papers. The Secretary of State and I have noticed that this motion is different from the motion on the Committee on Exiting the European Union. That Committee was

to receive the papers and lay them before the House. This motion does not ask for that. I love being a member of the Work and Pensions Committee, but I can assure the House that we are not a group of Trappist monks and nuns; people will naturally want to talk. Therefore, before any documents come to us, I will be asking for the Speaker's interpretation of this motion, and what sense of secrecy or honour will bind the Committee when we receive the documents. Even if we only read them, that will surely affect how we pose questions. If they are all so good, surely we would have received them long ago.

**Neil Gray:** The right hon. Gentleman is making an incredibly powerful and emotive speech, and I commend him for it. Does he agree that the partial publication, and giving the redacted copies to the Select Committee, leaves its members in an invidious position? As the Committee Chair, does he think that it would be far better for the Government to publish the reports in full and publicly, as the Information Commissioner recommended?

**Frank Field:** That is why I will seek the Speaker's advice. It may partly be why Members on the Treasury Bench have accepted the motion: because it now shifts all the pressure from them to the Select Committee. As I said, we are thankfully not made up of Trappist monks and nuns. We are all very active members of the Committee.

I will make my last and perhaps most important point. The Government and Government Back Benchers—a rather rude one to my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) earlier—keep making assertions about the wonder of the benefit, for which there are no figures in the public domain. We do not know how the benefit affects work records, apart from those of the simplest claimants. We do not know from the Government the effect on rent arrears or on the use of food banks. We do not fully know the numbers of people who are waiting in our constituencies for more than six weeks—soon, thank God, five weeks, on which I congratulate the Secretary of State.

In the great spirit of openness, with which the Secretary of State has landed the Select Committee, I hope that we will shortly put before Parliament the data on the working of the new benefit, which will tell us whether the grand assertions that the Secretary of State and Ministers continue to make are true. I hope that they are true, but none of us has the data to back them up.

Before we do not vote on the motion tonight, I want to recall that the benefit is being rolled out for families of working age who have suffered multiple and cumulative benefit cuts. I described some of the effects. How does an MP give someone hope, when I do not have hope for them, that things will radically improve, and persuade them not to top themselves? What do we do to a family, who last year gave toys for our Christmas hampers, but have been so reduced in circumstances that this year, their little boy cries with hunger? That is the message that I want to go out from the debate.

We will receive the documents and advice on what we are to do with them, but I hope that the Secretary of State does not believe that releasing them—some of historical value—will prevent the Committee's insistence on a proper publication of data, which allows us to hold the Government to account for the hunger in our constituencies.

3.48 pm

**Heidi Allen** (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I do not know where to start after that. I am humbled by the words of my good friend the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field). No Governments are perfect, no benefit system is perfect and no debate or motion is perfect, but by God we will work together and make this better.

Select Committees are cross-party and they play an important role in scrutiny. Our Work and Pensions Committee is no different. I am sure that our focus on universal credit—I am sorry; I am not very good at this job, am I Mr Deputy Speaker?

**Frank Field:** I am amazed because, for the first time, I have been able to report publicly the events I described without weeping. I am so affected by them—I am as affected as my hon. Friend. That is the debate that we are really having: how do we represent here the desperation of many of our constituents when many of us feel that we cannot offer them hope? I fear that that may not have helped my hon. Friend, but it was meant to.

**Heidi Allen:** We have a job to do. I am sure the Select Committee's evidence-gathering helped the Government to identify improvements and make universal credit better. We will continue that work.

No one should underestimate the poverty-fighting potential of universal credit. I believe that and mean that most sincerely. There is a reason why work coaches are so motivated by it. There is a reason why, when claimants are fully up and running on it, they move into work faster and stay in work for longer. That does happen. The old system of multiple individual benefits was no better than a game of roulette. What kind of reward was it when a determined claimant successfully gained more hours of work only to lose their benefits? On their way up, they were stopped in their tracks by a benefit trap set at an arbitrary and life-limiting 16 hours. No one should be proud of that and no one should want to sustain that.

Universal credit is totally different. It offers a wraparound support service to claimants. I am the first to admit that the roll-out has had more issues than it should have had. There are aspects of the system I wish had been fixed before we pushed the button to roll it out further. I understand, however, why the Government were reluctant to pause it. They were eager to offer that transformative support and its potential for a better future to more claimants. That is what the Government wish to do. I was pleased, therefore, when the Chancellor announced in the Budget a package of reforms worth £1.5 billion. Reducing the six-week wait, specifically asked for by the Work and Pensions Committee, was critical. I understand that banking system limitations meant that reducing the wait even further beyond five weeks was technically impossible, but the Prime Minister, the Secretary of State and the Minister for Employment listened to our concerns regarding the risk of rent arrears and debt, which were real, and then made further—I believe arguably greater—concessions than taking an additional one-week delay away. They increased availability and doubled to 100% the size of advance payments, so that emergency funds would be available to claimants on day one. The payback period was also doubled to 12 months.

This means that no claimant will be without money if they need it. No ifs, no buts—fact. If someone needs an advance today, they get it.

The most welcome addition, for me at least, was the automatic additional payment of two more weeks of housing benefit for all claimants currently in receipt. That is huge! That is an additional two weeks of housing money on top of universal credit monthly payment. This is the good that the Government can do. These are the actions of the Government I envisaged when I first heard Theresa May on the steps of No. 10.

**Catherine McKinnell** (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way and for her compassion for the misery that I know many of my constituents have faced as universal credit has been rolled out in Newcastle. I have spoken about that many times, but does she share my concern that the announcements in the Budget will do nothing for those families who have already been pushed into misery, debt, the use of food banks and, potentially, the loss of their house? Does she want the Government to use that ability to support those families, too?

**Heidi Allen:** No family should be going through that. People have more difficult lives than I am blessed to have ever experienced, but work coaches are there, and discretionary housing payments and advance payments are there. Work coaches should be offering a wraparound service. I do not have universal credit yet in my area, but I hope that work coaches are doing everything they should for the hon. Lady's constituents. There is no reason for a family to be put into that level of debt. If that is the case, the work coach is not doing what they should.

Universal Credit is the biggest transformation of our benefit system in decades. The Government's slow roll-out and test and learn approach is the right one. They have been able to make amendments because of this approach, meaning the improvements announced in the Budget will be in place before a significant uplift in claimants moving on to the benefit. As we have heard today, that is so important because these are real people's lives.

Jobcentres have received absolute clarity on making advance payments available to all claimants. I know this to be true, because I heard it first-hand recently at a regional work coach event in the east of England. I am greatly relieved by these operational improvements and relieved to know the Government will keep the taper rate under review. I understand the challenges to our public finances, but I remain of the opinion that universal credit will never be the ultimate poverty-fighting machine it can be and was designed to be until either the taper rate or work allowances are restored to their pre-2015 levels. As inflation shows signs of volatility, I support the Government completely as they keep a watchful eye on the taper rate.

If universal credit does not deliver the transformative results it should, we will look at it again. Universal credit is both revolution and evolution. The Work and Pensions Select Committee, on which I am proud to sit, will continue to monitor progress every step of the way. I thank the Government for offering to share these reports. They are project management assessment documents, not policy assessment documents, so their value might be limited—I do not know, we will see—but

[Heidi Allen]

as a member of the Committee, I welcome the opportunity to review them. They will form part of the Committee's ongoing and dedicated review of the project's progress.

3.55 pm

**Fiona Onasanya** (Peterborough) (Lab): On Wednesday 18 October 2017, 80 Members from across the House debated a motion calling for a pause in the roll-out of universal credit. The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) said that she was touched by the speech made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), but we had an opportunity to pause and fix the system then. We had a chance to say, "Hang on a minute. This isn't really working as we thought it would. Let's pause it and fix it." The hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley) said we were "fixing forward". I have no idea what that means. If something is broken, we fix it and then continue.

**Lee Rowley:** I can explain exactly what it means: when we discover a problem, we fix it as we go; we do not throw out the entire system. We are thinking about benefiting people in the long term. Nobody is saying the system is perfect, but the point of fixing forward is to improve as we go, which has been the principle since the beginning of the policy.

**Fiona Onasanya:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but I beg to differ. If I had a vehicle that failed its MOT, I would fix it before putting it back on the road. I would not say, "I'll keep on driving and see what happens."

The motion in October was passed unanimously—by a vote of 299 to 0. None the less, despite that unanimous motion to pause the roll-out so that it might be fixed, the Government have continued with business as usual, saying, "Nothing's going wrong. Let's carry on as we are." Some of the issues we pointed out have been taken on board, and I am grateful for that, but the system is fundamentally flawed. We have asked for a pause so that it might be fixed. It is even more vital, therefore, that the Government come clean with their assessment of the risks involved and the implementation issues encountered.

**Justin Tomlinson** (North Swindon) (Con): Surely the hon. Lady recognises that universal credit is a transformational benefit for the vast majority of people going through the system. That is why staff are so passionate about it and feel empowered to make a difference to people's lives. If we paused it, we would rob some of the most vulnerable people in society of the opportunity to improve their lives. Can she not see that it would be better to carry on making improvements as we go forward?

**Fiona Onasanya:** I thank the hon. Gentleman but, again, I beg to differ. The roll-out of universal credit started in my constituency on 15 November. The lady who manages my district advised me that the first payments would be received on 27 December, the day after Boxing day. We talk about changes, helping people and this being six benefits in one. We are saying to people, "For a period, there will be no money—but hold on, there is money. You can apply for it, ahead of

time, and get up to 50%, but we will take that 50% back." That is why we call it a loan. It is not as case of, "Here's some money to help you now. When your money kicks in, you can carry on as you were."

I put it to hon. Members that we are in a very privileged position. I do not take that for granted. I understand that not everyone is in my position. We are saying to people, "Wait five or six weeks. Oh yes, your gas and electric are on meters, which are weekly, and your money has run out, so you've got no electric, your fridge doesn't work and you've got no food, but don't worry, because we have food banks, although you can only go three times—but that's fine, because, remember, it's transformational." That is unacceptable.

**Justin Tomlinson:** I recognise those points, but one of the principles is that those who go to work are often paid in arrears. Surely it is better to help people to adjust to that while having the support of the named work coach and access to advance payments. Surely it is better to make this an easier process, rather than blocking people from having the opportunity to work at a later point.

**Fiona Onasanya:** What I do recognise is that most of those people's rents are paid weekly. I pay my mortgage monthly, and I was able to choose the payment date that would suit me on the basis of the receipt of my salary. Fortunately, I could also take advantage of a payment holiday if I got into trouble. That does not work for these people, unless we say to organisations such as utility providers, "Do not make them use their emergency payments and take all that money immediately, because they will have nothing," or say to housing associations and councils, "Please can we make sure that they are not offered a chance to be evicted?" I say "offered a chance" because I am being polite, but people get a notice to quit.

Should we not be saying, "We understand that there are issues"? I am not suggesting that it is negative to create a benefit that helps people to get into work, because I agree with the hand-up rather than the handout, but this is not a hand-up. Much like my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead, I sit with constituents who are struggling because they have been put into this system and there is no way for them to obtain the finance that they need.

I sit with constituents who have mental health issues and whose work coaches can only say to them, "We suggest that you go to this place for help," because they have no power to say, "We are going to refer you." That is not their role. They have no power to say, "Let us stop this now, because we can see that you are not coping." That is why we end up with constituents who are in the same position as those of my right hon. Friend. Work coaches have discretion, but they do not have the power to intervene and make decisions. They are not permitted to do that.

Sir John Major described universal credit as "operationally messy, socially unfair and unforgiving", and those are the points on which I am focusing. I am not trying to knock the scheme. I am merely saying, "Please at least give us access to the documents so that we can speak to our constituents on the basis of knowledge, explain to them why they are in the position in which they have found themselves, and seek to assist them and

make things easier for them.” My constituents who have been put on universal credit will not receive their first payments until the day after Boxing day. How can that be transformational in a positive way? I ask the Secretary of State to listen properly to what we are saying, and not to claim that the system is working without giving us any evidence to show that it is not hurting the people whom we seek to represent.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle):** Order. I am reducing the speaking limit to seven minutes. I hope that I shall not need to drop it any further.

4.3 pm

**Lucy Frazer** (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): Earlier this year, having tabled an emergency motion, the shadow Leader of the House argued passionately for more Opposition day debates. She highlighted at least four topics that she felt needed urgent debate, including social security and the personal independence payment, NHS nursing numbers, the Swansea tidal lagoon, and higher education regulations. Since she made that speech four months ago, only two of those topics have been raised by Labour Members in Opposition day motions. Instead, they have used their motions as a procedural tool to seek access to documents from the Government, but I want to raise the question of whether that is the appropriate route for such requests. The Secretary of State has acceded to the request in today’s motion—I welcome that disclosure—but he made it clear that this was an exceptional case. A five-hour Opposition day debate is not, in fact, the appropriate route to make such a request, and let me explain why that is the case.

**Neil Gray:** Will the hon. and learned Lady give way?

**Lucy Frazer:** I will make some progress for the moment.

By means of today’s motion, the Opposition seek the disclosure of various documents to a Select Committee. There is a procedure whereby Select Committees can ask for such documents themselves under Standing Orders. When I asked the Library last night whether there was any record of the Work and Pensions Committee having asked for these documents, I was told that there was no such record. If there had been such a request, there might have been the opportunity for a discussion between the Chairman of the Committee and the Secretary of State about the basis of the request and the use to which the documents might be put—the very issues that have been raised in this debate.

Raising such matters can be achieved in various ways, including through written and oral parliamentary questions, urgent questions and debates. Again, I asked the Library whether the Opposition had availed themselves of any of those procedures with regard to this request. The only record that the Library had of any such request related to one parliamentary question tabled three years—two Parliaments—ago. In this Parliament, we have had six debates on universal credit, as well as two ministerial statements and one urgent question. On none of those occasions has the relevance of these documents been raised, and nor have they been asked for. If it were in the public interest urgently to disclose the documents, I would have expected Labour Members to have used one of those routes to request them through official channels

over the course of this Parliament, but they have not done so. This is the first time the matter has been raised in this Parliament.

My question is whether it is appropriate to use an important procedure of this House to require the Government to produce documents when no prior official request has been made to obtain them through the usual procedures that are available to hold the Government to account. Is it appropriate to request important documents from the Government for the first time in a Opposition day motion when the contents of that motion were not known by the Government until yesterday?

**Mike Amesbury** (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Of course it is right for the Opposition to raise the problems of universal credit at every opportunity. Surely the hon. and learned Lady can understand that. I know that the additional 30% of people using food banks in my constituency understand it.

**Lucy Frazer:** The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point, as universal credit is an important measure. I endorse that point, which many Members have made today. Universal credit affects those who need help the most, and that is the issue that we should be debating, rather than the disclosure of documents that could have been asked for before, to which the Secretary of State has now willingly granted access. We do not need a five-hour debate. It is the issues that affect our constituents that need to be debated, not a procedural request for documentation. In the course of the Standing Order No. 24 debate on the need for more Opposition day debates, the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) stated that such debates were important as “the key means in this House of raising issues of concern to our voters.”—[*Official Report*, 17 July 2017; Vol. 627, c. 616.]

I am sure that my voters care about universal credit, and I am sure that they care about getting people into work, but I am not sure they would welcome a day-long debate about a request for documents that could have been made, and granted, through the ordinary procedures of this House.

4.8 pm

**Gerald Jones** (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): Thank you for calling me to speak in this important debate, Mr Deputy Speaker. I welcome the concessions that the Government have been forced to make on universal credit, but I do not believe that they go anything like far enough to relieve the hardship and stress that this roll-out is causing, and will continue to cause unless and until the Government take on board the concerns and take further action. There are so many issues with universal credit that it is essential that the full extent of all project assessment reviews that the Government carry out are placed with the Work and Pensions Committee. The Government must come clean about their assessments so that the risks can be identified and scrutiny can be provided by the Committee.

I know that many Members across the House share my concerns about the roll-out of universal credit. It might be convenient for the Government to ignore the views of those on the Opposition Benches who have expressed legitimate concerns on behalf of their constituents and, in the case of the Secretary of State, to pass them off as scaremongering. However, the Government should

[Gerald Jones]

not ignore the concerns shared by many outside this House, too—by organisations at the forefront of supporting people through difficult periods and supporting those who are most vulnerable. These organisations include Community Housing Cymru, which acts as an umbrella body for housing associations across Wales, and Citizens Advice, Shelter, and the Child Poverty Action Group. Does the Secretary of State consider these organisations to be scaremongering, too? These organisations know the pressures and hardship that UC is causing, as they are picking up the pieces when people's lives are turned upside down due to the debt and anxiety caused by issues created by the roll-out, and the Government should take note.

Recent research undertaken by Cardiff Metropolitan University has highlighted the fact that one in five claimants is not receiving their full entitlement on time, with some facing a delay of four to eight weeks. The Government should address the waiting time as it is what causes most hardship. Many people do not have savings or money set aside to cover day-to-day living expenses during this period. The Government have taken away the seven-day waiting time, thus reducing the period to five weeks, but this is still too long for people to wait. We should also note that this is a minimum waiting time, and many people are waiting longer, leading to arrears and claimants needing to use food banks, increasing their debts and living in poverty.

We know that food bank use is increasing. A recent Trussell Trust report shows a 30% increase in people using food banks in areas where UC has been rolled out. Perhaps the Secretary of State thinks that report is scaremongering, too.

**Michael Tomlinson:** The hon. Gentleman mentions the Trussell Trust. Does he acknowledge that the trust's chief executive has welcomed the measures the Chancellor announced in the Budget, and will he also welcome them?

**Gerald Jones:** If the hon. Gentleman had been listening, he would have heard that I welcomed those concessions earlier this afternoon, but, as I also said, they do not go far enough. I was with the Trussell Trust last weekend, collecting for the food bank in my area, because I know, as many other Members do, that that need is growing rather than reducing.

It appears that there are the same issues everywhere UC has been rolled out, and in my view it stands to reason that, with a hastened roll-out, these issues will only increase. We need a pause and fix. In Wales, as of October 2017 almost 25,000 people were in receipt of UC, meaning that the roll-out is just 6% complete; full roll-out is expected by November next year. I do not understand why the Government cannot see that hastened roll-out will lead to increased hardship, and why they will not act to pause and fix, to avoid families being subjected to undue stress and hardship.

There is not much evidence of any festive spirit coming from the Government on this issue, and talking about the Christmas period that is almost upon us, the news that thousands of low-paid people on UC will receive reduced payments or none at all over Christmas because they are paid weekly and their income "will likely go over the universal credit limit"

is extremely worrying. A similar problem will re-occur in other months that, like this December, have five paydays, because UC is calculated on a monthly basis.

The Government must realise that Christmas puts huge pressure on family budgets and this situation will massively increase hardship. When people have five weekly earnings payments within an assessment period, their income might be too high to qualify for UC in that month, but the official advice is:

"You can re-apply the following month as you should only get four wage payments in your assessment period then."

I am sure that will really help families through the Christmas period!

This flaw needs to be addressed and a fix found; it cannot be that difficult. Those paid weekly will find four times in a 12-monthly cycle that this "apparent" overpayment happens, and that could either reduce or cost them UC. Surely a mechanism can be found within Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs. This is yet another glitch among a growing list that have beset UC.

We have heard today, and will continue to hear, the evidence that this roll-out is causing significant hardship and undue stress. The Government must listen to these very genuine concerns, and act to avoid further hardship.

I was glad to hear the Secretary of State's comments, and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) on introducing this motion.

4.14 pm

**Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con):** We are discussing universal credit, and "universal" is an important word, because I think we universally agree in this Chamber that the previous system was a failure. People were stuck on the old system for far too long, and there was no incentive for them to get back into work. My hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) said that the old system was like a game of roulette, and we can all agree on the benefits of the current universal system. My hon. Friend also said that universal credit has poverty-fighting potential, and we can all agree on that because both Opposition Members and Government Members agreed with the general principles of universal credit. It is important to remember that there is cross-party support for what we are trying to achieve with universal credit. There may be divergence of opinion in certain areas, but the system is necessary and is supported across the Chamber. People on universal credit are more likely to find and stay in work, and they are more likely to earn more money while in work, which is an important message that we cannot forget in these repeated debates in the Chamber.

**Neil Gray:** Our cautious welcome for universal credit at the time was not unconditional. For us to make an assessment of how universal credit is going, we need to see the DWP's assessments. The Government are going to make those documents available to the Work and Pensions Committee, so why can they not publish them more widely?

**Douglas Ross:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for bringing me on to what is going to be published. The Government have agreed to exactly what is requested in this Opposition day motion, and I was pleased to hear the Secretary of State confirm at the Dispatch Box that he will ensure that everything that has been asked for will be delivered.

I listened most intently to the emotive speech of the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), but he went on to say that he was not particularly happy with the Government agreeing to everything in the motion and, indeed, that he will be raising the contents of the motion with Mr Speaker. I politely suggest that it may have been more useful for him to raise that concern with the Opposition Front-Bench team, because this is a Labour motion that the Government have accepted. The papers will be published, and any differences of opinion that the right hon. Gentleman now wants to raise with Mr Speaker should have been raised more promptly with his own Front-Bench team, because what they have asked for will be delivered.

**Frank Field:** Whatever has happened has happened. I welcome this motion, and I will seek Mr Speaker's advice, because I shall keep the story going in doing so.

**Douglas Ross:** But stories start somewhere, and the right hon. Gentleman could have started his story with the Opposition Front-Bench team, because he seems to be most critical of them for not asking more of the Government.

I accept the useful point made by my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley), who suggested that Labour now wants more given that the Government have accepted what was requested in the motion. However, the information is extremely dated, so we have to question its merit and benefit given that the system has developed considerably. We have had four debates in the Chamber, and the policy has been developed since the Chancellor gave his Budget and will continue to be developed as we go forward.

Speaking of the Chancellor and his Budget, I welcome the £1.5 billion to address concerns around universal credit. *[Interruption.]* I hear the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) say, "That is not enough." I listened carefully to his speech, in which he could not accept that the Government have done anything good, saying that this Government must be bad when they talk about universal credit and that he was not happy with the proposals in the Budget. I would therefore like to know what he thinks about Citizens Advice Scotland, which welcomed the changes to universal credit in the Budget, saying:

"Taken together, these measures will make a real difference to those claimants who are currently experiencing hardship."

That is the sort of response that we should be getting from the Opposition parties.

**Neil Gray:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Douglas Ross:** I have already given way, and we are on a time limit.

**Neil Gray:** The hon. Gentleman just mentioned me.

**Douglas Ross:** I have already given way to the hon. Gentleman.

The changes in the Budget will have a real impact. I have already mentioned the £1.5 billion that will address some concerns, but the removal of the seven-day waiting period for new claimants will mean that no one waits six weeks to receive their first universal credit payment.

**Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab):** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Douglas Ross:** I am sorry, but we are on a time limit.

Claimants who need support can get advance payments of up to 100% of their estimated monthly entitlement, effectively removing the wait for first payments altogether and going further than anyone on either side of the House and many external commentators were asking for. The Budget changes show that this is a Government who are listening. This is a Government who accept concerns raised by Members on both sides of the House and who want to make changes to improve a system that is designed to improve many people's lives.

Because of those Budget changes, we have also seen a reduction in the pace of the roll-out in Scotland. In my area, Moray Council will now not see the roll-out until June 2018, which will allow council staff and DWP staff to work to enact the positive changes that we saw in the Budget.

I am delighted that the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) has returned to the Chamber, as in both his interventions he addressed the impact of poor broadband on universal credit. The Secretary of State is correct that the problem of broadband is not for the Department for Work and Pensions. It is actually a problem for the Scottish Government, who are failing in the broadband roll-out. *[Interruption.]* SNP Members do not like it. They are shouting across the Chamber because they are failing to deliver broadband in Scotland, which is why this Conservative Government are correct to bypass the Scottish Government in the next roll-out to ensure that we can have effective broadband across Scotland, addressing the concerns so ably raised by the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross.

This Conservative Government are introducing transformational change. This is a system that had to be corrected because of the failures of the Labour party and of a system that did not help people into work—indeed, the system kept people out of work. With such major transformational changes, there will have to be improvements along the way. I am pleased that this Conservative Government have listened and have reacted to concerns but are continuing with a system of universal credit that wants to help people back into work, rather than ensuring that people cannot get into work and stay out of work. By doing that, we not only improve the lives of individuals who get back into work but we improve life for our communities, which we should all support.

4.22 pm

**Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab):** Universal credit has been rolled out in my constituency for some time, and my office has seen its effect. Universal credit is pushing people into poverty and making life harder. Across the House, we must agree to do everything that can be done and to release any information that can help us better understand the situation and fix it.

I have local examples of how universal credit is affecting my constituents. I have a constituent who sustained life-changing injuries while serving in Iraq. He was medically retired by the military but has had to go for further universal credit assessments, which have caused him further stress. Why is my constituent having

[Danielle Rowley]

to go through that, and why are the Ministry of Defence and the Department for Work and Pensions not joined up?

I have previously spoken in this place about a single mother in my constituency who is on universal credit but, because of the way the system works, is not able to pay for childcare, so is having to consider giving up work. Again, why is a system that is supposed to help people into work making single parents have to choose between looking after their children and work?

I have heard a lot today from Conservative Members about how no one on universal credit has to wait the full six weeks, which is not true. Just two weeks ago, a constituent came to my surgery and told me he applied for the advance payment but was denied. It is called an advance payment, but it is a loan. I have contacted the Department for Work and Pensions and my local jobcentre to find out why he was refused the advance payment—I have been told time and again that no one is refused—but I have not had an answer. So, again, I would like an answer. If somewhere in these documents I can find an answer to that—some working to show why the Department has come to its decision—that has to be released and it is in the public interest for that to be done.

**Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op):** These households are getting delays in receiving advance payments and are racking up huge amounts of debt, so does my hon. Friend agree that the Government need to release the assessment on the levels of debt of these households?

**Danielle Rowley:** I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend on that. There are many reasons why this information must be released.

Another issue I wish to raise is the fully digital aspect of the system. Many constituents have come to me because they are vulnerable, elderly or disabled and they are simply not able to use the digital aspect. They have not been able to get out of their house to get to a jobcentre—of course, these are being closed across Scotland—to get this support. Again, do these documents contain an answer on that? Will something in them tell us why this decision has been taken? Will something show the working of the Department on why it has reached its decisions?

The third thing I am concerned about is the reputation of this place. After our debate and vote on UC, constituents have come to me saying, “Fantastic. You’ve been helping me because I am struggling under this system, but now of course it is going to be paused and fixed because you had a vote on it. I followed that and am very grateful to everyone who voted on it.” I had to say to them, “Well, you’re right that we had a vote and we won it, but no action has been taken, and we did not see any tangible measures in the Budget that would address the issues we have raised. The Chancellor refused to pause and review universal credit.” People have therefore rightly asked me how this can be allowed: how we can have a vote and yet not see any action taken.

I have asked numerous written questions to the Department, but the reply to them all has been that the information cannot be obtained or that my constituency is in a larger area with different constituencies that do not yet have the roll-out, so there is no information to

be given. No wonder there is large public mistrust of this system; it seems so opaque; we cannot get the answers we need; and now there are secret documents and they are not going to be released. If they are released, it will be to the Select Committee and not to the House and to the public. I want to know why these project assessment reviews will not be released, because I desperately feel that, having many constituents come to me with grave issues, I need to know what these problems are.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) for giving such a passionate speech earlier and disclosing some issues. I have two constituents who have taken their own lives, both of whom were on UC. They were both very desperate and both had been to my local citizen’s advice bureau for help, as they had no money. I will not cry for them in this place, because their memory deserves not tears but anger and action. I want these papers to be released, so that I can find some answers to these questions and give people in my constituency the certainty that they deserve.

4.28 pm

**Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con):** I welcome the Minister’s statement on making available the reports requested by the Labour party. I am pleased to speak in this debate and to challenge the belief among some Opposition Members that helping people into work and away from relying on state welfare is just too difficult and too complicated. I accept that our work as MPs is not easy. We all do our best for our constituents, and I accept that most often they come to us in the last resort and expect our help. But the privilege of being elected as an MP is to take on and tackle sensitive subjects and to unravel bad policies which hold people back, regardless of how complicated they seem.

I do not need to reference emails and surgery cases to know that the only way to help people out of poverty is through work. I grew up in social housing, where families had not worked for two or three generations, with households in which children had never seen their parents go out to work, and where they were told—where I was told—time and again to “lower your expectations and stay in line for welfare.” Aspirations to work were met with cliff-edge drop-offs and the loss of benefits. Why would someone take a risk to secure a job that may or may not work out when that is weighed up against losing benefits and the drama it takes to get back on to welfare to make sure they have a home? For too many people, the risk is too great. That is why universal credit works. It tapers as a person secures more work and does what welfare is meant to do: it provides a hand up and a safety net.

**Mike Amesbury:** The Labour party is what it says on the tin: we are the party of work. Many of those in receipt of universal credit, and tax credits before that, are actually in work, with many of them on low pay.

**Ms Ghani:** I do not accept the hon. Gentleman’s intervention. There are now more people with better opportunities—whether children going to better schools, more working-class kids going to university or people on lower incomes taking more of that income home to support their families. I grew up in a Labour stronghold where I was told repeatedly to know my place, which was to remain on welfare like everybody else in my community. That is why the Conservative party introduced



universal credit, and why it is so important that we ensure that it is successfully delivered. Universal credit is founded on the belief that work should always pay, and it encourages people to find work and not stay trapped in the vicious cycle of the benefits system.

The request for the publication of the reports in the motion has been granted. I am, though, a little perplexed about why we need to see reports on assessments from back in 2012 when we have facts and figures that we can rely on today. I hope that the Minister can shed some light on that. Here is what is already in the public domain. Critics should welcome the fact that each person on universal credit is treated as an individual and provided with tailored support, working around their personal needs. For the first time, people have a named work coach. This is the first time that their personal requirements and unique needs are being assessed. It is the first time that their childcare, housing or work support is being assessed. More importantly, this will be the first time that many people from my community have had real support that tackles their needs and supports their aspirations to improve their and their families' lives. They are no longer just a number to be told to get to the back of the queue.

Let us not forget that the previous welfare system created cliff edges, discouraged people from working for more than 16 hours a week and, most damning of all, trapped 1.5 million on out-of-work benefits for nearly a decade. I challenge anyone who would disagree that those people had been failed by the system.

**Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab):** I have wanted to make a comment for some time, so I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way.

On the supposed blocks in the previous system, I have been contacted by constituents who were previously nursing students in receipt of a nursing bursary and, under the old system, tax credits. Because that bursary was not considered an income, they were still able to get tax credits, so they could continue to pay their rent, bills and so on. Now, under universal credit, someone is doing a teaching degree and is in receipt of student finance, which counts as an income, so they are not eligible for any other benefits and they are already three months behind on their rent. Is that a demonstration of somebody being able to move on?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle):** The hon. Lady has made a speech; we will have short interventions.

**Ms Ghani:** That is where the work coach should be able to help. The hon. Lady should be challenging the work coaches in that community. People are moving on: they are able to get a loan to get an education and change the life choices available to them.

With its one simple payment and gradual introduction, universal credit is flexible enough to respond to any technical issues. Previously, the existence of six different benefits was an overbearing and bureaucratic mess. The system was expensive to administer; it was confusing to understand; and, most of all, it was demoralising to boot. The results so far show that universal credit is working: people claiming universal credit are 13% more likely to be in work than people claiming jobseeker's allowance, and they are earning more money and are more likely to take on a job.

Such drastic reform will always come with complications, and over the past four years, imperfections have been uncovered and brought to light. I am pleased that the Government have listened and acted to improve universal credit, by ensuring that it achieves its original goals. The £1.5 billion package to address the delivery concerns will be welcomed across the country in places where universal credit has yet to be rolled out. The removal of the seven-day waiting period will mean that applicants will be entitled to receive universal credit from the first day of application. Those who need it can also now access up to a month's worth of universal credit within five days via an interest-free advance. I cannot be the only Member of Parliament who has struggled to deal with constituents who have been made to feel insecure and afraid to access the welfare to which they are entitled, because they are made to feel that, somehow, it will work against them. The free support phone line is also welcome. These important changes mean that we are not letting down those who need our support the most.

Universal credit is committed to helping people into work, and, once in work, to help them progress and increase their earnings, providing security and opportunities for them and their families. It is important that the Government are fully committed to the gradual roll-out, giving the ever reducing numbers of unemployed people a greater chance of the security that only a job can provide. We must not revert to the old failing system where 1.5 million people were trapped in out-of-work benefits for a decade.

If people are not convinced by my arguments, let me quote the chief executive of St Mungo's:

"We have been calling for a new strategy to tackle homelessness. I welcome the opportunity to work with the taskforce to end the national scandal of rough sleeping altogether. We are also pleased to see a number of changes to Universal Credit that St Mungo's had been calling for, particularly the removal of the seven day waiting period and the extension of the repayment period for advances to 12 months."

I will end by quoting someone from Citizen's Advice, because we all reach out to them when we are dealing with difficult constituency work. The chief executive said:

"The £1.5 billion package for Universal Credit announced in the Budget last week will directly help millions of the most vulnerable people."

4.36 pm

**Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab):** I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this afternoon's debate, and I want to support the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams). I also wish to thank the Secretary of State for his concessions today. Although I welcome them, they are, sadly, not nearly enough to address the very many serious flaws of this failed benefit.

I wish to address my remarks to the situation in my constituency of Reading East where universal credit is rolled out tomorrow, on 6 December. Tomorrow, 10,000 of my constituents will be hit hard by this failing programme and many—I wish to point this out to the hon. Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) and others—are families in work; some are disabled; and some are people in all kinds of desperate need. We have 10,000 people facing the possibility of a Dickensian Christmas in a

[Matt Rodda]

relatively wealthy town in one of the most prosperous regions of the country in 21st century Britain. Is that acceptable to any of us? I do not think so.

The delays in the roll-out—it could be several weeks—mean that it is unlikely that many of those 10,000 people will be able to enjoy the benefits in time for Christmas. Indeed, many will only be paid universal credit in January 2018. Just like the family of Tiny Tim in Dickens's "Christmas Carol", there will be no Christmas in these households. For those who are not familiar with that situation, it is important to consider that those families will be struggling to find any sort of Christmas dinner, any sort of presents and any sort of celebration.

I note that the Secretary of State has now allowed a greater level of loans for families in receipt of universal credit. However, until January, loans of only 50% are available, so I ask Conservative Members to consider what it would be like to be one of the working poor in Reading, struggling to get by with 50% less income from benefits to cover their Christmas expenditure. That is half the payments they would have had this time last year. Is not Christmas hard enough already for these families? This is not only a sadly mistaken policy, but actually wrong, and the roll-out, in its current form, is failing deeply.

I appreciate that some changes were made in the Budget. However, deep flaws remain—not least the long wait and various other points made by hon. Members. I will run through some of the effects of the budgetary changes on my constituents that many have overlooked today. For the areas where the roll-out is taking place in December, it is irrelevant that the seven-day waiting period is being changed. It will be too late because it happens in February. The period over which advance payments are recovered is being extended, but this is also too late, starting in January. The interest-free advances are too late, as they start in 2018. On and on—these late interventions will not help families who will have a terrible Christmas this year.

It is quite clear that universal credit is, quite simply, a failing programme. The Government are refusing to release key documents, and the changes set out in the Budget fail to meet the needs of families. Given these fundamental flaws, the failure in delivery and the Dickensian misery being forced on families, surely the Government will admit that it is time to pause and fix this benefit.

4.40 pm

**Luke Graham** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): Our welfare system has historically been the victim of criticism from both sides of the House. Colleagues, their views often stoked by the media, take opposing rhetorical positions that rarely lead to improvements in the system and certainly do not help individual constituents. I thank the Secretary of State for making exceptions and publishing the extra information for the Work and Pensions Committee. I hope that it will help with the Committee's work. In the future, I hope that we will have more up-to-date analysis that will help to guide that work in a more meaningful way.

In previous debates on universal credit—we have had a few—Members of all political stripes in this House have accepted that universal credit is a positive and transformational reform, and that it is a real attempt to

change the culture and improve results for those hoping to get into work. Everyone will recognise that the roll-out has encountered challenges, but I hope that most Members would accept that, with a nine-year roll-out, the Department for Work and Pensions has reacted to concerns raised. It should not be forgotten that most major Government welfare programmes encounter difficulties, as the last Labour Government did when they made £2 billion of erroneous payments of tax credits, forcing working families and single parents to pay back money that they had already spent. This is not party political; it is about the difficulties of being a responsible Government.

In my constituency, there is one jobcentre, which is in Alloa, where universal credit went live with full service in June 2017. The jobcentre in Perth, which is just outside my constituency but also serves my constituents, will have full service in 2018. I have been into those jobcentres. I have worked for a day in the Alloa jobcentre, sitting in with the new cohort who were transitioning on to universal credit, and even with individual claimants who were coming in for the first time to apply for universal credit. I saw how beneficial and transformational universal credit can be when properly applied.

I want to pick up on some of the comments made by the Opposition, particularly by Members on the Labour Benches, and to look at the reasons why people are having more difficulties and going to food banks. I asked my office to analyse all the people who have come to my office with universal credit concerns. Two of the key issues were waiting times and limited information such as not knowing how to access advances. I have fortunately been able—through this place, thanks to the Minister—to push for extra training in jobcentres in Scotland to ensure that advances are now proactively offered to claimants across Scotland. Thanks to the dedication of my constituency team, 80% of our universal credit cases have been satisfactorily resolved in a very short period of time. They were fixed because this is a new system, and I pay tribute to my team for all their work.

I must mention some of the rhetoric on the Opposition Benches, specifically from the hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda), who referred to people having a Dickensian Christmas. With the greatest respect to the hon. Gentleman, I have lived in developing countries such as China and Thailand, where I really saw harrowing inequality. People with no limbs had to beg on the street because there was no welfare system and they had no protections whatever. It is completely unfair of him to cast the same aspersions on this Government and our country.

One of the reasons I gave for why my constituents are struggling to access universal credit was limited information. Many of them have come to me because they are nervous about what they see in the media, and they believe they cannot access universal credit and advances.

I welcome criticism. To be fair, SNP Members have criticised universal credit and, as I will explain in a moment, many points have been addressed as a result of that criticism from them and from the Conservative side too. However, we have to be careful about the rhetoric we use, because it has real implications for people in our constituencies.

**Frank Field:** I disagree with my hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) because the Christmas story written by Dickens had a happy ending.

**Luke Graham:** And I hope universal credit, with these changes, will too.

**Hugh Gaffney** (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Luke Graham:** I am sorry. I am going to make a little more progress.

Quite rightly, Conservative Members—I have been one of them—have made criticisms of universal credit. I have written to Ministers, as have many other colleagues, and issues have been raised on all Benches throughout the debate.

The criticisms that have been raised include concerns about the seven-day waiting time, advances and paying landlords. Well, the seven-day waiting time is being removed. On the concerns about paying landlords, we have the offer to pay them directly, and we have the landlord portal to make sure they have the right information. On the concerns about advances, we know that those can be settled within five days or even on the same day. On those issues, therefore, I would ask Members to make sure we are giving the right information to our constituents so that they can access the advance they are entitled to and no one faces any hardship over Christmas.

The Opposition also say that universal credit and some of the hardship I have seen first hand are down to some sort of ideological Tory austerity. Yet, the changes that have been pushed forward mean that there has been an extra £65 billion in spending on welfare, which is the cost of all these changes since 2010. So if we are trying to do these things just to save money, we have done a pretty poor job.

Changes have been made to universal credit; it has been improved. There has been a nine-year roll-out. I still have concerns about universal credit.

**Liz Twist:** Does the hon. Gentleman accept that, for people in my constituency, which started the universal credit roll-out on 1 November, these changes will have no impact, and people will face the same problems that all of us have acknowledged in our previous discussions? It would be great if the Government could make some progress to ensure that those people in my constituency have a better Christmas than they are expecting.

**Luke Graham:** I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. Some of the changes that were previously announced by the Government—especially on advances, guidance and making sure people get payments within five days—will benefit her constituents. The measures put forward in the Budget will obviously come in the new year, but the advances the Government previously announced are in place, and people can benefit from them now. I hope she will help with offering them.

As I was saying, I still have concerns, especially about those who are already in debt who transfer on to universal credit. I would ask my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to look in more detail at what can be done with some of the budget financing schemes and about the knowledge and availability of them for constituents who are in debt. There are also those people who are on variable incomes and those who are self-employed. Also, in terms of single household payments, we need to make sure no one is disadvantaged by their sex, relationship or circumstances.

One issue I hope to work with SNP colleagues on is the split payment system in Scotland, where we have the devolved Administration. Evidence suggests that that system is not as beneficial as we originally thought. Hopefully, we can work together to improve that. *[Interruption.]* Vis-à-vis the northern Irish scheme, it is more disadvantageous.

I hope the Government will remain focused in delivering this reform, will continue to improve the system and will show the flexibility to fix cases where mistakes have been made. We can work together constructively to boost employment by the 250,000 we expect and to make sure we help the 1.5 million who were previously trapped in poverty and benefits.

4.49 pm

**Drew Hendry** (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I would have thought that if Ministers were so confident about the success of universal credit, they would release these reports in full and in public. The people deserve to hear if the experience in those reports matches that of those who have endured the failings of universal credit in our constituencies where it has had an impact. As my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) pointed out, there are many and manifest failures with the system that have been reported many times.

When the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) told us of the experiences in his surgeries, it brought tears to the eyes of Members, but this is not the first time that universal credit has brought tears. I remember, just after being elected as an MP, meeting members of the local citizens advice bureau, and there were tears as they talked about the trials and tribulations of people who were going through in their office. Elaine Donnelly, who works with Macmillan Citizens Advice Partnership, was one of those people in tears. She came to my universal credit summit—Ministers did not attend, although they were invited—and told us of the experiences that she had with people who are terminally ill. Crucially, she says that she no longer cries, because she has heard so much about this that she is now battle-weary. She is numb. It does not hit her in the same way any more because so much has been going on.

Members such as the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) talk about the rhetoric that goes on, using words such as “scaremongering”. Not only have all Conservative Members been invited to my constituency to hear about these experiences, but so have Government Front Benchers.

**Stephen Kerr** (Stirling) (Con): The hon. Gentleman recently visited my constituency on the subject of universal credit. I was very grateful that he visited the beautiful constituency of Stirling. Which aspects of universal credit—its principles—does he support? Every speech I have heard him make in the House has been an undiluted torrent of negativity about universal credit. It is accepted that the system is not perfect, but can he tell us which parts work and which he supports?

**Drew Hendry:** I am very glad to answer that question. To repeat the statements that I have made and that my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts has made today, SNP Members have never opposed the principle of universal credit. We have always supported

[Drew Hendry]

the principle of simplifying the benefits system so that people can get social security in a simpler and more effective way, but—this is where Conservative Members really need to open their ears and listen—the experience of people applying for universal credit is not that the process is simple. It is, for many people, hard and devastating. For a lot of people, it can really have an impact on not only their family lives, but their health.

**Luke Graham** *rose*—

**Drew Hendry:** I am going to make some progress, but I will come back to the hon. Gentleman because I do want an answer to this.

We hear about rhetoric and scaremongering, but do Conservative Members also challenge organisations such as the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Welfare Scotland, Citizens Advice, Macmillan, Marie Curie, Gingerbread, the Child Poverty Action Group, the Resolution Foundation, the Trussell Trust and Shelter, or all the cross-party local authority bodies, churches, faith groups and more? Are all those people giving empty rhetoric and scaremongering? No, they are not—they absolutely are not.

Since 2013, I have been raising the fact—yes, I will repeat it—that this has brought misery on people in my constituency from the pilot, through to live service, through to full roll-out. For Conservative Members who have had that delayed—lucky you. It is coming your way, and you will soon understand what happens with it. This has been a real problem. As I have said many times, since my election to the House in 2015, and prior to then, as the leader of the Highland Council, we have seen problems arising in Inverness and the rest of my constituency. We have reported them. We have requested changes. We have demanded changes. We have cajoled. We have even begged for changes to be made, yet there has been little or no movement. We have had platitudes and dogma, but there was never an understanding or a willingness to change, until very recently in the Budget, as my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts pointed out, there was a final admission that the system is broken.

**Luke Graham:** The hon. Gentleman and I have been involved in politics and campaigning for a few years. Does he accept that there have been issues with a lot of welfare reforms? Benefit sanctions were a big issue at the 2015 general election, as the SNP has rightly mentioned. He said that he made demands for changes. Can he list the demands that have not already been answered by Ministers?

**Stephen Kerr:** Specifics!

**Luke Graham:** Can the hon. Gentleman give us specifics?

**Drew Hendry:** I would be absolutely delighted to answer that question, and I am genuinely grateful for that intervention. Since 2013, universal credit has driven up poverty and misery in my constituency, as is evidenced by a dramatic increase in food bank use. [Interruption.] The hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire says that that is not the case, but he is not letting me get to the full explanation.

**Jamie Stone:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Drew Hendry:** I will do so very briefly, because there is not much time and I want to make these points.

**Jamie Stone:** Once upon a time, the hon. Gentleman and I served on the Highland Council. Does he agree that one of the unwanted side effects of all this was the impact on the council's budget? He and I had to put money aside to advise constituents about their problems, and that cut into the vital services that we were trying to deliver.

**Drew Hendry:** Indeed it did, and that is one of the manifest problems that I was going to come to. Universal credit is fuelling debt by default, leading some people to be evicted from their homes and placing others under stress due to the threat of eviction. Here is a list of the problems. There are delays, missed payments, poor communication, wrong payments, incorrect deductions, people left without money, people who do not know what is happening, and people who cannot work their way through the system. Universal credit hits the working, the low waged, the self-employed and the disabled, as well as those who are seeking work. At the universal credit summit that we held, we heard all those problems and more.

In the limited time that I have left, I want to make a few more points. The CAB-Macmillan partnership said, of people with terminal illness:

“We’ve not seen anybody fast-tracked through for an earlier payment. In fact we have seen people who are terminally ill dying before their Universal Credit is processed”.

How is that for a problem with universal credit? I have got pages of the stuff here, and I could, if I had the time, give lots more evidence about why universal credit is failing.

This debate is about the information, however. The project assessment reviews are detailed assessments of the implementation of universal credit. As has been said, the Information Commissioner's Office

“finds that the balance of the public interest supports disclosure of the requested information.”

I pay tribute to John Slater for his tenacity. He deserves the right to access this information. The least the Government can do is to publish the information, but so far they have failed to do so. The justification for why publication is not in the public interest is beyond me, if the Government are so confident about it. The ICO notes that

“the reports provide a much greater insight than any information already available about the UCP, there are strong arguments for transparency and accountability for a programme which may affect 11 million UK citizens and process billions of pounds, which has had numerous reported failings in its governance.”

It is about time that people got the full story about universal credit. I can tell hon and right hon. Members whose constituencies have not experienced a lengthy period of universal credit that they will be glad to get that information before universal credit hits their constituents.

4.58 pm

**Alex Burghart** (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate, and it is always good to discuss universal credit in the House. As a

member of the Work and Pensions Committee, I want to make a minor point before I go on to more substantive arguments. The first I knew about the Committee's involvement in the motion was when I saw the Order Paper this morning while I was having my breakfast. I understand that we are all politicians here, and that the Opposition do not want to give anyone unfair notice, but it would be a simple courtesy to give members of any Select Committee some advance warning that their Committee is being involved in such a motion. I am not asking for much—notice could be given even an hour before the Order Paper is published. We were all here until 1 o'clock this morning, but there was plenty of time to send an email. That is just a general point for this sort of debate, which the Opposition are absolutely entitled to call.

I would like to put it on record that I am very happy with the Secretary of State's response and pleased that these documents will be shared with the Work and Pensions Committee. I certainly take it on agreement that we will receive the documents in confidence—I understand that we will not publish them ourselves—which I think is quite right. That said, I think that my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) made a good point when she said that the analysis in the reports is now slightly out of date. Opposition Members who are hoping that it will cast brilliant sunlight on the workings of universal credit will be disappointed.

There is a broader point, which has been raised by a number of Opposition Members, about whether the documents should be published. There is a live freedom of information request, so people have requested the documents and the DWP has declined to give them. The Information Commissioner has said that they should be handed over and the DWP has appealed, as it is fully entitled to do. If that ruling is upheld, the documents will be published; if it is overturned, they will be kept out of the public eye. The House should abide by that well-respected and well-established process—it was established under a Labour Government—which is tried and tested. This debate is really about greater transparency. I believe that we should always call on policy makers to reach for greater transparency, and it is the job of this House to hold them to account. That goes for policy makers on both sides.

We saw a very big investment in universal credit in the Budget—£1.5 billion. The Select Committee was delighted by and welcomed the arrival of that money. As the Red Book shows, it has been raised by reducing opportunities for tax evasion and avoidance—money well raised; money well spent. The shadow Secretary of State has said twice in this House that she thinks that that additional £1.5 billion represents just £1 in every £10 that has been taken out, and she strongly implied that she would like to put the rest of that money back. By my calculation, that is £13.5 billion that she would like to put into universal credit. I am all for putting more money into universal credit, as my colleagues and friends know, but I always like to know where the money will come from.

The Labour party has set itself a fiscal credibility rule, which means that if it gets into government it intends to balance day-to-day expenditure and borrow only for investment in infrastructure, homes, railways, roads, renewable energy and new technology. Anyone remotely familiar with the DWP budget will know that

the Secretary of State does not have £13.5 billion in a jar on his shelf. There is no slack to be found there, which means the money would need to be found elsewhere. Those familiar with the Red Book will know that £13.5 billion is not easily found elsewhere either.

If the Labour party were to stick to its own fiscal credibility rule, it would have to raise £11.5 billion. Its manifesto commits £2 billion to universal credit, which it says is accounted for—the Institute for Fiscal Studies has a different view—which means that £11.5 billion is unaccounted for. I will happily take an intervention from any Opposition Front Bencher who can tell me where that £11.5 billion will come from.

**Mrs Madeleine Moon** (Bridgend) (Lab): Perhaps the hon. Gentleman, being new to this House, does not appreciate that mistakes made in one Department can often have financial consequences in another. Let me tell him the story of a constituent of mine who went eight weeks with no income—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing)**: Order. The hon. Lady cannot tell a story in an intervention. I will allow her to make a very quick point.

**Mrs Moon**: My constituent had eight weeks with no income and three months with no rent. She was back on anti-depressants after five years of recovery. The consequences might not have been grave for universal credit, but they were huge for the health services in Wales and the local housing authority, and my constituent's health was destroyed. If we get things wrong in one Department, there are consequences for others.

**Madam Deputy Speaker**: Order. The hon. Lady has made her point.

**Alex Burghart**: I fully understand the hon. Lady's point because of course there are knock-on consequences. I am also very sorry to hear that her constituent waited eight weeks for money, but we know that that should never happen when advance payments are available and people can receive money on the same day. The seven waiting days have now been removed. The process of test and learn shows that we can make changes and improve outcomes for people on universal credit.

If we listened to Opposition Front Benchers, we would find an £11.5 billion black hole in the spending plans for universal credit. That shows that, rather than a fiscal credibility rule, the rule is that Labour has no fiscal credibility.

It is important that we increase transparency. I would welcome a little more transparency when Select Committees are cited in motions. I believe in the Information Commissioner's transparency processes, and I am sure that we would all welcome a little more transparency on how the Labour party would fill the epic black hole in its finances.

5.6 pm

**Stephen Lloyd** (Eastbourne) (LD): Like other hon. Members, I congratulate the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) and the Labour party on securing the debate.

[Stephen Lloyd]

I am delighted that the Secretary of State will provide the assessments to the Chairman of the Select Committee on Work and Pensions and to the Committee. That will be valuable, though it would probably have been more helpful to provide them sooner because I suspect that many of the issues that the Secretary of State's predecessors saw coming—certainly some that I flagged up when I was on the Work and Pensions Committee between 2010 and 2015—appear in the assessment documents. If that is the case, and the documents contain some of the issues that have caused so much difficulty that the Government have had to U-turn on them, I ask Committee members who are in the Chamber, and certainly the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), to point them out very directly to the Government. It would be ridiculous if some of the problems that I and the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth put to the then Secretary of State when I was last in this place have come to pass. If they were in the assessment documents and ignored, I would be extremely disappointed.

**Ms Ghani:** The hon. Gentleman mentioned a U-turn. When he was previously the MP for Eastbourne, is it correct that he voted in favour of universal credit in all its forms?

**Stephen Lloyd:** I appreciate the hon. Lady's intervention because it gives me the opportunity to remind the House of the numerous times on the Select Committee that I pointed out to the then Secretary of State that if he did not change things around the auto-payment default to landlords and the six or seven-week delay, the policy would be a disaster. Explaining why I still went through the Lobby leads me to the Government's most disastrous mistake on universal credit. In 2015, the then Chancellor gutted universal credit on the work allowance by £3 billion per annum. That shattered the making work pay principle. I see in the Budget that the Government are taking some lessons from our reminding them that the whole process was undermined.

**Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab):** The hon. Gentleman refers to the previous Chancellor. The problem we have with universal credit, as with other benefits, is that the Government have a target of cutting £12 billion from the benefits budget. That is why we have an imperfect system. They are trying to make the system work, but they are making a bad job of it.

**Stephen Lloyd:** I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's intervention and he is quite right. My theory is that the then Chancellor expected the Liberal Democrats to do a little better in 2015, because he knew that we would not have allowed that £12 billion cut. However, we were not there to stop the Conservatives being absolutely idiotic on universal credit, and, frankly, on penalising the poor. The £12 billion cut gutted universal credit, but they continued with its introduction. We would have stopped both.

Let me return to the Budget. Apparently, the Budget was "listening". The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions made representations to the Chancellor, because even the Conservatives began to realise that the fault lines in universal credit were causing the most shattering

problems for our constituents. A number of hon. Members from both sides of the House have spoken very eloquently about the really quite appalling experiences that people are going through.

My key issue is this. The one reason why I supported universal credit, through gritted teeth and despite making constant representations when I was a member of the Select Committee—I know the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth agreed with me about some of the clunky elements—was that the work allowance would make work pay. As I said, in 2015 the then Chancellor took out £3 billion a year. The current Chancellor obviously recognised that the work allowance had been slashed so much that it barely washed its face and certainly did not make work pay, so—I got this from the Local Government Association—the Budget allocated an extra £8 million to trial innovative approaches to help individuals on universal credit to earn more at work. That is a ridiculous amount—£8 million is 1%—when £3 billion was taken out every year for the next five years. I am looking at the Conservative party, which is allegedly the party of aspiration. Its Chancellor of the Exchequer put in £8 million. That is a recognition that universal credit is not working from the perspective of making work pay. It also shows the Conservative party's utter bankruptcy with regard to really trying to put in place what could ultimately be a very good credit and benefit system. They are instead retaining its failings and not doing what is necessary to make a real difference. It really is very, very disappointing.

I have also heard from the Conservative party, "Obviously, we can't really make the changes because technically it's too difficult on the six weeks-five weeks." Well, first they moved down a week, so that was a bit different from what they said a few weeks ago. The other point—there are no Democratic Unionist party Members here, but let me share this with other hon. Members—is that the DUP got an agreement a few years ago for universal credit to be paid every two weeks and for there to be a default to the landlord in private rental. Perhaps the DUP has a different computer. Does the Secretary of State know whether they have a completely different computer in Northern Ireland? Is it somehow a special DUP computer, or is it all based on the same system? My understanding is that it is based on the same system. If the DUP can ensure that payments are made every two weeks—this has been happening for years, even before they crept in to prop up this absurd Government—why is it impossible for us to have it in Britain, considering some of the absolutely desperate situations people have been suffering as a result of the long delays? Yes, there have been changes to advance payments, but my God we had to drag that out of the Government like we were pulling teeth.

Frankly, if the Government had actually listened over a year and a half ago, maybe even a few years ago when I was on the Work and Pensions Committee, we would not have gone through the elements of universal credit that resemble a moving car crash, and more importantly—this was put so eloquently by the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) and the right hon. Member for Birkenhead—some of our constituents would have avoided the searing pain, hurt and frustration that they are currently experiencing. That was all because the Government were ideologically determined not to listen on some of the elements of

universal credit that we knew did not work and—back to this again—because of the appalling gutting of universal credit work allowances by £3 billion per annum.

I will say one other thing. This, combined with the benefits freeze, is affecting real people. The Child Poverty Action Group told me a few weeks ago that on average the 2 million single parents in this country will lose £2,380 per annum. That is too much money. We are all on good salaries in this place, but I would notice if two and a half grand was taken out of my salary—I really would. It is a scandal that a single parent on a low income is going to lose on average—some will lose more—£2,380. It is a scandal and cannot proceed. I urge the Secretary of State to go back to the Chancellor on the work allowances and the benefits freeze and, most of all, get universal credit right so that it can be the good benefit it was originally proposed to be, before you gutted it and cut it.

**Several hon. Members** *rose—*

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing):** Order. Before I call the next speaker, I will make two points. First, a great many people are using the word “you”. When one is in the Chamber and addressing the Minister, it is “the Minister” or “the Government”. “You” means the Chair. I have to say this most emphatically, because so many people are making that mistake. Secondly, there have been lots of interventions, so we are running out of time and I have to reduce the time limit to six minutes. I call Mr James Cartlidge.

5.16 pm

**James Cartlidge** (South Suffolk) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Stephen Lloyd), because he gives a certain nuanced view on the coalition. In my view, the Government should seek to reduce the benefits bill. It is not a badge of honour if a Government preside over ever-spiralling welfare bills, and I am proud that we have brought them under control, but I accept entirely that welfare reform has consequences.

I want to focus on the difficult subject of food banks. Two weeks ago, the *Suffolk Free Press*, my main local paper, ran a piece saying that since the introduction of universal credit in Sudbury on 18 October—the full service roll-out—there had been an increase in the number of referrals to food banks. I received an email from the jobcentre just before this debate, so I feel that I should quote it at length. It is the jobcentre’s stance on the suggestion of an increase. It states:

“It is true that there has been an increase in referrals to Sudbury Food bank with 17 people being referred from the Jobcentre since Universal Credit Full Service rolled out... This is definitely more than we would have expected to have referred under the previous version of Universal Credit, known as Live Service, or previous benefits. While some of this might be because of the longer initial wait for payment there are other factors as well. The Full Service version of Universal Credit introduces a more diverse range of customers with a higher proportion of vulnerable groups – Live Service was only for single claimants who were often young and living with parents.”

Importantly, it also points out that it has itself been giving out vouchers for food banks, so it is no surprise that people would be visiting them.

On the measures in the Budget, the jobcentre concludes:

“It would be hoped that the recent budget announcements reducing the waiting time for the first payment by one week and

increasing the amount of advance payment to 100% of their expected first payment will help reduce the number of people that need to be referred to the food bank.”

That is the unvarnished truth, as it were. We all know that the people claiming these benefits are not wealthy. That is the whole point; they are not supposed to be. They are experiencing difficulties. Wages have been compressed across large parts of the western world—I do not pretend otherwise. The key for us is to come up with a system that ensures they can break out and go on to earn higher wages and attain a sustainably better standard of living.

**Hugh Gaffney:** Would the hon. Gentleman agree that the system is broken? Food bank use has so increased since his Government came to office that people are worried they will not have enough food this year.

**James Cartlidge:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. However, the number of workless households in the United Kingdom is at an all-time low, and there is no single greater indication that poverty is being beaten than a reduction in the number of workless households. We have made incredible progress. This is not a Dickensian Christmas; it is the Christmas when we have reached the lowest level of unemployment since before I was born, in 1974. [*Interruption.*]

The hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) is trying to intervene from a sedentary position. Let me simply say to her, as I have said in a previous debate on this subject and many times before, that I do not speak theoretically. Like other Conservative Members, I ran a small business before coming to the House. The hon. Lady talks about the effect on pay, but some members of my staff declined pay rises because they would lose so much in tax credit, and refused to work more than 16 hours a week. That was a huge problem, and it brings me to the main point of the debate.

If you want to reform welfare, you have to have a system that deals with inherited problems, particularly the 16-hour issue. The only way to do that without creating much more poverty, and much more dependence on food banks and the like, is to do precisely what I think we are trying to do, and give people incentives to earn more through work. If we give them universal support, they will have the encouragement and the skills to do better in the workplace. The other point about my local jobcentre is that it has been incredibly positive about that experience. This is a joined-up programme that does not just make work pay, but enables people to get more from work and to build a career.

**Jamie Stone:** May I amplify the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne (Stephen Lloyd)? Perhaps all Members on both sides of the House are uncomfortable, even within themselves, about the concept of food banks. When I was growing up, there were no food banks because we did not need them. Surely, ultimately, we all agree that they are an evil sight and we would rather it was not there.

**James Cartlidge:** The hon. Gentleman speaks as if he wanted to abolish food banks. They are run by a charity that is helping people in need, and I have no problem with that. I accept that even in the wealthiest districts of

[James Cartlidge]

the wealthiest countries in the world there will be people who are struggling for one reason or another, and it is good that there is that sort of provision. The duty of the Government is to build broad policy that encourages people to improve their position in life, to earn higher wages, and to get on.

**Luke Graham:** As has been acknowledged several times in the House, just over 1.1 million people in the UK used food banks in the last year. In Germany, where pay and benefits are higher, the figure is 1.5 million every week. Although there may be some individual cases, food bank usage is a structural issue. It is not solely down to universal credit.

**James Cartlidge:** My hon. Friend has made a good point. As I said earlier, the issue of the compression of wages in certain parts of the economy is a global phenomenon. It has been seen in the United States, in particular.

Let me end by raising an important issue that I have not heard a single Opposition Member mention in all our debates on this subject. The purpose of welfare reform is not to pay out more in benefits; it is to help people into work, and that is something that we should be thinking about.

In Suffolk, we have a real problem with finding people to pick fruit in our local growing sector, and I understand that in Cornwall fruit is rotting in fields because EU workers are going home and there are not enough people to pick it. Although unemployment is very low—and I am proud of that—more than 10,000 people are unemployed in Suffolk and Cornwall, yet we say that there is no one to pick our natural abundance. I do not understand why not a single Opposition Member, at any point during any debate on welfare, ever comes up with a way to reform the system, to encourage work, and to incentivise people to go out there and get it. Moreover, I am afraid that we should consider the other side of the issue: sometimes we need stick as well as carrot. There are people who are not taking work that is available, and in my view they should be.

**Neil Gray:** The hon. Gentleman's right hon. Friend, the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith)—who designed universal credit—has said that work allowances need to be restored to retain an incentive to work as part of universal credit. Does he not accept that?

**James Cartlidge:** I think that the benefits system remains extremely generous. The difficulty for the Government is that they inherited a system in which millions of people have been taken through tax credit and made unnecessarily dependent on benefits. It is incredibly difficult to wean people off that dependency, and you do not do it by paying out more and more in benefits; all that you do is get the country into ever greater debt. I am proud that we have made the progress that we have made, but it is a difficult issue.

I am trying to focus on the fact that we are starting to see labour shortages in areas where we have 10,000 unemployed. What is going on? What malfunction is occurring in our so-called social security system? For me,

the answer is not a softening of the welfare system or the increase in benefit payments that the Opposition are calling for, because that would create even less incentive for people to go out to work. We need to understand how we are going to fill those positions as we head into Brexit and turn off the tap of cheap labour from abroad. How are we going to fill those positions with people from this country? We will have to take some very difficult decisions in regard to the economically inactive and those who remain on unemployment benefit. If the Opposition cannot see that, it shows that they did not learn any lessons when they were in government. They left us with the deficit that caused the whole mess to start off with, and they need to start understanding that welfare is not just about paying more benefits. It is about encouraging people into work and reforming the system.

5.25 pm

**Laura Smith** (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): I want to thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), who is not here at the moment, for speaking so openly. This is 2017. How can stories like that be commonplace? As we have just heard, universal credit is a perfect example of how this Government can detach themselves from the very real suffering that they have inflicted on their citizens, through the blinkered belief that they know what is best. Their main argument is to discredit the previous tax credit system, saying that it encouraged people not to enter work. As someone who had to rely on that tax credit system, I believe that I am somewhat more qualified to tell the Government about some of the real problems in the system. They include low wages, high childcare costs, huge rental expenses and extortionate bills.

The Government set about trying to label people like me as scroungers or shirkers. They should try hearing every day how people like me should not have children if they cannot afford them. Single parents, the sick and disabled are penalised by a Government who think it is okay to demonise those who are struggling, while the people controlling the system avoid paying taxes and get richer and richer. And when we call the Government out, they tell us we are scaremongering. That is their rhetoric, but this is life.

Universal credit is a system that supposedly incentivises people to get back into the workplace. Do the Government actually know what that looks like? I say to Government Members that people have no choice but to take jobs on zero-hours contracts or temporary work that could cease at any moment. They have to rely on that insecure work, while private landlords will not touch them with a bargepole. If the Government prioritised creating secure jobs with decent pay, helping families to get into safe, secure and affordable housing and helping parents practically with childcare costs, they would soon find that they had a more productive workforce and that the economy grew.

My constituency of Crewe and Nantwich had full universal credit rolled out in July this year. I will share some of the so-called success stories that have come into my office. I have a constituent who is a single parent with two children. She went to university and now works full-time in the prison service. She has to put both children into full-time childcare, but the childminders require payment up front, so the week she started her job, she had to get an overdraft to pay the



childminding fees. She made an application for universal credit, but before her first payment was even received, she had to pay for the childcare again, which was the equivalent of her take-home wage. At that stage, she had nothing. She had no wages left and no overdraft to dip into as it was totally maxed out. She was taking out loans just to feed her children, and by the time her payment came, it was only two weeks before the childcare fees were due again. She went to university to better herself and to provide for her children, but the system has plunged her into poverty and made her reliant on high interest payday loans. We put in a food bank referral for her, but she struggled to collect the parcel because of her work commitments. Thankfully, my office was able to arrange for it to be delivered; otherwise, her family would have gone hungry.

Another example is Cornelli, a self-employed mum with a child of two and a new addition on the way. She is building a photography business. With her previous child, she was able to claim tax credits alongside maternity allowance. However, under universal credit, her maternity allowance will reduce the amount of universal credit she receives, pound for pound, as it is considered a benefit. If she were not self-employed but in normal work, she would receive statutory maternity pay, which is treated as income. Under universal credit, she will be £600 a month worse off than she would be under the tax credits system. This Government are unfairly penalising the self-employed. In addition to deducting all of her maternity allowance, they have lost out on her partner's disability premium under the new system.

Finally, another example of the Government's "success" is the situation faced by Mr Rodgers, who had issues with his previous employer, who paid him for three months' work in one lump sum. Despite him uploading the wage slip to that effect on his journal, those administering universal credit now think he earned much more money in one month than he did and as such is not entitled to universal credit for that month. Had he been paid monthly, he would have been entitled to a payment each month.

Universal credit is not tailored to meet the reality of the UK economy. It needs to be adapted to be able to deal with changes in circumstances as and when they happen. Given the Government's refusal to pause and fix universal credit despite a unanimous motion in this House supporting a pause, it is even more vital that they come clean with their own assessment of the risks involved.

I stand here as a voice for my constituents, who are living and breathing this flawed system, and ask again: listen to them, please—this simply is not fair.

5.31 pm

**Andrew Bowie** (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): First, I want to comment on what was said by the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field). Having been in a similar position as a staffer for a Member of the Scottish Parliament, I well understand how a situation like the one he described can affect people. I also want to associate myself with the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) regarding the awareness of Work and Pensions Committee members of the Committee's involvement in today's motion; it would have been nice to have been alerted of our involvement, but we will let that go.

This is the fourth time we have spoken on universal credit since the election. As I said in my last contribution to the debate, that is a not a bad thing given how important and wide-ranging universal credit is, and how much impact it will have across the country. However, unlike on previous occasions, today is the first time we have heard from at least some on the Opposition Benches a partial acknowledgment of the good work being done by this Government.

As a member of the Work and Pensions Committee, I am extremely pleased that the Government have listened to our recommendations and removed the seven-day waiting period at the beginning of the process, extended the repayment timetable for advance payments, and carried housing benefit across for two weeks, which, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen), who is not in her place, said, is tremendous.

Today, however, we are debating the publication of the project assessment reviews. As the Secretary of State set out, there is a need, recognised by the Public Accounts Committee, that confidential sensitive data must be protected for commercial and other reasons. I do not think anybody with any reasonable sense would deny that. This is in the public interest, but, as has also been said, there has to be a balance, so I welcome the announcement that the Government will agree to publish the papers to the Select Committee of which I am a member, and I am looking forward to my Christmas recess reading.

We have come a long way with universal credit, and I pay tribute to my colleagues on the Committee, who have been persistent but, I believe, constructive in moving this debate forward. I also pay tribute to the Secretary of State and the Department for showing by their actions a willingness to listen and move on issues that it is agreed need to be moved on. The most responsible way for the Government to proceed now—as they are—is to take the roll-out at a steady pace and to stay the course, minimising uncertainty. This policy has been a long time in the making, and the Government are taking the right approach: rolling out universal credit slowly, listening to Members on all sides of the House, to the Work and Pensions Committee and to DWP staff, and making changes to address issues as and when they emerge.

I think everyone agrees that in a perfect world the five-week waiting period would be reduced to four weeks, which would then mirror the way that most people are paid—monthly in arrears. The issue here is not a political will or ideology, but is a technical matter which would be faced by any Government. However, the Government are compensating for this practicality issue with not only the lifeline of advance payments, but the housing benefit carry-over. The seven-day waiting period has been scrapped, the taper rate has been cut, the phone helplines are now free, advance payments are substantial and easy to receive, and people are significantly more likely to move into work than those on the old system—a system under which it made sense to work for only 16 hours a week, trapping people in the benefits system.

I find it difficult to believe that the Opposition want to see the documents simply to make constructive, realistic proposals to improve the policy. It could be that they are searching for headlines and to make political capital when the Government are pressing ahead, slowly and in a listening mode, with a policy that will affect many lives for the better, and building a

[Andrew Bowie]

welfare system that works and will help support all our constituents who are in need of it. Announcing today that the project assessment reviews will be published to the Work and Pensions Committee is yet another display of the constructive approach being taken by this Government to this incredibly important policy.

5.35 pm

**Dr Philippa Whitford** (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): On Monday last week, I spoke in the Chamber to propose a ten-minute rule Bill to try to tackle some of the organisational and administrative issues that have made universal credit worse. The most important thing that has been discussed in all these universal credit debates is obviously the waiting time and, like others, I welcome the Chancellor's reducing it to five weeks. However, contrary to what was claimed by the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross), 25% of universal credit claimants are waiting longer than six weeks now. That is a DWP figure, so it is simply not the case that no one is waiting longer than five weeks. I also welcome the increase in the advance loans to 100% and the stretching of the payback to a year, but those changes do not come in until next year. People in my constituency, which was hit on Budget day, will face exactly the same set-up that has been discussed repeatedly today.

Last Monday, I proposed some of the flexible options put forward by the Scottish Government, such as fortnightly payments and direct payments to landlords, and I call in particular for separate payments. While the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) said that they are not any use, separate payments are being promoted by women's charities as a way of avoiding financial control and manipulation. However, a ten-minute rule Bill can only discuss the things around the edges, and universal credit has major underlying problems. It is often described as simple, but rolling so many different types of people on to one benefit has proven difficult. The majority of people on universal credit includes working people who will be receiving child tax credits and working tax credits through universal credit. As has been said, the benefit will eventually be collected by 11 million people, so it is important to get things right before it reaches that scale.

One of the main issues is the benefit freeze until 2020. Inflation is already over 3% and is expected to climb due to Brexit. The average loss of earnings for unemployed people will be £500 a year, but the figure for employed households is £1,200 a year. Of that loss, 57% is due to the change in the work allowance. If the Government want to make work pay, they should return to what was proposed in 2013 and fix the work allowance. The grotesque rape clause has been well aired by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), but it is simply an exemption to another big issue: the two-child limit on tax credits. Three-quarters of a million families with three children or more will lose more than £2,500 a year, and that includes a quarter of a million one-earner families who will lose more than £3,800 a year. With the kind of income that such families have, that loss is enormous. We have already seen the number of children living in poverty increase by 400,000, and any medic or social scientist will talk about the impact that the change will have on children's lives and how it will cost more in the long term.

The Women's Budget Group has shown that 86% of all the cuts made over the past seven years have been felt by women, who tend to be at the lower end of the income scale, and by black, Asian and minority ethnic women in particular, which may be aggravated by cultural factors because they may have three or more children. The hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) talked about family planning, and no one can predict the moment at which life can change. People cannot suddenly put their child in a bin because their circumstances have changed or they have been made redundant—that is ridiculous.

My Bill called on the Government to carry out cumulative impact assessments that consider gender and race. We have been calling for the roll-out to be paused and fixed, and we have heard in the past week that it will be paused, but it will be paused between February and April. Good luck to those whose constituencies will not be hit, as mine is, going into the Christmas and new year period, but why is the roll-out not being paused now so that, as we go through the hardest bit of winter, the reforms agreed by the Chancellor can be enacted? The roll-out needs to be changed, and the pause should be now, not next February.

5.40 pm

**Wendy Morton** (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's response earlier this afternoon, not least on the release of the project assessment reports on which the motion focuses.

The Secretary of State addressed the need for transparency and scrutiny, and he highlighted how the Public Accounts Committee and others have scrutinised universal credit. I am sure universal credit will continue to be scrutinised both in this Chamber and in Committee as we continue with the roll-out, as is right and proper. He also mentioned the importance of not weakening any commercial negotiating position, of protecting information, as appropriate, and of making sure that we maintain an effective system in the public interest. It is important that the right balance continues to be struck in our deliberations.

I welcome the Secretary of State's announcement that he will provide the papers to the Work and Pensions Committee; as he said, it is important to recognise that this is an exceptional request. The assessments will be provided subject to redaction and on a confidential basis, but their release gives the Select Committee the opportunity to see the information.

I have contributed to previous debates on universal credit, which is fundamentally about creating a welfare system that helps people into work and supports those who need help while being fair to those who pay for it. We introduced universal credit to ensure that work always pays. Merging six benefits into one simpler, fairer system makes sense. Jobseekers are able to spend more time looking for work. They are more likely to consider jobs and, compared with the old system, they are taking on more jobs or hours.

**Stephen Lloyd:** I totally endorse what the hon. Lady says about making work pay. What is her answer to my charge earlier that, from 2015, the Government have been taking £3 billion per annum from universal credit via the work allowance? Does that make work pay?

**Wendy Morton:** At the heart of universal credit is a system that makes work pay and helps people into work. One of the fundamental things it does is give people more support in their local jobcentre.

Since the start of the roll-out of universal credit, this Government have continued to listen and have continued to review the programme. In many circumstances, new projects and new programmes have to be continually reviewed as they go along, and this Government are doing exactly the right thing.

When it comes to getting people into work, alongside having people to help and support them through that process, a good education is fundamental. We must not lose sight of the fact that, under this Government, there are more than 1.9 million more children in good or outstanding schools, and standards are rising. The number of children in workless households is now at a 20-year low.

We have created more than 3 million apprenticeships since May 2010, and we have committed to delivering 3 million apprenticeships between 2015 and 2020. Those apprenticeships are developing skills for the workplace. They are helping people into work, helping people stay in work, helping our businesses to develop for the future and helping to develop our economy. Whereas under Labour the number of young people not in education, employment or training went up by a third, unemployment is now at its lowest since 1975. This Government are creating the opportunities for young people. When there are jobs and apprenticeships, that also helps jobcentres to get people into work.

Reforms to the skills and education system are also important in making sure that young people are equipped to get those jobs. We need to invest in technology and in skills that will help and support people, and help this country thrive in new and emerging economies. It is this Government who are helping people, which is why I am disappointed to have sat through a lot of this debate and heard scaremongering stories from Opposition Members. I do not think that helps anybody. It does not help those people who on benefit or those who may be needing to go on to UC. We should be working constructively, working together to create those opportunities for everybody to benefit.

In my constituency, we do not yet have UC, but a lot of preparation is already going on in advance of the roll-out. It is being done through our jobcentre, which I visited a few months ago, when I was really impressed by the hard work and effort the people there were putting in to get ready for the moment of roll-out next year. I was impressed at how they were already starting, through their systems and their local knowledge, to identify the people who might need that little extra support to find their way through the new system—that is important. Our local housing association, Walsall Housing Group, is already starting to make preparations and look at helping people through this transition period. So let us not lose sight of that. There are always sad cases and people who get into difficulties, and the system has to be there for them, but let us also not forget that, despite the protestations from Opposition Members, there are many positive stories. My hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) is not in her place, but she has had the roll-out in her constituency and she can see the benefits it is bringing.

Time is short, so I am going to end on one important quote from the Trussell Trust. On the Budget, it said:

“We welcome the Chancellor’s announcement today of a package to address concerns around the operational delivery of Universal Credit. Cutting the waiting time by seven days, modifying the advance payment system, and ensuring that people will continue receiving housing benefit for two weeks after moving onto the new system, will ease the pressure on thousands of households”.

5.47 pm

**Laura Pidcock** (North West Durham) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) for securing this debate and pursuing this issue. This is probably going to be the last time I speak in this place on this issue before UC is rolled out in my constituency on 13 December. That is a daunting prospect, not because I have just made things up or because I am scaremongering, but because of everything that every advice and support agency in my constituency has told me about this system.

I also want to refute some of the things that have been said by Conservative Members. This is about people in work. They talk about people getting into work quicker, but more than 50% of people on UC are in work, so this is a problem for those people. I refute the idea that this is not about austerity, because the Institute for Fiscal Studies has said that by 2022 £12 billion will come from the welfare budget. If that is not about austerity, I do not know what is. Before campaigning on an issue, you must be sure you are doing it in the best interest of all your constituents and that it is something important to them. I am absolutely convinced that UC is one such issue.

It is right that we separate the delivery of this system from the design, because the people in jobcentres could not be working any harder to prepare for this roll-out. The idea that when jobcentre staff get a visit from a Member from the ruling party they are able to sit down and tell them, in all its glory, about the difficulties and the problems they are facing just completely ignores the power dynamics between that member of staff and somebody from this place.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Laura Pidcock:** I will not give way. If you do not acknowledge that power dynamics exist—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing):** Order. The hon. Lady must not say you. I advise everyone else who has a speech written out to look through it and score out the yous.

**Laura Pidcock:** Conservative Members will not acknowledge that power dynamics sometimes prevent the truth from being heard.

**Dr Whitford:** Is the issue not partly the fact that we hear Members talking about meeting DWP staff, but they then say that they do not have the full roll-out? They should come back to talk in the Chamber when they do.

**Laura Pidcock** *rose*—

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Laura Pidcock:** I am not going to give way, so Conservative Members should save their energy.

Colleagues on the Opposition Benches have conveyed their deep unrest at the system, not to score political points but to try to get the Government to see what we see: people in work and out of work enduring what is essentially an ill-thought-out experiment. It is an experiment built on deeply flawed assumptions about what causes worklessness and what creates low pay. It is based on a deeply flawed model of what traps people in a cycle of debt and financial crisis, and it is a deeply flawed ideology that labels workers and people unable to work with the worst of motivations rather than the best, created by people who, if I am honest, know little or nothing about poverty and what it means to struggle in that poverty.

Leaving aside the ideological differences, the practical issues are enough to go on alone. We have listed them in this place time and again. We have had meetings with the Secretary of State. We have written letters and held evidence sessions. We have listened cumulatively to thousands and thousands of people, from claimants to advice agencies, about the chaos the system brings, and we have witnessed the fear that people are experiencing or anticipating.

Let me say what is still wrong with the system: the wait is still too long, the advance payments are still a loan, the disability premium remains removed, explicit consent is still a barrier and universal credit still penalises people with fluctuating wages. There is still uncertainty about claimants' entitlement to free school meals, prescription exemptions and Healthy Start vouchers. Private landlords are still wary about having universal credit claimants as tenants and housing associations are still anticipating arrears. So, I was not cheering and whooping at the Chancellor's announcements. On all the things we raised that the Government conceded on, there was originally no acknowledgement that there was a problem.

On behalf of my constituents, I would like to know why the Government are rolling out this system in Consett and Crook jobcentres on 13 December. Who thought that was a sensible idea? Who on earth signed it off? I still do not have an answer to that. At a time of year when people quite rightly take leave and endure increased costs because of all the difficulties of winter, who signed that off?

The Opposition, backed by some brilliant campaign groups, have won victories against the Government, including concessions on phone-line charges, the increase in advance payment entitlement and the repayment schedule, and the removal of the seven-day waiting period. But let us be under no illusions at all: the Government would not have conceded on any of those points were it not for the political pressure and the activism of those groups. We need more popular resistance to this Government, who have repeatedly told us that everything is fine. Everything is fine, until they concede on another wholly inappropriate part of the universal credit system, so to find out that they have been withholding the publishing of papers—reports that potentially give us the facts to support everything that we know and have been saying is already going on—feels like a betrayal.

I want to see the papers and I want the Work and Pensions Committee to see them in time, before universal credit is rolled out in my constituency on 13 December.

The Select Committee will not have time to analyse the information before the system is rolled out. I do not think any of us can buy the argument that the content cannot be shared while retaining the anonymity of those surveyed. Of course these assessments can be published. Let us be honest: the Government are embarrassed. The hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley) said earlier that the Opposition were trying to embarrass the Government; no, the Government are embarrassed about this system. They are hell-bent on continuing the roll-out of this system, irrespective of the evidence. As I have already said—

**James Cartlidge:** Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Laura Pidcock:** I am not giving way to Government Members. I have heard enough of their contributions about my community. I have sat here for hours. I want to say my piece and then continue to listen to the rest of the debate.

The Select Committee will not have time to analyse the evidence. The announcements that were made by the Chancellor will not take effect until next year, so they mean nothing to the people in my constituency. I beg this Government to please pause the roll-out in North West Durham.

5.54 pm

**Stephen Kerr** (Stirling) (Con): I am pleased to follow the “to the barricades” speech of the hon. Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock). I can assure her that if she joined me in visiting DWP staff at Randolphfield, Stirling, she would find that they are far from supine, as she alleges. They will absolutely tell me what is going on, and I count on that and am grateful for it.

**Tom Tugendhat** (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): To suggest that DWP workers, who work with such integrity and courage in Tonbridge and other areas around my constituency, do not speak out when they are asked is to malign them. These are people with integrity and courage who work incredibly hard.

**Laura Pidcock:** On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I said that members of the Department for Work and Pensions work very, very hard. I did not—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing):** Order. That is not a point of order. If the hon. Lady wishes to make that point, she will have to intervene on the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), who currently has the Floor. Whether or not he takes her intervention would be a matter of great interest.

**Stephen Kerr:** I can assure the House that the professionalism and dedication of DWP staff are not in question. I especially pay tribute to DWP staff in Stirling, who are doing a magnificent job in delivering this radical change—there is no question but that it is a massive change. That is why the Government are taking their approach to rolling it out, for which I applaud them.

I also warmly welcome the changes that were announced in the Budget. They went a very long way to meeting the concerns that I and other Members have expressed to the Government. I welcome the Secretary of State's

speech, and I also compliment the Minister for Employment for the detail that he continues to give to all of us who have a genuine interest in the success of universal credit. It is a major reform and it is long overdue. As we have rehearsed so often in these debates, it is a programme that encourages and facilitates a return to work by mirroring the world of work through its processes.

Of course problems arise when there is such a dramatic change, especially when it comes to the vulnerable in our society. When we try to encourage people to cope with making their own decisions and to stand on their own two feet, it is not easy, but that is the whole essence of welfare—to help people to help themselves. Surely that is a noble objective to which we can all subscribe.

Time is against me, but I want to mention some specific points that I would like the Minister to consider. DWP staff used to have a database of people—I believe that it was called the Apollo list—whom they could speak to about a specific case, but that ceased to exist in June. One of the main problems that remains is the capacity of DWP staff to talk to individuals—I am thinking about more than one for a particular case. I ask that this list of accredited and trusted partners is reinstated so that DWP staff can talk to a wider range of people, whom I would describe as being in the circle of concern for claimants, particularly those who struggle, who have learning difficulties or disabilities, or who, frankly—I say this with the greatest of respect—lead what can only be described as a chaotic lifestyle and need additional help.

Secondly money can be recouped from universal credit payments for a variety of bona fide reasons—council tax arrears, rent arrears, sheriff court fines or whatever. That is all well and good, but there has to be closer scrutiny of the minimum amount that people can be left to live on, otherwise we can cause unintended hardship. I would like to see a little more discretion in how those deductions are made.

Thirdly there have been some instances of universal credit overpayments. In such cases, there are attempts to recover the money, which is right and proper, but it feels as though DWP staff had more discretion in the past about how they went about recovering money. I would like the DWP to consider how it organises its staff and how they operate in front of claimants.

Fourthly, there is the issue of overpayments relating to local housing allowances. In some cases, payments have been made on the basis of full rent, but then there has been a reference to the local housing allowance, and it is discovered that there have been overpayments. There is then a request for a refund. Frankly, the process gets rather messy, because people have usually either spent the money, or paid it in rent. Perhaps these things could be addressed more directly and quickly if there were a circle of concern and a greater possibility of intervention by accredited partners.

Another concern I will add to my list is about the DWP's capacity to provide visiting officers and outreach in rural areas. It is undoubtedly the case that applicants from rural areas face difficulties when they are required to attend jobcentres for interview, ID verification or ongoing appointments. The whole experience of going into DWP offices can be too much for some people. I am only talking about small numbers, but if the programme is to be a success—I ask Opposition Members to stop trying to pull this whole thing down—we need to be attentive to the needs of the most vulnerable.

**Jamie Stone:** I refer yet again to my vast and very remote constituency. I wholeheartedly endorse the hon. Gentleman's point, because I have visited DWP staff in Wick in my constituency. I recognise how hard they are working and that they are doing their very best, but travelling to meet clients—if that is what we call them—in the far north-west of Sutherland is an almost impossible task.

**Stephen Kerr:** That is one dimension. Another aspect that I am trying to highlight is the fact that some people need to be visited in their homes, but the DWP does not have the capacity to do that. For example, there are only two people who make such visits in the whole Forth Valley area, and they are overworked.

The process when someone is required to present themselves to provide ID verification can get a bit messy, as people do not always have the ID that they need. Not everyone has a passport or a driving licence, so further interventions are required from other agencies. It is logical for a patient to ask their GP to verify their ID, because surgeries can produce documents, but GP surgeries in my constituency are saying, "Hang on, that's not our job. We're not going to give you this information because it is really the DWP that should be talking to us about your identity." The suggestion that some GP surgeries might begin to charge for such services causes me grave concern.

Time is against me, so I will conclude on the issue of joint claims and split payments. I have concerns about the way in which these payments are being handled. I have spoken to a number of women's charities, such as Stirling and District Women's Aid, that have explained why we need to adopt a more flexible approach to split payments. For example, payments for joint claimants should be made into either a joint bank account or separate bank accounts. That would protect the most vulnerable people in society—women with young children who are on the receiving end of a rather brutal existence at the hands of some miscreant men.

Finally, we should not be afraid of measurement and reporting, so I welcome the Government's approach to that. When performance is measured, it improves, and when that performance is reported, the rate of improvement accelerates. That cannot be a bad thing.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. The time limit on Back-Bench speeches will have to be reduced to five minutes, with immediate effect.

6.4 pm

**Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It was the former hon. Member for Foyle, Mark Durkan, who is sadly missed in this place, who once referred to Opposition day debates as being like a silent disco: the Opposition talk about the motion on the Order Paper, and Government Members talk about something that might have a tenuous link to the motion on the Order Paper. In this debate, some Conservative Members—rather naughtily I thought, Mr Speaker—have questioned occupants of the Chair as to whether the motion is actually in order. I should have thought that the fact that it is on the Order Paper would suggest that it is in order.

[Chris Stephens]

Given that this is pantomime season, we have seen a competition on the Government Benches as to who their top pantomime villain is—[*Interruption.*] Well, he was pulled up. We almost, but not quite, had the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) suggesting some sort of corporal punishment for the unemployed when he was talking about using the big stick. I thought that that was completely and utterly outrageous.

**James Cartlidge:** I was simply saying that, when we have a massive lack of labour—for picking fruit, for example—and thousands of people unemployed, we have to ask ourselves what is wrong in the benefit system that we are not getting people to fill those positions. That is not calling for corporal punishment; it is a perfectly fair thing to ask for.

**Chris Stephens:** I asked a number of my hon. Friends before I rose to speak whether the hon. Gentleman seemed to suggest some sort of corporal punishment, and I have to say that they thought that he did.

I want to talk about the Information Commissioner, because what has happened is quite strange. The DWP appealed to the Information Commissioner over the publication of a 2011 report and then went to the first-tier tribunal, but the appeal was not upheld. Having been told that it had to publish that report, why is the Department now blocking further such reports—from May 2012, February 2013, June 2013, March 2014 and March 2015? I hope that the Minister will explain why the Department, having previously lost decisions at tribunal and been forced to respond to freedom of information requests, is choosing to appeal now.

The report from the Information Commissioner is particularly devastating for the Government. It even quotes a National Audit Office report, saying that it stated that a project assessment review report from February 2013

“raised serious concerns about the UCP which lead ‘to a reset of the programme between February and May 2013.’”

I think the Work and Pensions Committee, of which I am a member, has the right to review these reports, and also to look quite specifically at what recommendations have been brought forward and which of them the Department has not acted on. Could the issues covered include telephone calls and telephone charges—something I have been campaigning about since I came to this place two and a half years ago? Has a previous report suggested that calls to the Department for Work and Pensions should be free? Have recommendations been made, for example, regarding the difficulty faced by those who have to rely on a text relay operator or to use Minicom services—another issue I have raised recently? The Select Committee heard rather disturbing evidence of people having to use the text relay operator service who waited 45 to 50 minutes to contact someone, but found that they were hung up on. That is something the Department should urgently address, and the same applies to Minicom services. Did these project assessment reviews look at the closure of jobcentres? We have seen the Department’s proposals for the closure of hundreds of jobcentres across the UK.

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** While I share my hon. Friend’s outrage, he surely cannot be surprised. When it

came to the closure of half of Glasgow’s jobcentres, not a single equality impact assessment was published, despite calls for the Department to do so.

**Chris Stephens:** I agree entirely. There is a significant problem of equality impact assessments not being published, not only by the Department for Work and Pensions but across the board. Last year, I tabled parliamentary questions to each and every UK Government Department and found that not one equality impact assessment had been carried out under their change and reform programmes.

Universal credit potentially affects 11 million UK citizens. That is why I look forward to the Select Committee receiving these reports and checking whether the Government acted on the recommendations that we had provided to them. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) that the reports should not just be going to the Select Committee, because the general public have a right to review them to find out whether the Government have been acting on their recommendations.

There has been a lot of heat in the debate on universal credit. We have heard some suggestions that food banks are a good thing, but food banks are not part of the social security system of this country. In 2010, 61,400 food parcels were delivered to citizens across the UK. The figure for this year, so far, is 1,182,594. If there can be any suggestion at all that austerity is working, it certainly does not seem to be working for the poorest and most vulnerable in our society.

6.11 pm

**Michael Tomlinson** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak on this subject yet again. As we have heard, it is the sixth debate on universal credit in this Parliament and the fourth in the past eight weeks. This gives me another opportunity to reiterate my support for universal credit, which encourages people to get into work and supports them while they are in work, with the overriding aim of simplifying an overly bureaucratic and complicated system by rolling six benefits into one.

However, the title of this debate is slightly different from the others, referring as it does to project assessment reviews carried out between 2012 and 2015, and subsequent documents as well. I wondered what the reason was for that. I suspect that the answer lies in three points. First, Labour Members think that there is a clever parliamentary tactic in tabling motions of this sort. Secondly, no particular benefit can be gained by looking at documents dating back to 2012 to 2015. That point has been made by other hon. Members, and it must be right—we have moved on significantly since then.

Thirdly, Labour Members appear not to not believe in the advantages of the universal credit system, as we have heard again in some of the speeches this afternoon. They risk sounding as though they think that the legacy system was all perfect whereas this system is not. That is not right. The legacy system was complex and bureaucratic. It trapped people into working for a limited period of only 16 hours. I am sure that we have all had constituents, as I have, who did not take on additional work because they calculated that they were better off staying on benefits in the legacy system than getting into work. I do not criticise that, because it was a perfectly logical

and reasonable decision to make—I criticise the legacy system and the position that my constituents were put in at the time.

**Ruth George:** Does the hon. Gentleman accept that under the tax credits system, working people could earn up to £5,000 a year more and still keep their working tax credit without losing a penny of it? I very much hope that he advised his constituents of that when they came to him for advice.

**Michael Tomlinson:** The “big bang” roll-out of the tax credits system was an absolute disaster that many of our constituents had to live through for a number of years.

I am disappointed that this motion fails to mention and to acknowledge the good words that we heard from the Chancellor—and not just words, but the additional £1.5 billion that was put in. Some hon. Members have mentioned it, but it could have been put into the motion. The shadow Secretary of State did say that she welcomed those measures, but what she said sounded a little bit mealy-mouthed, certainly to my ears. The hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) mentioned his support in principle for universal credit. I very much enjoyed listening to him speak, as I always do. He said that he was short of time, and I wish that he had had more time to develop his speech and take more interventions. It was a shame that he did not, because he was correct to say that the principle of universal credit is absolutely right. It was good to hear the SNP’s support for it.

In relation to the Budget, I have welcomed the £1.5 billion extra and the reduction in the waiting period. I want the Minister to address this specific question: can he confirm that there was a seven-day wait in the legacy system, and that we have now reduced the wait to zero days, making it shorter than it was even under the legacy system? I particularly welcome, as other Members have done, the payment of two weeks’ housing benefit element, which will not be repayable. That will help the most vulnerable to transition on to universal credit. Too often, during the debate, we heard reference to five weeks’ or six weeks’ wait, but we have not had clarity about the fact that people can get a payment within five days of applying, or even on the day. I am sure that the Minister will confirm that when he gets to his feet.

I welcome the additional support, and it is disappointing that people have not been more vocal about it. But Citizens Advice Scotland, Citizens Advice, the chief executive of St Mungo’s and the chief executive of the Trussell Trust—my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) gave the full quote—have all voiced their support for the scheme.

I would like to mention another myth: the allegation that the universal credit hotline was a premium phone line, which of course it is not. I would be grateful if the Minister confirmed that the hotline is now free, and that by the end of the year all phone calls to the Department will be free. I welcome the opportunity to set out the advantages of the system and the additional money that has gone in to help the most vulnerable to transition on to universal credit. We should look to transfer the most vulnerable not only on to universal credit, but into work, and I believe that that is what the system does.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Five hon. Members are still seeking to catch my eye. I have no difficulty at all with each of them speaking for five minutes, but I warn them that their Front Benchers might, as the winding-up speeches will start late. If they are unbothered by the imperious glances of those who sit in front of them, so am I.

6.17 pm

**Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab):** As someone who has worked for the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers on behalf of low-paid shop workers for nearly 20 years, I have been banging on about universal credit for many a year. It is a pleasure to see so many Members across both sides of the House taking such an interest in the policy. We are not surprised by that, because the policy will affect not just the 7 million households who will become claimants—an average of 10,800 households in each constituency—but the 2.5 million households who are currently on legacy benefits and will cease to receive anything because of the cuts to universal credit.

I welcome the constructive comments made by Members on both sides of the House about universal credit, and I have always tried to be constructive when I address the policy. I have set up the all-party group on universal credit, and I am pleased to see contributions being made to that group by Members from all parts of the House. I sit on the Work and Pensions Committee, which will be pleased to receive the report.

If the Government are open about scrutiny and they really want to learn and fix universal credit, why are they not publishing an impact assessment on it? It is not just about the reports; we last had an impact assessment on universal credit five years ago, almost to the day. Since then, almost £5 billion a year has been cut from that policy. The last impact assessment for universal credit stated:

“A comprehensive evaluation programme is being developed... The evaluation will need to meet the immediate need for feedback and evidence on implementation issues”.

Apparently, the evaluation programme will include

“ongoing monitoring, evaluation and analysis; a ‘live running review’ of implementation and delivery; a fuller evaluation of implementation and delivery and ongoing analysis of outcomes and impacts.”

I want the Minister to answer this question when he replies to the debate: where are those assessments of universal credit that the impact assessment of December 2012 said would be put in place? Have they actually been produced? If not, why not? If they have been produced, following that commitment, why have they not been published? Why have we waited for five years and seen £5 billion of cuts but still not seen any evidence from the Conservative party on how universal credit is affecting the hundreds of thousands of people now receiving it, and on how it will affect millions in future?

At the very least there should have been an assessment of the impact of those cuts from the July 2015 Budget. That Budget cut £3.2 billion from work allowances and nearly £1.5 billion with the two-child policy, but it was left to the IFS to tell us that 3 million working households with children will be £2,500 a year worse off and that work incentives for single parents and couples who both

[Ruth George]

work are actually weakened under universal credit now that the work allowances have been cut.

Unlike under tax credits, if universal credit claimants work overtime, their next month's universal credit payment is docked by 63% of whatever they earn. Where is the work incentive in that? If a parent earns an extra £100 in the run-up to Christmas to try to pay for some presents and give their family a decent holiday, they will see their next universal credit payment cut by £63. That is not a work incentive.

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The hon. Lady is speaking very well, and I am glad that she is raising these issues. Is she aware that for some families who now fall victim to the family cap on universal credit it does not pay to go out to work, because work will pay them less than the nursery fees required if they have a third child?

**Ruth George:** Absolutely. Childcare is a key issue when families are trying to raise themselves out of poverty, as the hon. Lady rightly says. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has found that 30% of children are now in poverty, and nearly two thirds of those are in working households. Some 8 million adults live in poverty in a household where someone is in work.

Universal credit was meant to address the problems of poverty and work incentives. It does not. The Government are refusing to publish the evidence needed to fix their own policy, which they claim is what they want to do. If they really want to fix universal credit before it is rolled out to another 6 million families, they need to publish not just these reports but a full impact assessment, laying their policy and themselves open to the scrutiny that this House and the public deserve.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** Further interventions will eat significantly into the time available for the winding-up speeches. I simply make that point and leave colleagues to their own devices.

6.23 pm

**Chris Green** (Bolton West) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George), who brings such a wealth of knowledge to this important subject. I welcome the fact that this is the sixth debate on universal credit in this Parliament, which shows the importance that we attach to the matter, on the Opposition side and on the Government side, given the contributions we have been making.

I also welcome the Secretary of State's decision to release the project assessment review reports. I think that transparency and openness is incredibly important, but we do have to be a little cautious on this, because we also need to foster within Departments, especially if they are doing innovative projects, a culture of honesty, open exchange and frank and honest discussion. We must always have that balance, but I welcome the fact that the Work and Pensions Committee will receive the reports.

The purpose of scrutiny should be, at least partly, to drive reform. We need reform in all parts of Government and in what Government do, especially when we introduce

new policies and ideas that try to change people's lives radically. However, we must be cautious about how we use the data, some of which goes back to 2012. I am not sure how valuable or important data that goes back that far will be.

I do not accuse any Opposition Member of scaremongering, but there have been instances of scaremongering recently. Only last week, the BBC had to apologise because what they said made people fear what would happen over Christmas. The BBC apologised for that scaremongering, so we must bear that in mind when we consider data and its use.

We should acknowledge the reforms that the Government have delivered. I believe that they are a listening Government, especially the Department for Work and Pensions, and they have delivered numerous reforms in recent months.

The focus on the fix as opposed to the pause is incredibly important. The waiting days, the telephone costs and the six-week wait have been cut. The advances will become more accessible—that is important in the run-up to Christmas—and there will be payback over 12 months. People will be able to get an advance within one week and, in instances of the most pressing need, on the same day. There are also improved options of direct payment to landlords. A key change, which I really appreciate and I think many people will appreciate in the roll-out of universal credit in the coming year, is the two-week housing benefit payment, which does not have to be paid back. That is an important contribution, which means that when people go on to universal credit, that support is there from the beginning.

Further improvements are needed, especially for those who are self-employed. We need to look at the taper rates for work allowance and to increase the discretion of jobcentre staff in dealing with the most difficult cases. We should trust those who work in jobcentres when they deal with such cases.

I am pleased that the focus of the debate has been on the "fix" element and that the success of the Secretary of State and his team in delivering reform has been recognised. We need more reform, but I believe that universal credit is a mechanism to make work pay and lift people out of poverty. It is much better than Labour's scheme, which created so much welfare dependency and a malign poverty trap.

6.27 pm

**John Woodcock** (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow that speech, which at least had the merit of sounding less like a combative deaf cat than some Conservative Members' speeches.

The debate has been depressing, partly because of the heart-rending stories that some colleagues have told. In Barrow and Furness, too, there has been increasing poverty and desperation in recent years. Our referrals to food banks are up by around two thirds on this time last year. People are trying to do their best, but they are struggling and they are frightened. I shall say more about scaremongering shortly.

The debate has also been depressing because some of the speeches made by Government Members bear little resemblance to their constituents' reality. I do not think that that is because most of them are intrinsically bad people, but something happens when



we get into this Chamber, and people feel an obligation to parrot the lines they are given by their Whip or Department.

I was a special adviser in the last Labour Government in the Department for Work and Pensions and we considered universal credit—it was our long-term goal, too. There were good reasons for choosing not to go ahead with it at the time, and they are writ large in what is happening now. It is not that universal credit is a bad thing. In principle, we think it is a good thing, but to call the changes transformative—I mean, come on, look at it! The system does not even come close to the level of investment needed, both in terms of the payments made to families and of the support offered to get people back to work, to call it transformative.

**Stephen Lloyd:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**John Woodcock:** I will not, I am afraid, because we are so short of time.

The previous Labour Government were guilty of this rhetoric to an extent. I gently remind some Conservative Members, who may not have been here then, that we pursued a path of welfare reform. It was seen as dangerous at the time, although in fact it should have gone further and faster. There was a significant period when the shadow Work and Pensions Secretary, who is now the Chancellor of the Exchequer, said that we should not have made some of those changes. We were sometimes guilty of claiming that the reforms would transform people's lives, but enough changes were never made to be able to make that so.

On the way in which the reforms are being implemented, "scaremongering" is a term that is bandied around a lot, but if Members want, with justification, to accuse people of scaremongering, they have to be confident about what the future will be for this benefit. The case studies my right hon. and hon. Friends have outlined today show the huge problems with the roll-out of universal credit. The recent history of benefit delivery by the Department for Work and Pensions and the people it has contracted makes it impossible to get to a place where we could think that this is all going to be fine, no matter the good intentions behind the changes, which are welcome in so far as they correct some of the glaring injustices of the system as it stood.

For the people of Barrow and Furness, the full transition to universal credit has been delayed until 18 July. There has, rightly, been much passionate talk about the dangers of a transition over the Christmas period. I fear for my constituents. I signed the Bill on holiday hunger introduced by my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field). I fear for families who struggle to feed their children over the holidays in the best of times. We need much less complacency from the Government and a sense that they are prepared to grip this problem. The problems are clearly already stacking up. That will continue and they need to be dealt with by the time my constituents go on fully to universal credit.

6.32 pm

**Kelly Tolhurst** (Rochester and Strood) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for calling me to speak in this very important debate today about universal credit.

Universal credit has been debated extensively over recent weeks and still the Opposition's dialogue on universal credit is concerning. I am unsure about their

real objective. The Opposition say they support the idea of universal credit, but their dialogue says something different and continues to cause distress among potential claimants and those waiting to switch over to universal credit.

Universal credit is a good thing. This system and its implementation is long overdue. It is a system within the welfare system to help to encourage people back to work. Universal credit is designed to replace the old outdated system, which has done very little to give people the help and the confidence they need to get back into work. It has for too long trapped them into working only 16 hours a week for fear of risking their benefits, or having to pay back large sums of money. This is about fairness and helping people when they need it most—people who have fallen into difficult situations and need to be supported with a system that is flexible enough for their specific circumstances to be taken into consideration. If the Opposition feel that the status quo is a preferred option, they really are sadly mistaken.

The new system takes six different benefits payments and makes them into one single payment. The roll-out from Government has, correctly, been slow and measured over a nine-year period. In my opinion, it is being done with care. That has allowed the Government to assess how the system is working. With any new system, however, there are always things that need to be modified and improved during implementation. Our debates over recent weeks have shown exactly that.

In my own area, universal credit roll-out has been put back until next May. The roll-out in my constituency will include the announcements in the Budget: the increase in advance payments of percentages up to 100% and available within five days of claims being made; claims able to be made online; the removal of the seven-day waiting period, meaning that entitlement starts on the first day; people already on housing benefit able to continue receiving it for two weeks after their universal credit claim; and the Government to make it easier for people to ask for the housing element to be paid directly to their landlord.

As of the summer, nearly 40% of universal credit claimants were in work. In my constituency, as of October, the claimant count of unemployed people was 2.1%—a total of 1,165 people. The Government are completely focused on helping people when they need it—helping people move forward with their lives—without losing sight of fairness. In 13 years of Labour Government, we saw people being trapped on benefits, and made better off on benefits. That is what we would have again under a Labour Government—policies that make it hard for people to achieve their aspirations and which do not give the people of this country the respect they deserve and need to move out of difficult times. I regard that as an insult.

Some 82% of the people claiming universal credit reported that they were satisfied or very satisfied with the service. I say again: do the Opposition not accept or realise that the old system is not working? Do they not understand that people want to move into work and stay there, and want the state to help them achieve that? I welcome the Secretary of State's response and the willingness to share the details of the review with the Select Committee, but I am deeply concerned by this continual scaremongering by the Opposition. The suggestion that the Government, and in turn me, do not

[Kelly Tolhurst]

care about people in need of help and are deliberately trying to harm them, and the suggestion that no one on benefits can manage their own lives, are quite frankly offensive.

When I was first elected in 2015, our constituents expressed a clear will: they wanted welfare reform. That is what the Government are delivering, along with their vision for developing our economy, providing better jobs, higher wages and a better quality of life, and securing a better future for Britain.

6.37 pm

**Mr Simon Clarke** (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): I have never been in any doubt that my constituents understand the need to support each other through our welfare state. It is with quiet compassion, rather than resentment, that taxpayers see a portion of their labour dedicated to assisting those whom life has dealt an unfair or unforgiving hand. It was my two-year-old's birthday party at the weekend. I listened with something akin to a tear in my eye to the moving comments of the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) about the child choosing between a present and food. It must surely be our common state of mind that we want a welfare system in which that is not a choice that any child has to face, and that is why it is so important we get welfare reform right.

The Government have designed universal credit precisely to deliver that ambition. Let us be clear: the welfare system we inherited—the legacy system—was profoundly socially and economically damaging, and in few places was it more so than in my constituency. The system trapped millions of people on out-of-work benefits for the entire course of Labour's last decade in office and created what Fraser Nelson, editor of *The Spectator*, rightly called the most expensive poverty in the world. We can surely do better than that.

Year after year, it was not just money we squandered, it was human potential—human lives were being damaged by our getting this wrong. We perpetuated dependency on the state with scant concern for the dignity, confidence and independence of the most vulnerable in our society. I welcome the Secretary of State's decision to publish the papers today, but we do not need supposedly secret papers to tell us that under Labour those trying to move into work stood to lose up to 90% of their earnings. Similarly, those already in work who wanted to increase their hours would have had to forfeit more than 80% of any increased earnings through a combination of withdrawn benefits and higher tax. Those were perverse incentives. The system did not help the recipients of welfare provision, it did not help people into work, and it left taxpayers feeling frustrated about the fact that their money was being used to perpetuate a problem rather than resolve it.

Universal credit stacks the incentives to ensure that work does pay. It is not perfect—we are not even halfway through the implementation phase—but we already see statistical data which show that claimants are 4% more likely to be in work within six months than their counterparts on jobseeker's allowance. There are 3 million more people in work than there were in 2010; 600,000 fewer people are living in absolute poverty; and three quarters of the total number of children in workless

families have been lifted out of poverty because their parents have been able to get full-time jobs. Those are achievements of which I am proud, and which I will defend.

Has the process of transition been perfect, and have the Government always got everything right first time? No, but that was in the nature of the system. What is important is how the Government respond. When there were cash-flow difficulties during the wait before the first payment, the Government abolished the initial seven-day waiting period, and they have now made available a full month's payment in advance. When problems arose with rent arrears, the Government created the landlord portal and the trusted partner scheme, and committed themselves to a two-week continuation of housing benefit during the start of a universal credit claim. They have demonstrated repeatedly that they are receptive to feedback, and have acted decisively when necessary. We have seen the £1.5 billion additional investment package for roll-out, the delay in implementation from five years to nine, the adoption of Freephone helplines, the reduction in the taper rate, and the ability of families to claim back up to 85% of their childcare costs as they move into work—which is significantly more than they could claim under the previous system.

It is right, of course, that the Government are challenged, scrutinised and lobbied to make sensible reforms. I pay tribute to the work of Members on both sides of the House—particularly my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen), who was so eloquent, not only in her words but through her tears, as she spoke of how much it mattered for us to get this right. But when we hear talk of Dickensian Christmases and Tiny Tim, and suggestions that the Government's sole purpose is to sadistically inflict suffering, I question whether those accusations are made in good faith, and whether they will yield the benefits that we all want to see.

We are as one, surely, in our compassion for our constituents. We want a welfare system that is fair not only to those in need, but to those who are striving to find work. I represent a constituency that was once represented by Ellen Wilkinson, who led the Jarrow march. The belief that a better world is possible is something that we all share and aspire to. We have a system that is capable of ongoing reform to deliver that, which is why I commend it to the House today.

6.42 pm

**Margaret Greenwood** (Wirral West) (Lab): This has been an important debate. We have heard some excellent contributions, in which Members have raised the broad range of issues that remain to be addressed by the Government in relation to universal credit and the problems arising from its design and implementation. Those contributions have been, by turn, insightful, constructive, passionate, and at times emotional, particularly those of my hon. Friends the Members for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith), for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) and for High Peak (Ruth George).

Opposition Members welcome the statement that the Secretary of State has made about the project assessment reviews, but it is disappointing that this would never have happened if we had not tabled the motion. We look forward to the handing over of the reports to the Work and Pensions Committee, and we hope that there

will not be too many redactions, which would render them valueless. We also look forward to the consequent recommendations of the Committee—which may, of course, consider wider publication in the public interest, given the view of the Information Commissioner. The Secretary of State’s announcement does not get away from the fact that the Information Commissioner has asked for the reports to be put in the public domain, and I ask him to give serious thought to the commissioner’s instruction and make the reports public.

Between 2012 and 2015, five project assessment reviews of universal credit were carried out by the Government’s Major Projects Authority, which is now known as the Infrastructure and Projects Authority. In August this year, after a complaint from a campaigner, the Information Commissioner’s Office ruled that the reports must be disclosed. In a decision notice, the Information Commissioner said:

“The reports provide a much greater insight than any information already available about the UCP”

—the universal credit programme—

“there are strong arguments for transparency and accountability for a programme which may affect 11 million UK citizens and process billions of pounds, which has had numerous reported failings in its governance.”

Why, then, have the Government failed to act? What have they to hide? Are they afraid that the reports will shine a light on what the commissioner refers to as the “numerous reported failings in its governance”,

or is it that they do not want to provide us with an insight into how they came to develop the universal credit full service into the chaotic programme that it is proving to be?

It is important that we are given sight of these reports, because the competence of the Department for Work and Pensions really is a matter of public interest. It is important that we have that insight and that we understand what challenge there has been within the system to improve the programme. It is also important if we are to understand the kind of questions that have been raised in the Department about the Government’s flagship social security policy. Armed with that information, we can scrutinise whether they are the right kind of questions and, if they are not, we on these Benches are ready to help.

The debate today has been revealing. I feel that the Secretary of State has displayed a degree of complacency in relation to some of the remaining serious problems being generated by the Government’s design and implementation of universal credit. It would therefore be useful to know which issues have been raised in the reports. Have questions been asked about the impact on single-parent families, for example? Gingerbread has entitled its report on the impact of universal credit on lone parents “An impossible bind”, which indeed it is for many single parents. The report, which was published last month, highlights the practical problems facing single parents when they try to find work or increase their hours.

The shortage of part-time work and flexible jobs is a real issue, as is the very high cost of childcare, yet under universal credit, the Government have brought in new conditionality requirements. For the first time, parents of three and four-year-olds will be required to look for work or risk being sanctioned. By the time universal

credit is rolled out, nearly 2 million single-parent families will be eligible to receive it. According to Gingerbread, 220,000 parents, including 165,000 single parents, will be affected by the new rules concerning three and four-year-olds.

Then there is the high cost of childcare, especially in London and the south-east. Any lone parent who has been watching “Motherland” will have laughed at the deep irony of the prospective childminder who, on being asked why she is charging as much as £18 an hour, replies, “Because I have to pay someone to look after my own children while I’m looking after yours.” But of course this failure of Government policy is no laughing matter, and it is important that universal credit supports the practical realities facing lone parents. Perhaps the reports can cast some light on that.

Then there is the two child policy. From April this year, under universal credit, third and subsequent children within a family will not receive the same social security support as their older siblings. This policy really is offensive in its implication that some children are valued more than others. It would indeed be useful to understand how on earth the Government came up with a policy that implies that. Children are our future, and we need the Government to invest in them for their sakes and for all our sakes.

There is mounting concern around the country at the growing and shameful problem of poverty, particularly child poverty, under this Government. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation’s report published yesterday, “UK Poverty 2017”, makes for sobering reading. It highlights the fact that more than 14 million people live in poverty in the UK. That is one in five people, or 20% of the population. It includes 8 million working-age adults, 4 million children and 1.9 million pensioners, and we know that 8 million people in poverty live in families where at least one person is in work.

That brings me to the cuts that have been made to universal credit. The cuts to work allowances, and so to work incentives, under universal credit were implemented in 2016, and they have undermined one of the core aims of the universal credit programme—namely, that work should always pay. We on these Benches know that people want to be able to work. Research carried out by Labour shows that, following cuts to work allowances and subsequent changes to the taper rate, some families will be £2,100 a year worse off. So, while we welcome the changes introduced in the Budget this autumn, the Government have to recognise that many of the core issues with universal credit remain, and that the size of the cuts is key. Having sight of the progress assessment reports is important, not least because it is reasonable for members of the public who are at the sharp end of the cuts to know just what has been going on in the Department, and how much money has been wasted.

It is also important to consider the impact of universal credit on the self-employed. The Government certainly need to address that issue, particularly at a time when there is real economic uncertainty in the light of the Government’s failure on productivity. Universal credit assumes that people earn the equivalent of 35 times the national living wage per week after the first year, but of course that is often not the case for new businesses, particularly seasonal businesses such as those related to tourism, fishing and agriculture. The National Farmers Union has suggested that the Government could give

[Margaret Greenwood]

people longer to get to that level of income. Of course, farmers' income is always going to fluctuate. Someone on universal credit might average that amount over the course of a year, but there is no means for someone to be paid retrospectively beyond the one month cycle.

Moreover, universal credit will put further administrative burdens on business, since the reporting period is not in synch with that of HMRC. Labour would change the way in which self-employed workers are assessed to annually, rather than monthly, to account for their volatile working patterns. And of course the requirements that claims be made and managed online brings all sorts of problems; a farmer with poor broadband access, for example, might particularly struggle with the reporting requirements.

We have heard a great deal of testimony as to the effect of universal credit on people's ability to pay their rents. While we acknowledge that the Government have made some movement on this, it remains to be seen how this will work given the delays in the system earlier this year. For example, some people in Croydon have had to wait up to 12 weeks for payments.

We welcome that the Government have changed tack, but I am sure that all of us want to see the publication of these papers. The Government have not moved nearly far enough. The issues with universal credit are causing serious problems for our constituents and need to be addressed. For these reasons it would be helpful if the Government could publish the project assessment reports, as directed by the Information Commissioner, so this House can carry out the scrutiny that this flawed programme desperately needs.

6.50 pm

**The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds):** Universal credit is being introduced at a time when record numbers of people are in work and unemployment is at its lowest for 40 years. It is a vital reform, replacing the outdated and complex benefits system of the past, which too often stifled people's potential, as my hon. Friends the Members for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst) and for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) outlined. Six benefits are replaced with one simple monthly universal credit payment, designed to support people whether they are in or out of work.

Under UC, claimants are better off when they move into work and they are better off when they progress in work. People's UC is gradually reduced as earnings increase, so claimants will not lose all their benefits at once if they are on a low income. My hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) reminded us of features of the previous system that called out for reform. With UC, there is no 16-hour ceiling, no 16-hour floor, no such thing as "permitted work"—or, rather, non-permitted work—and there is no upheaval and risk in terms of people's benefit as they move into a job, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) mentioned. This means that the more people work, the more money they get in their pocket. So UC supports those who can work and cares for those who cannot, while being fair to the taxpayer as the Government continue to spend around £90 billion a year supporting people of working age.

My hon. Friends the Members for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) and for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone), who spoke about Wick, and others spoke of the dedication of Jobcentre Plus staff and of staff at housing associations and elsewhere, and the great deal of preparation going into readying for universal credit, and I echo those words of appreciation. I also say to any Members who have not recently visited their local jobcentre: please do so.

My hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley) spoke of the phased roll-out approach and how that allows the Government to learn from frontline feedback and evolve the system, making the changes to improve as we go along, and making sure that people who need help can get it.

The Budget package that the Chancellor set out will put more money into claimants' hands earlier, ensuring extra support for those who most need it. This is a £1.5 billion package and it addresses concerns that have been expressed about the delivery of the benefit, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) rightly said.

This month, new guidance will be issued to staff to ensure that claimants in the private rented sector who have their housing benefit paid directly to landlords are also offered that option when they join universal credit. From January, we will make two changes to advances, and my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) reminded us of the new guidance given in jobcentres to make sure that advances are entirely known about. The changes are increasing the maximum recovery time from six months to a year and the maximum amount from 50% to 100%.

I should mention to the hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) that in practice this also means that new claimants in December can receive an advance of up to 50% of their overall entitlement, and may receive a second advance to take it up to 100% in the new year. So no one who needs immediate financial assistance will need to wait until the end of the first assessment period.

It has been said a few times that advances are a loan. An advance brings forward a payment, but it is not an advance like a normal loan, as there is no interest to be paid. It is also not like a normal wage advance in the sense that it does not just come out of people's first payment. In addition, from February we will remove the seven-day waiting period, benefiting about 750,000 new universal credit claimants a year by an average of £160 per household. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson) asked me to confirm that that is a net improvement in the cash position. Waiting days were a long-standing feature of the benefits system, so he is exactly right.

From April, as claimants with housing support transfer to universal credit, an additional two weeks of housing benefit will continue to be paid. That change will provide an average of £233 pounds in additional financial support per household for 2.3 million claimants over the roll-out. From February, the initial wait for payment will comprise an assessment period of one calendar month, during which evidence of earnings and so on will be gathered, and up to a further week of payment generation and administration via Bacs. A claimant's first UC pay date will be up to seven calendar days after the end of their

initial assessment period, and subsequent pay due days will be on the same date each month. As my hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) said, most people are paid monthly, and that is the case for universal credit, too.

I want to try to respond to as many of the points made in the debate as I can, but I fear I will not get to all of them. The hon. Members for Eastbourne (Stephen Lloyd) and for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) talked about different payment patterns. It is a reality of devolution that they are possible under the devolved Administrations, and we will engage with them to make that work. However, we think that monthly is the better payment pattern. It is not that it is impossible to use other patterns, and an argument for why payment should be weekly could be constructed, but few things are paid fortnightly. Monthly is the more sensible pattern, and it is only way by which the assessment period can take account of all the different patterns of how people in work are paid.

My hon. and learned Friend the Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Lucy Frazer) noted the use of Opposition days in respect of matters relating to the release of documents and discussed other urgent matters that have not been covered in the meantime. My hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) talked about the positive role that the Work and Pensions Committee can play in the process. My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) reminded us of the need for care and responsibility in interpreting reports. The hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) asked about the post-implementation review, and that will come in 2022. My hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) mentioned the importance of fiscal responsibility, and universal credit will save substantially on fraud and error.

**Frank Field:** Will the Minister give way?

**Damian Hinds:** I cannot. My hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) asked about home visits, and I can confirm that the DWP makes around 300,000 home visits a year, most of which are completed within 10 days.

I want to turn specifically to the comments of the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), who made a passionate, powerful, emotive speech. Nobody here could fail to have been affected by the moving stories that he related. I know that that is what brought him into politics, and I would never question his motivation, sincerity or determination. However, on the behalf of everybody on this side of the House—I can say this with no fear of contradiction—that is what brought us into politics, too. When we talk about extending free childcare, school results, the national living wage, the creation of 3 million jobs, the reduction in income inequality and record-high household incomes, they are not just statistics; they are steps towards tackling injustice and spreading opportunity, and universal credit is at the heart of that list.

Universal credit helps to prepare people for work through personalised support and help with IT skills and budgeting, by paying people monthly like most jobs and by paying money to people, not landlords. It helps people into work by removing the risk to their benefit claim by making it visibly clear that work will pay and

by covering childcare costs in the run-up to work, so that children can settle and people can get set and ready for the first day at work. Once people are there, it helps them to get on in work, because it pays out based on earnings, not hours, because it covers more of their childcare costs, and because there are no hours rules and no restrictions on progression. We are in the middle of a fundamental structural reform that is already improving lives. We will continue to work with claimants, partners and right hon. and hon. Members from across the house to resolve issues and improve universal credit as it rolls out across the country.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, That she will be graciously pleased to give directions that the five project assessment reviews, carried out into universal credit between 2012 and 2015 by the Government's Major Projects Authority now known as the Infrastructure and Projects Authority, and any subsequent project assessment reviews carried out into universal credit by the Infrastructure and Projects Authority between 1 January 2016 and 30 November 2017 that have been provided to Her Majesty's Ministers at the Department for Work and Pensions, be provided by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to the Work and Pensions Committee.

**Frank Field:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I have never doubted the motives of people on the other side of the House. As the Government have accepted the motion, will the Select Committee have the papers tomorrow?

**Mr Speaker:** My understanding is that the Minister indicated the papers would be delivered before Christmas.

**Frank Field:** This Christmas, we hope.

**Mr Speaker:** Well, certainly this Christmas. I certainly was not thinking of 2018. There is probably a default presumption that it means this Christmas—*[Interruption]*—but it is always better to be explicit. I grant that to the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), who is chuntering from a sedentary position in evident dissatisfaction at the inadequate clarification thus far provided, but help may be at hand, because the Secretary of State is perched like a panther—*[Laughter]*—if you can perch like a panther. He is poised like a panther, ready to pounce.

**Mr Gauke:** You have done my job for me, Mr Speaker. It is correct that, as I said in my opening remarks, we will provide this information before the House rises for Christmas 2017. On the question raised by the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), we will of course want to go through the documentation to take out, for example, the names of junior officials and any commercially sensitive information. As I say, we will provide that information before the House rises this Christmas.

**Mr Speaker:** I am inclined to leave it there for now. If the right hon. Member for Birkenhead has further points that he wishes to raise, he can, but I am not sure it will greatly profit him to do so now.

**Frank Field:** Mr Speaker, I will, if I may, come to talk to you about how soon we can get the documents. We have been promised the papers, not redacted papers.

**Mr Speaker:** The right hon. Gentleman is welcome to come to talk to me about that point, and I understand the premium he attaches to it. These are often matters of negotiation between a Committee and a Department, as recent experience has testified. There is merit—let me put it like this—in having clarity on the matter before the fact. My door is always open to him.

## PETITIONS

### Broadband: East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow

7.2 pm

**Dr Lisa Cameron** (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I rise to present a petition relating to broadband in the constituency of East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow,

Declares that broadband strength in rural communities is far from adequate; further that the stark difference in access between urban centres and rural towns has created a distinct digital inequality; further that the lack of appropriate broadband strength in my constituency is a continuous stress on our local economy; further that my constituents are faced with an average download speed of 2.5MBps whilst cities can expect speeds in accession of 20MBps for the same price; and further that some constituents, therefore, are having to rely on satellite broadband which is expensive, unreliable and frankly archaic in 21st century Britain.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to undertake a full review into the growing digital inequality between urban and rural communities and what can be done to ensure everyone has fair access to strong broadband; and further that the Government considers investing substantially in these rural areas and upgrade the current, outdated broadband services available in my constituency and other regions alike.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002086]

### Ruabon Station

7.3 pm

**Susan Elan Jones** (Clwyd South) (Lab): My petition concerns the urgent need for greater accessibility of Ruabon station.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the village of Ruabon in the constituency of Clwyd South,

Declares that Ruabon railway station is currently inaccessible to a number of potential users as the only method of using platform 2 is by crossing a footbridge which is difficult for passengers with mobility issues or luggage to carry, and impossible for wheelchair users.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons call on the Government to speed up plans to improve access to the Ruabon railway station either by replacing the existing bridge with one that allows easy access for all users, or to add a wheelchair accessible entrance to platform 2.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002088]

## Stroke Services

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

7.5 pm

**Sir David Amess** (Southend West) (Con): I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for allowing me the opportunity to raise the crucial subject of the provision of stroke services throughout the United Kingdom. Every Member of Parliament will have a relative or friend who at some stage has suffered from stroke, so we all appreciate at first hand what the outcome of stroke can be. It can sometimes be halted and a recovery can be made, but that is not always the outcome for people who are not so fortunate. We can all recall the former Member for the Isle of Wight, Andrew Turner, who suffered a stroke recently, and there have been many others.

On Thursday 26 October, I chaired a roundtable on stroke solutions and the revolutionary potential of mechanical thrombectomy for stroke patients. The facts about stroke are as follows: more than 100,000 strokes occur in the UK each year; there are more than 1.2 million stroke survivors in the UK; and almost two thirds of stroke survivors leave hospital with some sort of disability.

**James Duddridge** (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): I understand that this debate is very much about the UK and stroke units, but is my hon. Friend and parliamentary neighbour aware that today I met the Stroke Association, which is prepared to come to Southend to discuss changes in the stroke unit with the public? It will also have discussions with the wellbeing board, specifically to talk about the experience of reorganising acute and hyper-acute stroke units to give better outcomes, fewer deaths and fewer disabilities. This is good news for Southend, and the Stroke Association is happy to come to speak to us in Southend.

**Sir David Amess:** I very much welcome that news. I think that the two of us will look forward to meeting the Stroke Association and working with it to enhance the already excellent facilities at Southend Hospital.

The costs of stroke to the NHS and social care are about £1.7 billion a year, which is a huge amount. If I may be biased for a moment, let me say to the Minister that since 2013, the Government whom I support have contributed to significant advances in the treatment of stroke victims all over the country. The percentage of patients scanned within one hour of arrival in hospital has risen from 42% in 2013 to 51% last year, and the figure for those scanned within 12 hours has increased from 85% to 94%. I think the whole House will welcome that improvement, and I am grateful to Members on both sides of the House who are in the Chamber to listen to this Adjournment debate. I hope that their constituents will recognise the fact that they have stayed here.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I sought the hon. Gentleman's permission to intervene before this debate, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Right across the UK there are many problems in relation to stroke services. Some 4,000 people in Northern Ireland have had a stroke in the past year, and 36,000 people in Northern Ireland are living with the effects of

a stroke. What consideration has the hon. Gentleman given to people having a normal life after stroke through the provision of rehabilitation, and of occupational and cognitive therapies, and through the way in which the NHS handles aftercare, especially for the growing number of younger people who have strokes? This is not just about people in their 70s; it is sometimes about those in their 30s, 40s and 50s.

**Sir David Amess:** If I did not know better, I would have assumed that the hon. Gentleman had read my speech, because I was just about to say that in the past three years there has been a rise in compliance with standards for physiotherapy from 53% to 79%, and from 24% to 47% for speech and language therapy. I know that similar progress has been made in Scotland. With all that in mind, it is essential that the NHS continues to lead from the front. We must utilise some of the newest technologies to improve the effectiveness of stroke treatment, to allow patients to live fuller lives, and to decrease the burden of ill health after someone has suffered a stroke.

Two out of three stroke survivors currently leave hospital with a long-term disability at a cost of £1.7 billion, as I said. The provision of healthcare to people who have had a stroke accounts for approximately 3% to 5% of all healthcare expenditure, which is a vast amount. The cost of stroke treatment will rise to £43 billion in 2025 and £75 billion in 2035. If I remember rightly, I think the husband of the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) suffered strokes during his illness.

**Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind):** It is very kind of the hon. Gentleman to mention my late husband. He did not actually suffer from a stroke; he suffered from Alzheimer's, which was unfortunately the cause of his death. While I am on my feet, however, may I encourage the hon. Gentleman to put on record his appreciation for all the wonderful charities that work with stroke victims, and that support them and their families after what is a devastating health incident?

**Sir David Amess:** I absolutely join the hon. Lady in celebrating the work of all those charities.

The *European Stroke Journal* found that improving access to thrombolysis and early supported discharge services alone can contribute to reducing the financial burden of stroke on health and social care services. When the benefits of treatments such as mechanical thrombectomy are included, the costs can be lowered significantly. What measures are the Government taking to address the rising costs associated with strokes in England? I very much hope the Government are considering the widespread use of mechanical thrombectomy, which is a new and effective way of treating some of the most serious strokes caused by a blood clot.

**Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con):** I have heard first-hand stories about the impact of mechanical thrombectomy and just how fantastic a treatment it is. It can enable people who might have had lifelong disabilities to lead normal lives. I gather it is being rolled out throughout the NHS through specialised commissioning, but does my hon. Friend agree that the roll-out needs to be speeded up, and that we need more people in place to carry out the treatment so that more individuals can benefit from it?

**Sir David Amess:** Even though money is tight, I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. I have seen a video of the operation, and it is just extraordinary that a catheter can be inserted into a patient's artery to access the clot, which is then mechanically removed. The technology is extraordinary.

Mechanical thrombectomy significantly reduces disability rates after strokes. It removes clots that are too big to be broken down by drugs alone. For each six-minute delay in the delivery of mechanical thrombectomy, there is a 1% increase in the proportion of people who become disabled. Royal College of Physicians guidelines for stroke care label it as the best recommended practice. It is an effective procedure with very low complication rates. It is highly cost-effective, too. The Stroke Association has calculated that over a 10-year period, the net monetary benefit of 9,000 eligible patients receiving the treatment would be between £530 million and £975 million.

Mechanical thrombectomy enables more stroke survivors to live independently in their own homes, which is crucial, and then to return to work and take control of their lives again, thereby saving the NHS money. It really is a game-changing treatment that could revolutionise stroke victims' experiences, yet despite NHS England's agreeing to fund it, it is delivered for only 0.008% of the 85,122 acute stroke admissions, versus the EU benchmark of 3%, so we are really some way behind.

Let me blow the trumpet for Southend, following on from what my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) said earlier. Southend has been developing an interventional neuroradiology service alongside a hyper-acute stroke service providing thrombectomy. Our service is led and delivered by an interventional neuroradiologist. It has been developed with the local trust board since 2013, but due to a current recommendation that only interventional neuroradiologists can perform the procedure, she is the only person who can perform thrombectomy at the moment, so the service is provided on a "best endeavours" basis and is not, unfortunately, a regular service. The service is currently available only at Southend and nowhere else in Essex. We need to expand it to provide a 24-hour service. The only other place where it is provided is at St George's Hospital in London.

Mr Paul Guyler, who is a lead consultant in stroke medicine at Southend University Hospital, tells me that less than 1% of ischaemic stroke patients receive endovascular treatment and that, despite around 9,000 patients being eligible for mechanical thrombectomy, only 400 patients received the treatment last year. He has argued that the barriers to this treatment revolve around skills and education, resources and attitudes.

This is not a criticism of my hon. Friend the Minister, because he cannot wave a magic wand and solve all these problems, but Mr Guyler has advised me that there are not enough trained specialists to be able to provide a 24/7 service in all areas. Unfortunately, we also have a postcode lottery, with not enough neuro-radiologists and only 80 interventional neuroradiology operators in the United Kingdom.

**Maggie Throup:** My hon. Friend is being very generous with his time. He has hit the nail on the head: the treatment is very specialist and is carried out by surgeons and neurologists who are not normally there to treat stroke victims. The change in the way in which stroke

[Maggie Throup]

centres work has been fantastic. Stroke services have been centralised, but we need to go a step further and to make sure that we get the right training for these neurologists so that we can continue to save lives.

**Sir David Amess:** My hon. Friend is spot on in her analysis. I know that the Minister will take the points that she has made to heart and consider how we can improve the present situation.

Consensus forecasts predict that 150 trained people are required to run a fully functioning 24/7 national service. Mr Guyler says that training in stroke intervention is not readily available, that not enough hospitals can afford 24/7 availability and that there are not enough expert neuroradiologists to interpret CT scans. He says that there are turf wars between neurologists, cardiologists, neurosurgeons, radiologists, vascular surgeons and neuro-radiologists on who can and will perform interventional stroke treatment in the future. I do not think it is for politicians to get involved in those turf wars. The medical staff need to sort out between themselves who will lead in these matters. Apparently, there are also turf wars between university and district general hospitals on who should perform the procedure.

Mr Guyler also highlighted the fact that we have the expertise to develop this treatment significantly. The UK has one of only five training simulators in Europe—we should be proud of that—which is based at Anglia Ruskin University.

What are the Government doing to encourage more areas to reconfigure acute stroke services? We do need a new national stroke plan. I was at the launch of the original plan at St James's Palace many years ago, but it is now time for a new one.

**Dr Lisa Cameron** (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech on stroke services, which are invaluable right across the United Kingdom. I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is important that people who suffer strokes also have access to psychological services? Many people experience depression when adjusting post stroke, and it is important that counselling is available to support them through that.

**Sir David Amess:** The hon. Lady, with her considerable expertise in this area, is right to bring that particular matter to the attention of the House. We certainly need more provision of the women and men who give that sort of support.

A significant part of a new national stroke plan should be the development of 24/7 access to mechanical thrombectomy for all United Kingdom citizens, no matter where they live. Southend has already shown itself to be both safe and effective. It exceeds the recommended audit standards, its improvement in patient outcome is similar to international trials and, despite a severely ill patient collective, its results exceed the British Association of Stroke Physicians' quality benchmarks. I want all my constituents to have 24/7 access to the best possible stroke treatment, so I urge the Government to find a way of effectively introducing mechanical thrombectomy to all parts of the United Kingdom.

What is the Government's assessment of the national stroke strategy, and will the Minister update the House on progress with its replacement?

I am not criticising the Government's provision in any sense but, as with all these things, we could and should do more. We could do better. It is frustrating that a wonderful technique is available but is not available to everyone. Perhaps we can find a few more resources now because that should result in a saving in the long run. Finally, does the Minister agree that this wonderful facility at Southend Hospital is a further good reason for Southend to be declared a city?

7.21 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Steve Brine):** What a pleasure it is to see you, Madam Deputy Speaker; it has been a while. I knew that my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) would get in a mention of Southend becoming a city. I was only disappointed that it did not happen earlier in his speech, but he managed it in the very last line. I will show great diplomacy and leave that matter to the Ministers responsible. I congratulate him on securing another Adjournment debate—we have done this before—which is on stroke services this time. As ever, he set out his case brilliantly and with such passion. He gives newer parliamentarians a real lesson in how to handle debates in this House.

As my hon. Friend said and as so many of us know, stroke is a devastating disease for patients and their families. He is right that there are currently 1.2 million stroke survivors in the UK, with more than 1,350 in my hon. Friend's constituency alone. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is in his place as always at these debates, is absolutely right that stroke is predominantly a condition that affects older people. But it does affect younger people. I have met people of my age and younger who have been affected by stroke. Obviously, it is clinically debilitating, but it also comes as a great shock to their friends and families, who are taken aback by this happening to young people.

So many NHS staff work in multidisciplinary teams on stroke, and I pay tribute to them. There are nurses, consultants and speech and language therapists—the speechies, one of whom I am married to, so I will get brownie points for this—as well as physios, occupational therapists and specialist nurses, who all do so much when somebody suffers a stroke. The Stroke Association, which has already been mentioned, is an absolutely first-rate charity and a real partner for the Government. I also commend my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West for his strong work in driving improvements to stroke services both nationally and within his constituency. I know that he has taken a long interest in health matters, including stroke, as an MP. I reiterate his comments about the high-quality service provided by Southend stroke unit—more on that in a moment.

My hon. Friend will no doubt agree—he said this of course—that, in general, stroke services across the country are performing really well. Let me just reiterate some of the figures. Thirty-day mortality has dropped from 30% in 1998 to just over 13% in 2015-16—a huge improvement. The percentage of patients scanned within one hour of arriving at hospital, which is so critical, has increased from 42% in 2013-14 to over 51% in just three years, and the percentage scanned within 12 hours has increased from 85% to 94% in the same period.



There are many public health campaigns that we remember throughout the years, but the Act FAST campaign that public health campaigners and the Stroke Association have done is something we see and do not forget, and that, of course, was the intention.

Excellent progress has been made in the treatment of stroke over recent years. It is important that this programme continues and that the gains are built on, especially given the demographic changes we know are coming down the track with our much talked off and much publicised obesity challenge and our ageing population. That is why we published the cardiovascular disease outcomes strategy in 2013.

There is ongoing work in virtually all parts of the country to organise acute stroke care to ensure that all stroke patients have access to high-quality specialist care, regardless of where they live or what time of day or week they have their event. Although the national stroke strategy comes to an end shortly, as my hon. Friend said, NHS England continues to lead an effective programme of work on prevention and treatment. We are continuing to work closely together to improve acute treatment through the centralisation of care in centres that can provide the highest level of care and treatment at all times of the day and night.

Decisions on whether the strategy should be renewed are, of course, a matter for NHS England, but in liaison with Ministers. My understanding is that NHS England does not have current plans to renew it in the same form, but it is a subject that I, as the relatively new Minister, encouraged, of course, by my hon. Friend's debate, plan to discuss with NHS England early in the new year. I would welcome my hon. Friend's involvement—and that of other Members—if he wishes to feed into that.

**Jim Shannon:** I thank the Minister for his comprehensive response. One thing that is sometimes overlooked is research and development—the work that is done by universities in conjunction with health groups to try to find better ways of caring for people with strokes. Does he have any information on how critical that is to the whole care package that is given to those who have had strokes?

**Steve Brine:** I echo the hon. Gentleman's sentiment that that work is critical. I mentioned the Act FAST campaign, which was a heavily evidenced public health campaign showing that the quicker we act after the event, the better the outcome, so he is absolutely right to highlight that issue. However, I am conscious of time, so I am going to press on.

My hon. Friend rightly spoke about mechanical thrombectomy, which he called a game-changer, and he is absolutely right. To continue and build on our stroke service success and to address the costs associated with stroke in England, which was one of my hon. Friend's first asks, it is imperative that we keep identifying and developing innovative treatments and cutting-edge procedures.

In mechanical thrombectomy, or MT as we shall know it, we have an innovation that we believe can significantly improve patient outcomes, and my hon. Friend spoke about that. In April this year, NHS England announced that it will commission mechanical thrombectomy so that it can become more widely available for patients who have certain types of acute ischaemic

stroke, which is a severe form of the condition. My understanding is that work by NHS England is now under way to assess the readiness of 24 neuroscience centres across the country. It is expected that the treatment will start to be phased in later this year and early next year, with an estimated 1,000 patients set to benefit across the first year of introduction. Overall, this will benefit an estimated 8,000 stroke patients a year and save millions of pounds in long-term health and social care costs—my hon. Friend was absolutely right to point out the rising costs to NHS England around this condition.

As the clinical director for stroke at NHS England has said, we are committed to fast-tracking new and effective treatments that will deliver long-term benefits for patients. For me, this treatment is just one example of many that we believe have the potential to tangibly improve patient care and to address rising costs.

**Maggie Throup:** Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Steve Brine:** I am going to press on, because we have to finish at a certain time, but I thank my hon. Friend for her contribution earlier.

Stroke services are an important part of the range of vital services delivered in the part of Essex represented by my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West. It is important that his constituents have the right access to the right care at the right time, which in this case means specialist acute and hyper-acute stroke units. As he knows, and as we have discussed in Adjournment debates previously, there is a lively debate in his local area about the best way to configure services in order to meet these needs. As ever, he makes a powerful case for Southend, which he says has shown itself to be both safe and effective, and I have no reason to doubt his word.

My hon. Friend's second big question was about what we are doing to transform services. Sustainability and transformation partnerships are absolutely key in this regard. STPs cannot but help in improving stroke services; they have a huge part to play. STPs should bring the local population, NHS organisations and local authority bodies together to propose how they, at a locally designed level, can improve the way that their local health and care is planned and delivered. These local areas have been encouraged to take a collective view of the local health system so that they can explore how best services within the local area, including stroke services, can be streamlined and centred around the patient, and determine what configurations are necessary within each local area to deliver the best possible care. My hon. Friend's description of turf wars does not surprise me, although it does disappoint me. If he wishes to raise anything specific with me, I ask him to write to me about it. As the Minister responsible for STPs, I do not want to see this happening, and if I can help with it, I will certainly do so.

Much guidance has been issued to the system from us at the centre to help support STPs in making these crucial local reconfiguration decisions. My hon. Friend's associated STP, Mid and South Essex, is making good progress and has recently been rated through our STP dashboard as being in the top half, so it is a top-half-of-the-table team among STPs. Mid and South Essex's stroke services compare very well with the best, in many ways, but, as he says, we could be doing much better.

[*Steve Brine*]

One area that it has identified for improvement is that none of the three existing hospitals currently has the right number of specialists to provide the level of specialist stroke unit care that is being proposed. That goes to the heart of some of the examples that he gave from the consultant he has been speaking to.

I welcome the fact that organisations within my hon. Friend's area, and other STP areas across England, are working in partnership to develop proposals that can really benefit those who matter most—the patients. There are proposals currently out for consultation in his area, which obviously my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) takes a very close interest in as well. I look forward to seeing the results of that consultation in due course. Knowing my hon. Friends, I feel almost certain that we will be back here discussing that at some point.

I mentioned the tangible progress that has been made in improving both the quality and delivery of stroke services, with evidence-based public health campaigns and really strong, well-organised local services, but there is so much more to do. Patient mortality has indeed fallen, compliance with the standards has risen, and patient experience and satisfaction continues to improve. This is a pathway on which I expect us to continue. New services that my hon. Friend is absolutely

right to raise, such as mechanical thrombectomy, can really help us in achieving this. He said what a fascinating piece of medical technology that is. Putting the mesh into the groin for it then to travel through to have such an impact is truly incredible. We are very clever, in many ways.

How this is being delivered is changing, and that is important. The STPs are providing a new way of working. They can be controversial because they involve difficult decisions around reconfiguration, but they should involve local organisations, local services, local people, and local MPs. Local MPs who are not involved in their STPs should ask themselves why not. STPs, and the whole reconfiguration process, are a huge opportunity for us. Locally led commissioning enables local need to be taken into account in decision making about the shape of all services. It can result in very strong local services that can meet these needs, and nowhere is that more important than in stroke care. It is a system that drives improvement in all patient care, and that is what we are about. I thank my hon. Friend for bringing this debate to the House, and other hon. Members who have contributed.

*Question put and agreed to.*

7.34 pm

*House adjourned.*





# Westminster Hall

Tuesday 5 December 2017

[IAN PAISLEY *in the Chair*]

## Tolls on the Mersey Crossings

9.30 am

**Christian Matheson** (City of Chester) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered tolls on the Mersey crossings.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. Although the motion is in my name, it is very much the result of a team effort, as demonstrated by the number of right hon. and hon. Members on the Labour Benches today.

The issue of tolls on the new Mersey crossing has caused consternation across our sub-region and, for me, today's debate centres on two pillars: deceit and inconsistency. In the mid to late-1950s, the Runcorn-Widnes crossing was a transporter bridge, the likes of which we now see only really in Middlesbrough, so when the new bridge was opened at the start of the 1960s it was a revolutionary leap forward in transport infrastructure. The Runcorn-Widnes bridge, the green bridge, the Silver Jubilee bridge—as it became after renovation in 1975—or even, simply, the bridge, grew as an essential artery for the sub-regional traffic, and it can be argued that the success of the area, from the growth of Liverpool airport to the industrial areas around Speke, Widnes and Runcorn and the new multimodal hub, has all been possible because of the crossing. But with its more than 80,000 vehicle movements per day, it was clear that the old bridge was beyond capacity and that, having been a source of growth in the past, it was in danger of becoming a brake on growth and development.

I say at the outset that I welcome the new crossing. The fact that we have a new bridge is not the issue. I also acknowledge that the tolls did not come as a surprise. How we pay for the new crossing has been a matter of debate since the project was first mooted, and that is where the inconsistency comes in. At this year's Conservative party conference, the Secretary of State for Wales told the assembled masses, in relation to the removal of tolls on the Severn bridge:

“After 50 years—just think—no tolls, no booths, no charges and no long queues to get into Wales. This decision will immediately boost the economy of South Wales by over £100m a year. Equally important is that it brings the opportunity to bind the South West and Wales.”

He was right of course: infrastructure investment leads to economic growth and brings communities together.

**Helen Jones** (Warrington North) (Lab): My hon. Friend makes a very good case. Was he concerned, as I was, to hear the Minister for the Northern Powerhouse, the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry), yesterday dismiss the problem of the tolls for the bridges and the Mersey tunnels limiting economic growth in the region and attribute, I understand, to the Mayor of the city region views that he does not hold?

**Christian Matheson:** I was most perturbed to hear that, and perhaps the Transport Minister here today might pass the concerns of the assembled right hon. and hon. Members back to the Minister for the Northern Powerhouse. In relation to attributing views to the Mayor of the city region that he does not hold, I understand that the Mayor, Steve Rotherham, has today written to the Minister for the Northern Powerhouse, asking for a retraction. I hope that retraction will come as quickly as the Minister's original comments.

In relation to the Severn bridge, I can well understand the argument that the costs of the bridge might have been paid off by the tolls received in preceding years, but the arguments made by the Secretary of State for Wales about economic growth and bringing communities together apply in this debate as well. Indeed, they seem to apply in Scotland, where the new Forth crossing is untolled, and in London, where many millions of pounds of Government money go simply into studying the feasibility of Crossrail 2. The same principle applies in the east of England, where plans for the A14 upgrade to be tolled around Huntingdon and Cambridge were scrapped in 2013. The planned toll was described as a “tax on East Anglia” by the local chamber of commerce. The principle applies everywhere, it seems, except to the Mersey crossing. Indeed, in contrast to the growth potential of infrastructure, the Freight Transport Association tells me that some of its members face an annual cost of £1.5 million in tolls from the new Mersey crossing, which will kill business, not boost it, and that is without the admin costs of keeping fleet lists registered and up to date for so many different toll schemes.

It was announced that most, but not all, residents of Halton Borough Council would get reduced tolls, which is understandable on the basis that it brings together two parts of that cross-river borough. But that brings me on to, if I may use the term, the question of deceit. Just days before the 2015 general election, on a campaign visit to the area, the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, late of this parish, announced that free crossings would be extended to Warrington and to my borough of Cheshire West and Chester. In a tweet on 23 April 2015, Mr Osborne said:

“Confirm we'll extend free bridge tolls to residents of Cheshire W & Chester + Warrington—a victory for”,

and he then named two local Conservative party candidates. That was naked political opportunism, but having said that he would extend the free scheme to neighbouring boroughs, he should have made good on the promise. To make such a clear political declaration and then reverse it after the election denigrates politics, denigrates elected politicians—because the public will not always see it for what it really is—and degrades confidence in our democracy.

I am told, although I cannot prove it for certain, that Mr Osborne took his own officials by surprise, at which point a solution had to be found to implement the promise he had so glibly made in the pursuit of cheap votes. It seems that the solution was to say that residents of the neighbouring councils would indeed benefit from reduced tolls, but that the councils would have to pay for it, which was not what was promised by Mr Osborne. And when we take into consideration that Cheshire West and Chester—I cannot speak for Warrington—had its budget cut by central Government by £57 million from 2015 and is barely able to deliver statutory services, we can understand why once again passing responsibility

[*Christian Matheson*]

on to local government to deliver a central Government policy pledge without providing the requisite finance—a tactic we have seen several times from this Government—has engendered such cynicism from residents.

At no point has any Minister either apologised for the deceit or, indeed, recognised the wrongness of it, and that adds to people's anger about being misled. Nor has Mr Osborne ever faced the required obloquy for his deceit. I am clear that the tolls must go, but I am also trying to find a practical way through the mess for my constituents who use the bridge daily, and the many others who work on the other side of the water who now have to pay upwards of £1,000 every year to get to work. This is a retrospective tax that is simply unfair.

My constituent Clive has proposed a solution to Ministers, which is that anyone who could demonstrate that on the day the tolls were announced they had a permanent job on the other side of the water would be eligible for reduced tolls. He also pointed out that the number would only ever diminish over time; it would never increase. Ministers have rejected the idea on the basis of the cost to the scheme, but they are happy for the public to bear the cost burden. Perhaps today the Minister might consider that option again for those residents who have suffered the double whammy of being told they were to get free tolls only for that to be withdrawn, and then being hit with an annual £1,000 charge just to get to work.

As my constituent Rob, a teacher, told me:

“Recently, I have registered for the Merseyflow sticker for my car so that I can cross the new multimodal bridge to get to my work in a school in St Helens. I am not resident in Halton and I am therefore ineligible for anything other than a sticker, which reduces each crossing from £2.00 to £1.80. Whilst I am grateful for this reduction, my annual bill for using the bridge will surpass £720. This does not include any times where I may have to make the crossing more than twice in a day (Open Evenings, Prom etc).”

The situation has been further compounded because the original bridge, now closed for renovation, will itself be tolled when it reopens. As my constituent Tim pointed out to me, the equivalent would be that when the M6 toll was opened, the original M6 would also have been tolled—a clearly ludicrous suggestion, but equivalent to what we have here.

Operational matters are also causing problems. Now, all four crossings on the Mersey are tolled. The first two are run by Mersey Tunnels and the second two by Merseyflow. I cannot for the life of me see why we should have to register twice with different organisations just to get across the Mersey from Chester. Ideally—the Minister might want to consider this—all the tolled roads in the UK would have one central tagging or registration scheme. To have two in such a short distance is daft. Organised bodies such as road haulage organisations and fleet operators will have to register all their fleets twice because of the two different schemes.

I am told that the signage on the new crossing is inadequate, both to notify drivers that the bridge is tolled and to inform them how to pay. I am also told that upwards of 50,000 instances of non-payment have taken place already, totalling £1 million, which, in only six weeks of the crossing being open, is a staggering amount, if true. It must surely indicate that something somewhere is going badly wrong.

**David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab):** I have raised the issue on behalf of my constituents in north Wales who feel that they do not have clarity on the signage and did not know that the tolls were there. I have had a letter back from Merseyflow, which says:

“I fully appreciate the points in reference to the new scheme which may have led people, particularly from outside of the area to be confused on the ways to pay.”

I have constituents who have paid the toll, who have been fined for not paying the toll and who were not clear, when the toll was introduced, that the toll was even there.

**Christian Matheson:** My right hon. Friend makes a very good point and leads me into the next part of my speech. I will quote Rachel from north Wales, who has seemingly had a similar experience to his constituents. She said:

“Two weeks ago I drove over to Walton for a long awaited hospital appointment. Not only is it a 120 mile round trip, it's an area I don't know at all so subsequently I was reliant 100% on my Google Maps. While crossing this new bridge I did see a brief sign that mentioned Mersey Flow, but as I was concentrating on the road in an unknown area I was paying more due care and attention to the road and not the sign about a method of payment, I just assumed that being a 'Toll bridge' there would be a booth at the other side. 3 days after this event I was told via friends that you had to pay online or I would receive a fine. I paid the £4 for both journeys. Today I received a fine like many other people, including one of my sisters after driving there at 1 am to collect my father from Liverpool airport”.

It is precisely the same experience as that of my right hon. Friend's constituents. The issue does not just affect Halton and the surrounding boroughs, but is spreading its effects right across the sub-region and beyond into other areas.

**Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab):** Does it not seem extreme that within a month 50,000 have made the mistake? As my hon. Friend said, that is £1 million in fines.

**Christian Matheson:** It is an astonishing figure—50,000 people in just six weeks. As I said, it surely demonstrates that something is badly wrong. There are two issues here: first, the toll system is obviously not clear enough; and secondly, it is not just drivers from the immediate Halton area who are affected. Indeed, it seems absurd that the only place that someone can pay in person is in Halton, as that is the area where people, because they live there, are least likely to need to pay. I am told by taxi drivers in Halton and surrounding boroughs that they are not considered as public transport, so cannot register for free crossings. Again, that seems ridiculous. Will the Minister clarify that, not least because so many of my constituents take taxis to Liverpool airport?

The introduction and implementation of the tolls has caused consternation in my constituency and across our sub-region. At a time when other bridges are having their tolls removed, we are having to pay. It is punitive and retrospective. In fact, it must be the first case in history of a crossing being built that has caused greater division than the divide it sought to bridge. Ministers must think again. We cannot allow an important and much-needed piece of infrastructure to cause more harm than good. In the medium to long term the tolls must go, as they have in other parts of the UK. If that is

not to happen in the immediate future, will the Minister at least look at alternative arrangements for my constituents and others who are being clobbered by toll charges and fines?

9.43 am

**Mr George Howarth** (Knowsley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley, and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson), who made a very powerful case. I will be brief, because there are one or two straightforward arguments that need to be put. Before I get into those arguments, it is important to emphasise the point that my hon. Friend made: a commitment was given to a group of residents on the Cheshire side of the bridge by the former Chancellor of the Exchequer, and that commitment has now been completely ignored by the Government. I have no doubt that in that general election some people voted the way they did in the expectation that exemptions would be made for a wider area. However, that would not have covered my side of the river, and I will talk about that in a moment.

At the outset, I should say that I make no criticism of Halton Borough Council. I know that it was effectively given a choice of having no bridge or having tolls. Given the need for a further crossing, I can well understand why it took that decision. My hon. Friend the Member for Halton (Derek Twigg) will make that point more fully, if he is fortunate enough to catch your eye, Mr Paisley.

Over the past two years, myself and others have been trying to get some further exemptions. If it was right for the people on the Cheshire side of the new crossing to have exemptions, as promised by the former Member for Tatton, George Osborne, it equally would be right for the people in Knowsley, Liverpool, Warrington, St Helens and even north Wales to have some exemptions. I tried to press that point, and I eventually got a reply from a Transport Minister that hinted that it was legally all too difficult to do. The spread of Members attending this morning's debate tells the story, because if the exemption was extended to, for argument's sake, the City of Chester, how could that be justified when people from Knowsley or Liverpool have to travel in the opposite direction? I think it probably is too legally difficult to make exemptions.

I also argued that there should be exemptions for those who have to use the crossing for work purposes, or for people who need to attend medical appointments, or—it would be relatively few people—those who have to use the crossing for educational purposes. I think we have exhausted that argument, and the Government, possibly for those legal reasons, are not going to accept the argument, but we are still left with the problem. I have constituents—my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester referred to this—who are paying up to £1,000 a year to go to work and back. I understand entirely why they see that as an additional tax. For those not on a high wage, such as many of my constituents, £1,000 a year is a substantial amount of money to pay just to go back and forth to work. That is not even counting the cost of putting petrol in the car and keeping it on the road. Certainly those who need to use the crossing for regular medical appointments have every reason to be annoyed about what is happening.

That argument has now gone, and with Ministers having rejected further exemptions for people in Knowsley, Liverpool and other places, I have come to the conclusion

that, expensive though it will be, the only way forward is for the tolls to be scrapped altogether. I can see no other way of doing it that would not be open to some sort of legal challenge. I realise that is a very expensive option, but it is the only fair one. I hope Ministers will accept that. I put it forward not to be irresponsible, but to be fair to those who need to use the crossing for their everyday lives and to go to work. By the way, the issue also applies to businesses. We have all been approached by businesses that are at best confused about how the toll affects them and at worst furious about the additional costs it puts on their transactions. For the benefit of residents and businesses, the only way forward that I can see is, as some have said, to scrap the tolls.

9.49 am

**Derek Twigg** (Halton) (Lab): I will concentrate on the three or four key issues in this area that most constituents contact me about; I cannot concentrate on every issue that every constituent has raised with me.

I would like to put on record my congratulations to Halton Borough Council. It is a fantastic achievement to have delivered this huge infrastructure on time and to budget when the council is probably one of the smallest in the country. If central Government had that record, they would probably be a bit more pleased about some of their recent projects. It is excellent delivery by the council. Of course, there are some teething and snagging problems and other issues that hon. Friends have raised, but I want to concentrate on three or four main issues.

First, I absolutely agree that we should have a bridge with no tolls. That has always been my position. Certainly longer-standing hon. Friends here have supported having a new bridge, but not one that is tolled. Why should we have all the tolled crossings when London and the south-east have crossings on the Thames where people do not have to pay? I keep being told it is an estuary crossing, but why does an estuary crossing differ from the one a little further upriver, as is the case on the Thames? It is bizarre. I totally agree with my hon. Friends that the bridge should be toll-free.

However, the bridge is not toll-free. It was clear from the beginning of the discussions I have had with the Government since the early 2000s and thereafter—the previous Labour Government, the coalition Government and the Conservative Governments—that there would not be a crossing if it was not tolled. The decision letter from the Secretary of State stated:

“The Inspector said that the £604 million cost of the Project would be funded by toll revenues and PFI credits...The Secretary of State wishes to clarify first that the Project is intended to be funded from a mixture of toll revenues, PFI credits and RFA funding.”

That funding range has now changed, but that is what was said. On charging tolls on the Mersey Gateway bridge and the Silver Jubilee bridge, the decision letter stated:

“While noting that there was opposition to both the principle and perceived effects of tolling, particularly as regards the imposition of charges on the Silver Jubilee Bridge, the Inspector said it was clear that the Mersey Gateway Bridge could proceed only if tolled and that an un-tolled crossing would generate significant additional traffic contrary to transport policy. He accepted also that, without tolling the Silver Jubilee Bridge, traffic would not use the Mersey Gateway Bridge and the Project would not meet its objectives.”

I do not agree with the decision letter, but that is what was said at the time.

**Helen Jones:** My hon. Friend is right about the decisions taken and the concern about traffic flows. Does he agree that evidence is now appearing that the tolling on the bridge is increasing traffic flows through Warrington, which is already very congested? And that is after the former Member for Warrington South appeared in the 2015 election in front of a big banner saying, “No tolls”, so people rightly feel aggrieved.

**Derek Twigg:** My hon. Friend makes an important point. There is increased traffic going through Warrington, which was always expected, and that is causing further congestion. Again, it comes back to this: if a bridge is tolled, some traffic will try to find an alternative route. How long that will go on for, I do not know, but it is having an impact.

The reality is that we needed a new bridge. The Silver Jubilee bridge was congested, its capacity was far exceeded, and it was having an effect on investment in the borough because people were regularly queueing to get over the bridge. Sometimes, if a vehicle broke down or there was an accident, people could be there for hours. There was a regular queue of traffic going over the bridge. It is in need of major repairs as well, which is why it has been shut for about a year to carry out the repairs. Imagine closing that bridge with no other bridge in place: there would be chaos not only in Warrington, but all round the north-west. The fact that the bridge was needed is indisputable, and we need to understand that.

There is also an issue of pollution. Communities around the Silver Jubilee bridge had to cope with all the pollution of standing traffic and huge traffic increases. There was no doubt in my mind about the need for a bridge, but as I say, I want an untolled bridge, as do colleagues. However, we have this situation at the moment, and I look forward to hearing what the Minister will say.

As part of the discussions that I had, I met George Osborne, the former Member for Tatton, along with colleagues Graham Evans, the MP for Weaver Vale at the time, David Mowat and Andrew Miller. My primary aim in having that meeting was to argue that, for Halton people, it is their local road. They use it to go to the hospital, to work and to the train station, to go shopping and simply for normal business. I do not know anywhere else in the country where a borough has a tolled road that people have to cross to get to another part of the borough. It simply does not exist. It would be totally unfair.

George Osborne eventually accepted my argument and agreed that residents in Halton should be able to travel toll-free. He put out a press statement in July 2014 to announce that. I will make this clear for the Minister. The Treasury press release stated that the bridge

“will be free to use for all Halton residents”,

with

“a small charge”

for registration. It stated:

“The extension of the discount scheme will...apply to...categories of vehicles included in the existing discount scheme.”

I have written to the Department on numerous occasions because around 425 residents in Halton are in bands G and H and, because of the discount scheme, are excluded. The fact is that George Osborne—the Treasury—said that all residents would be able to travel free. I keep

getting letters back from the Minister quoting the issue about the local discount scheme, but it is not quoted here. It is clear.

I also wrote to George Osborne, and on 5 December 2015, he wrote:

“I am happy to confirm that as the Government has previously announced, tolls for Halton residents will be free once the Bridge opens.”

That is very clear. There are no ifs or buts, and no mention of excluding people in bands G and H. It is totally unfair for people in bands G and H to be denied the chance to travel free, albeit with a small charge, across the borough. Why should they have to pay? It is completely unfair and not reasonable. I hope the Minister will go away and look at this matter again, because the policy should be changed. Not all of the people in bands G and H are cash-rich. In some cases, people are not on great incomes, but that is not the point. In principle, they should not have to pay. I hope the Minister will look at that issue.

On small businesses, the then Chancellor made a statement—my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) referred to that. I have the press coverage here and witnesses heard him say this. As well as extending the scheme to Cheshire West and Chester, and Warrington, the then Chancellor said there would be “a special scheme” to help small businesses. He added that if firms paid nothing, taxpayers could pick up a higher bill, but he said that there will be a scheme to help small businesses. Of course, once he went, the promise to Cheshire West and Chester, and Warrington, was ditched, so I wrote to Ministers again. Halton businesses have the same issue as residents because they use the bridge a lot more. It is their local base. Again, the Minister wrote back and said there was no way that could be done, and this time used the argument about state aid rules.

I got in touch with the Library to do some research, and the Library believes there is a way of helping at least some small businesses by having a scheme in Halton. Again, the Government have ignored that, after a promise made by the former Chancellor of the Exchequer. I hope the Minister will look at that as well.

Another issue raised regularly with me is about businesses in Halton that might suffer as a result of paying the extra tolls, particularly if they are transport-heavy, such as haulage and delivery companies. Also, the constituents of my hon. Friends here today travel in and have to pay the toll. Some businesses tell me they are fearful of losing experienced and skilled staff who might go elsewhere because they do not want to pay the £1,000-a-year toll. The Minister needs to look at that issue, which has been raised with me by several companies.

The Minister needs to look seriously at some of the promises that were made and should revisit them. Although I want free tolls for everybody, the key issues for me are my constituents in bands G and H, small businesses, staff travelling into Halton and the impact on businesses. Most businesses think faster speed and lack of congestion are great. They are happy with that, but some have expressed concern about paying the toll.

**Dan Carden** (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): One thing that frustrates many people who have an interest in this debate is the fact that national leaders seek to blame local leaders. It is very clear that responsibility lies with the Minister. We had promises from the former Chancellor.



It was the Government that announced the scrapping of tolls on the Severn crossing. Is it not right to expect a real answer from the Minister today and not simply, as we saw yesterday, pushing this issue back down on to local leaders?

**Derek Twigg:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The fact remains that it was not Halton Borough Council's decision to make it a toll bridge. I know that because I have been involved with the project from the very start. It was clearly central Government who made that decision.

The solution that has been raised by my hon. Friends today rests with the Government, not Halton Borough Council, which has had its budget cut by over 50%. It is one of the smallest councils in the country and it is struggling on a daily basis to provide the services that its residents need. The solution rests with the Government alone, and they need to look at that very carefully.

In conclusion, the bridge is a great, iconic structure and it is fabulous to have it, but the toll system is causing untold problems. I raised the issues faced specifically by Halton constituents, but I also understand very well the concerns of my colleagues, some of whom will make further points of their own later on.

10 am

**Maria Eagle** (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) on obtaining this timely debate, and on the way he set out some of the concerns that have been raised with him. Generally speaking, it is certainly better to have the new bridge than not to have it, and I congratulate Halton Borough Council on taking on the necessary and ambitious scheme to get the bridge built and operating. It is a shame, as a couple of my right hon. and hon. Friends clearly set out, that the bridge has not been delivered in a way that allows my constituents to cross the Mersey at Runcorn without paying a toll.

The Silver Jubilee bridge has been free since it was built in the 1960s. It is now closed, and when it reopens it, too, will be tolled. The tolls, the discount arrangements and the entire administration need to be rethought. I hope that the Minister will be able to give us some comfort on that in his remarks at the end of the debate. I accept that the situation is not primarily the choice of Halton Borough Council; its choice was to build a toll bridge or no bridge, thanks to central Government requirements. We must therefore look to the Government for solutions.

Halton Borough Council has acted in a spirit of a long line of entrepreneurial local government organisations on Merseyside, which have been innovative and ahead of their time when it comes to infrastructure development, whether in respect of that original wet dock back in the mists of time in Liverpool or, more recently, tunnels under the Mersey. Unfortunately, Merseyside people often seem to end up having to pay for infrastructure in a way people do not in other parts of the country.

I will make three basic points which I hope the Minister will address. First, I have many constituents who cannot afford to pay the new tolls and are finding that their imposition, without a sufficiently widespread and generous discount scheme, is making their lives financially unsustainable. I will give some examples of

that. Secondly, the administration of the tolling arrangements appears secretive and unresponsive. There are, let us say, teething problems—which may turn out to be basic flaws—in the administration of the tolls. I have some examples of that as well. Thirdly, there is not sufficient public accountability, whether by Merseyflow, which operates the tolls; Mersey Gateway Crossings Boards Ltd and Halton Borough Council, which commissioned and look after the bridge; or the Government, who intervene when it suits them, then wash their hands of any further need to get involved when it does not. None of those things bodes well for the future smooth operation of these arrangements.

On affordability, I do not believe it is fair that residents living near the bridge in Halton receive almost free travel while my constituents, who have made decisions about where they live and work based on the longstanding availability of an untolled bridge, suddenly have to factor significant extra costs into their calculations. The Silver Jubilee bridge has been available and untolled since the 1960s; when it reopens, it will be tolled at the same rate as the Mersey Gateway.

Liz Simon is a teacher who works in Stockton Heath in Warrington. She has been in her job for seven years and has two young children. She says:

“I now have this additional bill to pay when we are only getting a 1% pay rise in the education sector. This will certainly not cover the £1000 a year toll charges.”

She has had to stop buying school dinners for her children to try to offset the additional costs she faced in getting to work. She says:

“It is frustrating that people who I work with who live in Halton pay £10 a year when ‘as the crow flies’ I live a lot closer (to work) than they do.”

Yet she pays 100 times more than her workmates—almost £1,000.

Another of my constituents, who works at the Countess of Chester hospital, also has to use the bridge daily to get to and from work. As a relatively poorly paid health worker, his pay rises are also capped at 1%, but he suddenly has to pay an extra £1,000. He has cancelled his home insurance, but does not know where he is going to find the other £500 per year he will need to pay the extra cost of getting to work. Understandably in my view, he calls this

“a no option commuter tax”.

What does the Minister suggest he does, and is it right that he has had to cancel his home insurance?

I have some constituents who have told me that they will have to give up their jobs because going across the river is no longer financially viable. Some of my constituents, when they are diagnosed with cancer, have to attend the Clatterbridge Centre on the Wirral for treatment on a regular basis over many months. Many of them lose a substantial portion of their income and end up relying on sickness benefits. They are now also having to find the money for bridge tolls, at a time when their income is dwindling and their costs are increasing—one more worry for people who need to avoid worry in order to recover. I have been contacted by constituents in that position who, for understandable reasons, do not want me to reveal their names. There are many similar stories, and my right hon. and hon. Friends have also given some examples.

[Maria Eagle]

On the administration of the tolls, the arrangements are unfair and are being operated badly, insensitively and secretively. My constituent, Liz Simon, has already drawn attention in the comments I have quoted to the current anomaly: big discounts for those happening to live within one local authority boundary create inexplicable differences between the treatment of those people and that of individuals who happen to live in other places, because such a demarcation does not take account of the travel-to-work area around the bridge. That can mean people in similar circumstances having to pay 100 times more for crossings over the same bridge.

The former Chancellor, George Osborne, recognised that anomaly when he visited Halton ahead of the 2015 general election. As has been said, he promised to consider financing a similar discount scheme to that operating for Halton residents for those living in Cheshire, Cheshire West and Chester, and Warrington. I am sure that it was an oversight on his part to miss out my constituents in Liverpool and Knowsley, as well as people living in St Helens, who also about the whereabouts of the bridge. The alternative explanation, offered by some Members in today's debate, that he was offering discounts only to those living in Tory marginal seats ahead of the general election cannot possibly be true; it would be a breach that the Treasury's accounting officer would not let him get away with indulging in. The fact that the current Chancellor has not gone ahead with his predecessor's scheme—indeed has not deigned, as yet, even to reply to my letter asking him to consider it—does not negate the great good sense of having a much fairer tolling scheme than the one currently in place.

In addition, can it be right that a £2 toll attracts a £40 fine for non-payment that escalates to £60 if unpaid for a month? I know that payment within 14 days cuts the penalty to £20, but that is still extortionate. The *Liverpool Echo* reported yesterday that between £1 million and £3 million has been charged in penalties within a month of the bridge opening. Indeed, some people feel as if the arrangements are specially designed to catch them out—again, some of my hon. Friends have referred to that in their remarks.

The signage just after the bridge opened was not clear, and it is still possible to drive over the bridge, unable to see the instructions about how and when to pay. The free-flow system has the advantage of not requiring cars to stop, but has the disadvantage of allowing people to incur costs without realising it. Elderly people and those not used to paying for things online are particularly disadvantaged, as are casual visitors, who often do not even realise that the bridge is tolled. I have had contact on social media from people passing by who end up with a fine and—I might say—a very bad impression of Liverpool because they feel they have been trapped into incurring a charge that they were unaware existed. Businesses are also suffering in administrative and financial terms.

What about tractors? You might not be aware of this, Mr Paisley, but I represent a small number of arable farmers. They were told that there would be no tolls for their tractors. After all, they do not pay road tax, or have number plates on the front. In addition, the plate on the trailer does not have to be the same as the plate on the tractor. However, they are having to pay and, as

a consequence of the lack of visible number plates on the front of the tractors, they are incurring fines. That may not seem like a large problem, but to a small number of arable farmers it is a serious issue. Merseyflow, the operator of the bridge, has refused to meet them or to address the issue with the National Farmers Union and has just said that it is all fine. I do not think that is sufficiently responsive.

The system has been going wrong. I have heard from people who have had penalty notices when they have paid and people who have had penalty notices when they are exempt. The *Liverpool Echo* reported that Alison Hill's husband had received 10 penalty charge notices demanding £220 in total, even though he is a Halton resident exempt from the charge and registered his vehicle in August. My constituent Phillip Grace has had penalty charge notices totalling £616 for 28 crossings because the signage detailing how to pay was missing for the first few weeks of operation.

My constituent Angela Hitchmough paid for a monthly pass for her car—£100 in total, with a £10 registration fee. Three weeks later, she changed her car but was told that she could not transfer her pass to the new vehicle. She has had to lose a week's worth of travel, register the new car and buy a new monthly pass. She uses the car to go to work part time in Runcorn, so those extra expenses are considerable for her.

On accountability, the organisations in charge of the bridge and the tolling arrangement are not helpful; I do not see why they should not be more accountable for their actions in public. They have not shown much sign of wanting to engage with the public thus far. That needs to change.

Given the complaints I have received, I wanted to know how many people had been fined. I asked a written question, and the Minister told me in a written answer on 3 November:

“The Department for Transport holds no information on the number of people who have been fined”,

and that I should ask Merseyflow. I asked Merseyflow on 6 November to tell me how many fines had been issued since the bridge opened. After further prompting by email and telephone on 4 December, I finally received verbal advice that it would not answer my question and I should put in a freedom of information request to Mersey Gateway Crossings Board.

The *Liverpool Echo*, as we have heard, was told on 20 November that 50,000 penalty charge notices were issued in the first month of operation. That is a suspiciously round number, but a very large one—fine income of between £1 million and £3 million in one month, depending on how quickly people pay their penalty charge notices. That is all money being taken out of the Merseyside economy.

The chief executive of Halton, David Parr, who, according to the *Liverpool Echo*, has refused to answer a freedom of information request about what he gets paid as a director of the Mersey Gateway Crossings Board, refused to say how much money had been raised in fines. Instead, he waxed lyrical about how popular the new bridge is. It is popular to some and not to others. Operators need to be much more open and transparent about what is going on and the Government need to collect information and give it out when asked.

Does the Minister not agree that the answers to the questions about how much money has been raised in fines and how many penalty charge notices have been issued should be in the public domain? Getting answers should not be like getting blood out of a stone, particularly given that the money is coming straight out of the hard-earned cash of local people and businesses, who are struggling to find it. Should the Department not have the information, particularly given the guarantees it has given to stand behind any shortfall? Why should the details of the contract and the scheme not be published as well? The people of Merseyside have a right to know the answers to those and other questions, and the Government, having insisted that Merseyside could only get this bridge if it was majority-financed by tolls, should be at the forefront of making sure that we have access to and transparency in the information, and should not be indulging in their usual trick of blaming someone else.

Many of my constituents cannot afford the extra costs imposed by the Mersey Gateway Bridge and its current tolling arrangements. There should be, and needs to be, a full reappraisal of how it works, who pays and how much should be paid, which should include looking at getting rid of tolls completely. We need that review sooner rather than later.

10.14 am

**Faisal Rashid** (Warrington South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) on securing this debate and thank the Backbench Business Committee for giving me and my colleagues the opportunity to raise our constituents' concerns about this important issue in the House.

The tolls on the Mersey crossings are a huge issue for hundreds of thousands of people living in the north-west. My hon. Friends have already commented on the regional disparity in the tolls across the United Kingdom and the inconsistencies in the Government's policies. They proudly claim the economic benefits of scrapping the tolls on the Severn Bridge; I cannot believe that simultaneously, for the first time in the UK, they are imposing a toll on users for what was previously a toll-free bridge, the Silver Jubilee bridge. It is currently closed and there is no pedestrian or cycle crossing on the new bridge. The decision is affecting a huge number of people in the north-west, with little consideration for the damage it will do to the region. The tolling of the Silver Jubilee and Mersey Gateway bridges is quite simply causing misery for a huge number of my constituents.

As my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester mentioned, just before the 2015 election, the then Chancellor of the Exchequer came to Warrington and made a commitment to the people of Warrington, and Cheshire West and Chester, that they would be exempt from the tolls. In January 2017, that promise was broken. If I were more sceptical of the Conservative Government of the time, I might suggest that there was some electioneering in the timing of the former Chancellor's announcement. It is no surprise that the U-turn on the commitment has left many of my constituents with a deep feeling of betrayal.

The new toll leaves residents facing an additional cost of £1,000 per year to make crossings that were previously free. For many, that huge cost is for carrying out everyday

activities such as travelling to work or attending hospital appointments. Halton and Warrington hospitals form part of the same NHS trust, yet they are on either side of the bridges so many people are forced to cross them to receive treatment. As one of my constituents with a chronic illness put it to me, the toll is yet another tax on illness for hundreds of people.

I have also been contacted by many NHS staff in my constituency, who we already know far too well are suffering as a result of the public sector pay freeze. They are now expected to take what is in effect a £1,000 pay cut, simply for the luxury of travelling to work. That is a huge financial strain on my constituents, especially for those on the lowest wages. The situation appears even more unfair when we consider that the Government spend more than £1,000 per head more per year on transport in London than they do in the north-west, yet they expect our constituents to spend an additional £1,000, which many of them simply do not have, to carry out everyday activities.

The introduction of the toll is a serious burden on local businesses. One local business, a Freight Transport Association member, has predicted that the tolls alone will cost it an additional £1.5 million.

**Conor McGinn** (St Helens North) (Lab): Is that not the frustration? The bridge was a chance to enhance connectivity, not just across Liverpool city region but with Wigan, Warrington, Chester and right into north Wales, but if workers in St Helens are having to pay £80 a month, and businesses are having to pay thousands of pounds a year, does it not become a barrier and a disincentive to building our economic region?

**Faisal Rashid:** I agree with my hon. Friend. It is so important that the Minister addresses how this is affecting businesses and local people and makes a firm commitment today for the region. My constituent says that it will cost his business £1.5 million per year, and there will be administration costs on top of that for completing the necessary paperwork. The millions of pounds that motorists across the region are being forced to spend to make the crossing is money that is no longer being spent in local businesses or used to boost the local economy.

It is not just the financial burden that is affecting local residents. Since the toll bridge opened, I have been contacted by dozens of constituents who have concerns about the increase in traffic in and around Warrington. The town centre is already highly congested at peak times. Naturally, motorists are keen to avoid paying the toll where they can, and many are opting instead to drive through Warrington town centre. Warrington already attracted almost 200,000 journeys to work before the tolls on the bridges were introduced. Local infrastructure simply cannot take any further increases in traffic congestion. Local people in my constituency and Warrington town do not deserve to suffer any more traffic misery.

Warrington already suffers extremely high levels of air pollution. In 2016, the World Health Organisation highlighted that it had breached air pollution safety levels. The major increase in vehicular movement is having an adverse impact on local residents' health, and is exacerbating Warrington's poor air quality problems.

I have raised just a few of the problems with the tolls in the Mersey region. I echo my hon. Friends' excellent comments, but it is time that words became actions. I

[Faisal Rashid]

welcomed the opportunity to meet the Minister last month, and I am grateful that he took the time to have discussions with me. He assured me that he would do his best to take action on this issue. I look forward to our follow-up meeting in the new year. However, the issue will not go away until real action is taken to alleviate the burden on our constituents. I would like the Government to commit to undertake an urgent review of the tolling of the bridge. The concessions that have been made to Halton residents were part-funded by £350 million from the Government. There is no reason why the Government cannot fund an extension of that scheme to help people in neighbouring constituencies who have no choice but to use the bridge regularly.

I will go even further: I urge the Government to consider renegotiating the ownership of the Silver Jubilee bridge with private investors with a view to bringing it into public ownership and keeping both Halton crossings toll-free for all residents. The bridge has the potential to be a valuable economic corridor connecting local communities and businesses. It should be part of the national road infrastructure; we should not have sought private investment when building it.

I urge the Government to prove to local people that the north matters. This is only the beginning of a long fight to scrap the Mersey tolls. I will fight for Warrington South every step of the way.

10.23 am

**Mike Amesbury** (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Thank you for chairing this crucial debate, Mr Paisley. I thank my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson), for securing it.

Like my hon. Friend and other hon. Members, I am opposed to tolls on the Mersey Gateway. As MP for Weaver Vale, I am in a unique position, in that half of my constituents live in Halton and have access to the funding and free travel arrangements that my hon. Friend the Member for Halton (Derek Twigg) referred to. I echo his point that bands G and H council tax payers and small businesses in the Halton part of my constituency should be included in any concessionary scheme, as the previous Chancellor argued in the past. The other half of my constituents live in Cheshire West and Chester, and therefore, like those of the hon. Member for City of Chester, must pay. If the system is unfair to users who, having paid their taxes to the Treasury, are forced to pay again to use the bridge that they have already helped to fund, it is doubly unfair to my constituents whose friends and neighbours get what they perceive to be free travel simply because of their postcode. For them, they are subject to a postcode lottery that they did not ask to enter in which the ticket cost is, in many cases, more than £1,000 a year, and they have no choice but to play. Like with other lotteries, they pay to enter only to see somebody else rake in the winnings, but the winner is not a fellow player but a private company making a hefty profit from the private finance initiative.

Before I expand on what the situation means for my constituents, I want to be clear about where the responsibility for the unfairness lies and who has the potential to fix it. Halton Borough Council rightly campaigned for decades for a new bridge across the

Mersey. To echo a point made by other hon. Members, it was needed. It is a wonderful piece of engineering and infrastructure. It is iconic, and it certainly has improved connectivity and speed flows across the city region. In the public inquiry, the residents of Halton were given a choice between a toll bridge and no bridge, so it is understandable that they chose a toll bridge. Halton Borough Council's hands were tied by successive Governments. This was the only show in town.

The best way to fund major infrastructure projects—it always seems to be done like this in other parts of the country, particularly the south-east—is from the Exchequer. The only solution is for central Government to address this issue, as they have done for other crossings across the country. If the Conservative Government can abolish tolls on the Severn bridge, they can do so on the Mersey—including for the Mersey tunnels. If the Conservative party can promise free travel for Cheshire and Warrington during the 2015 election campaign, the Chancellor can honour that promise in government. It was not Halton Borough Council or the Labour party that made and broke a promise to my constituents about bridge tolls; it was the previous Conservative Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, and the Government must be held to account for that.

Although I recognise that the bridge has been good news for travel times and is a fantastic piece of engineering, it is clear that the current-set up, as my hon. Friends said, is posing major challenges for people in my constituency and way beyond it. Money is all too often the reason. More than £1 million in fines—arguably more than that now—has been dished out in one month. I have spoken to many residents who have been dealt with harshly and insensitively. There has been poor communication and signage. An elderly woman in Helsby, which is part of my constituency, was fined £80. She was in tears on the phone because she did not know how to access the internet. It was unjust—she was just a couple of days late with the payment.

Constituents are being hit with bills of £150 if their car breaks down, due to some strange contractual arrangement that means they must be towed by an approved private contractor and pay a charge before their car is released from the compound. Membership of the Automobile Association or the Royal Automobile Club does not count, which is also a frustration for those organisations.

Although it is true that the bridge has created hundreds of skilled jobs during its construction, the jobs that support its ongoing operation are with a private company, Emovis. To be clear, as a Labour MP I am very disappointed that it does not recognise a trade union or pay the real living wage. The true benefit to the economy cannot be measured only in travel times, as crucial as they are; it has to be whether the benefits are shared fairly by all residents, as my hon. Friends have argued.

Recently, with others, I have launched a Christmas campaign. I was disappointed with the clear and quick answer I got from some of the powers that be. The clearest illustration of the crossings arrangements was that clear and quick refusal even to consider allowing free travel on Christmas day. Hon Members may correct me, but we have that for the Mersey tunnels, so on that one day of the year friends and families can visit relatives and so on. They are travelling from all over the country, as hon. Members have said, and we want to

ensure that they do not get caught by that interesting arrangement of a fixed penalty notice. I do not believe that the Government should get in the way of a private contractor offering such a concession at Christmas, but in a recent reply about why it is not possible, comment was made not only on the financial arrangements but on the need for Government permission to offer that concession.

The tolls, however, are not just for Christmas but for a period of about 25 years. Ministers will no doubt point to other crossings and say that the scenario is the same there, but the reality is clearly anything but, as people have already said: the new Forth bridge is toll free; tolls will be abolished for the Severn bridge—I have listened to Ministers' interesting arguments about the economy—and the Dartford crossing is free at night; and my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester has mentioned the option chosen for the East Anglia road toll. There is, however, no respite for users of the Mersey Gateway. Instead, when the Silver Jubilee bridge reopens next year, that will be tolled as well. My constituency has many unique and welcome claims to fame, but being near to the only place in the country that has two tolled bridges side by side—the Mersey tunnels are tolled too—is a scandalous situation for the people of Merseyside. It is a unique arrangement.

We have heard much from the Government about the northern powerhouse. Words have yet to be matched by actions or funding, but I do believe that some Ministers in this Government genuinely—I hope—want to tackle the regional divide. We understand that tolls on the Humber bridge are in line to be scrapped as part of a future Yorkshire devolution deal and, if that is the case, we would welcome the same for Merseyside, Cheshire and Warrington. As one constituent said to me, if this bridge was across the Thames, it would be free. What better way to prove that the Government want to change the perception than by abolishing the tolls?

I recognise that the Mersey Gateway is a multi million-pound project, and if abolition outright is not immediately feasible, extending to others the deal that Halton council secured would be a step forward. I and my colleagues would welcome sitting down with Ministers to see how that could be achieved as a first step. The £1,100 a year taken away from an individual household income is simply not fair to constituents and is a tax on jobs. It is not good for our economy, and not good for our region. I urge Ministers to join me and my colleagues in looking at things again and to abolish tolls.

**Ian Paisley (in the Chair):** I am about to call the last Back-Bench speaker, but I would like to call the Opposition spokesperson before quarter to 11. I am not imposing a time limit, but I would like you to bear that in mind—I call Justin Madders.

10.35 am

**Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Paisley, but I am sure I will be finished well within the time. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

I too congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) on securing the debate and on the assiduous way in which he and other hon. Friends and hon. Members have pursued this

matter for some considerable time. As we have heard, the issue has caused consternation—my hon. Friend used that word several times—as well as frustration and anger locally. Not only are people being asked to pay a toll when they were told that they would not have to, but they see other toll crossings around the country now becoming free.

I have no wish to list all the crossings where there is no charge, but it is worth setting out some of the headlines so that the Minister may see why our constituents feel so aggrieved by the situation. None of the crossings in Northern Ireland are tolled. None of the road crossings in Scotland are tolled. None of the 18 estuary road crossings in London are tolled. In fact, more than 90% of the tidal crossings in this country are toll-free, with several of those that are tolled due to become free shortly.

I hope that I have established that tolls for crossings are a relatively rare thing, and few crossings in recent memory have had charges imposed on their users. What is even rarer, however, if not unique, is the situation on the Mersey, where an existing free crossing is having charges introduced—just because, heaven forbid, people might want to use it: yes, a road charging scheme that is not about managing congestion or recouping construction costs, but about dissuading people from using the crossing altogether.

On the subject of construction costs, the existing Silver Jubilee bridge was partly funded by Cheshire County Council when Halton was part of it. Should not the successor authority to the county council get some sort of refund, or are my constituents expected to pay three times over for this crossing? They pay through the original construction cost, their road tax and the toll for every time they cross the river.

To be clear, my constituents and those of other hon. Members will pay through the nose for the scheme. The toll income is estimated to be about £38 million a year and, as we have heard, fines could well increase that figure. Anyway, Merseylink will be a tidy £113 million better off thanks to taxpayer handouts—the Merseylink accounts put the cost of the bridge at £455 million, yet total Government support for the bridge until 2044 is £568 million. Will the Minister explain where that extra £113 million is going? It is certainly not going to the benefit of my constituents.

To move away from those astronomical figures for a minute, let us look at the human impact. We have heard from hon. Members about how their constituents have been affected. I too have been contacted by many constituents who tell me that they are struggling to cope with the impact of the tolls. Many work in the public sector, be that the NHS, local government or education, where they have, of course, not had a pay rise for seven years, so having to find another £80 a month or so just to get to work is causing them real difficulty. I was very sad to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) describe how some of her constituents were having to think about giving up their jobs as a result—that is completely indefensible.

I will read out the personal account of one constituent who contacted me. She said:

“I live in great Sutton but I work in Knowsley. I work extremely hard, long shifts unsociable hours but I love my job (exercise rehab) I have managed to buy a house by myself and can afford a second hand car but have very few luxuries. With the new Mersey

[Justin Madders]

bridge being tolled I am going to find it extremely difficult to get to work £2 each way means £4 a day, £20 a week, £80 a month, £1000+ a year all on top of road tax, fuel, and insurance.”

She added:

“I personally believe this is highly unreasonable, especially as both bridges will be tolled. There is no escape and there is only yourself to cover the costs.”

The nub of it was:

“I feel penalised for working.”

There we have it: hard-working constituents feel that they are penalised for having a job. Is that the message that the Government want to send? We have heard that employers on both sides of the river already say that staff are looking to leave because of the additional cost. When did the so-called northern powerhouse become a tax on jobs?

Talking of the northern powerhouse, it would be remiss of me not to mention the great architect of this grand illusion, George Osborne, who hon. Members have already spoken of today. His promises in this area have proved to be as meaningless as the *Evening Standard* circulation figures. I remember coming across a voter during the 2015 election who told me that she was considering voting Conservative because she had heard that the then Chancellor would promise to scrap the Mersey tunnel fees. I expressed scepticism at the time, but looking back, he said:

“They will definitely be cut. I think we might be able to go further, I’m quite optimistic that we might be able to go further and abolish them all together”.

When I heard that, I could see why she might have thought that was a pretty clear statement of intent. In fact, it is almost as clear as what he said about the Mersey Gateway tolls. We have heard a number of Members quote things that he said at the time. He also said:

“I think you’ve got the balance right by extending the scheme to residents in Cheshire, Cheshire West and Chester and in Warrington.”

It is pretty clear that a promise was made just before the election, but the two statements about the Mersey tunnels and the Mersey Gateway have proved to be utterly meaningless.

Governments of all persuasions are rightly criticised for making election promises that they cannot keep, but in this case the then Chancellor of the Exchequer made clear and unambiguous financial commitments to the electorate. As for his statement on the cost of extending the free scheme to Warrington and Cheshire West residents, it is worth noting that a detailed study on the cost to the taxpayer was prepared and published in July 2016—more than a year after the promise was first made. It looks as though he said what he did with no costings having been done, and with no apparent intention of it being carried out. That is an indictment of the vacuous, tweet-led and dishonest politics we have too much of in this country.

As we have heard, the current boundaries on who pays and who does not make no sense. People can live closer to the crossing in Warrington, or Cheshire West and Chester, than someone in Halton, yet have to pay. I have received complaints, as have other hon. Members, from people about the difficulty they have had in paying.

Having no toll booths at all for the occasional visitor is opening people up to unnecessary fines. As my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood said, that creates a very bad impression for visitors to the area. It should not be forgotten that the bridge is located right by an international airport. My constituents should not have to pay fines or fees at all; they should be exempt from paying altogether and this Government should have the decency to honour their promises.

10.43 am

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) for making such an excellent speech, proving once again that he is the right advocate for the people of the City of Chester. He exposed the fact that across that 20-mile stretch of the River Mersey there is real confusion in the Government’s management of the river crossing and how it is paid for. I thank all my hon. Friends for their powerful speeches.

Before I specifically address the bridge tax, I want to look at what is happening about the disparity and the growing inequality in our country, not least the fact that the north is receiving around a 10th of the economic and transport infrastructure compared with London and the south-east. Of the 18 river crossings in Greater London, not one attracts a toll—Dartford is outside Greater London, of course. Yet in the north-west, we see tolls being extended to bridges that have never had tolls in their 60-year history. This is a region where wages are significantly lower. Therefore, a tax of £4 for a double crossing, which is £1,000 a year, is a real penalty on the north, and is not putting the power back into local people. We heard about the impact that this has on driving congestion in some of the cities, and on air pollution, with air quality deteriorating in places such as Warrington, as my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) mentioned.

We need to look at why we came to the point where we needed a second bridge. I hear what my hon. Friend the Member for Halton (Derek Twigg) said—that it was absolutely necessary—but we must recognise the completely failed public transport infrastructure. I met people from the region who told me how train journeys took so much longer than driving. Therefore, they had no choice. We have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid) that it seems that people do not have the choice of cycling or walking across that bridge. Choices for people in the north are being narrowed. We know that this is all about choices, because we need only to think that last week, the Secretary of State for Transport tried to conceal a deal on public transport with Stagecoach and Virgin, burying £2 billion, which should have gone into the state but was taken out. We could have had an additional £2 billion, which more than covers the cost of these bridges. This is all about choices, which need to be addressed. If that can be done at one stroke, I am sure that this problem can be redressed at one stroke. That makes it even more shocking.

We have heard my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) talk powerfully about the accountability of Merseyflow. People cannot even access information from that company, and we cannot even communicate properly with the company to represent our constituents. It is absolutely crucial

that the Minister gets control of that company and sorts out some of those really basic issues. We also heard from my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) and others about the impact on local businesses. A penalty is being put on businesses and our public services, not least on Christmas day, when people not only visit their families but go to work for our public services. We heard how people using the NHS are having to pay this tax to cross the river.

We know that there are 80,000 crossings a day, so it is absolutely clear that this is all about enhancing connectivity, improving social mobility—another issue where the Government are in desperate need of solutions—and improving economic growth in one of the country's most deprived regions. We have to seriously examine why there are four crossings that have to be paid for in the north-west, when there are none in Northern Ireland, Scotland or Wales, with the removal of the tolls on river crossings there. We are down to just seven crossings. I was just looking at the list: funnily enough, it is mostly in Labour areas where people still have to pay tolls.

It is clear the Government will have to bring redress to back up their rhetoric about economic investment. We have heard about how the former Chancellor seems to be planting money trees all over the place. Unfortunately, he then pulls them up after the polls have closed on election night. It is so important that the promises and commitments are followed through. For the residents of Warrington, Cheshire, Halton and the whole region, those promises must be honoured. There is a huge disparity. We heard so eloquently from my right hon. and hon. Friends exactly how that disparity and the way in which the system operates do not make logical sense.

Local people have been failed, particularly with the signage not being complete, having to understand a system that is not explained to them, and having to use the internet when perhaps they do not have a digital connection. It is a complete mess. The Minister needs to get a grip and get a hold of this situation to make the changes. Why are local residents having to pay so much for the scheme? I understand that in the Mersey tunnels alone, they have already paid for the cost of those tunnels 23 times, and now they have to pay again not just for the building of the bridge but for the public finance initiative scheme, paying about £113 million more. Surely that is a huge injustice.

I will not take up much more time, because I know that Members want to hear from the Minister. We need him to get hold of this problem, not pass it on to someone else. It is not local authorities' problem. He needs to take responsibility for this issue and to ensure that he honours the words of this Government, who said they would address the charges—the bridge tax—that residents have to pay.

10.50 am

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman):** It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I am grateful to the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) for calling this debate. It is testimony to his chirpiness and to the energy of Labour Back Benchers that they have been able to muster such a crowd after a night like last night. I congratulate them on that, too.

Many issues have been raised that will not merely resonate in the Palace of Westminster but be noted by Halton Borough Council and other local councils, and by Merseyflow. I hope that they also have an important wider impact in terms of informing hon. Members' constituents of the present situation. I have a lot of material to get through, so I am going to be quite quick.

Let me start by pointing out that, contrary to some rumours and suggestions, the Government are very focused on investment in the north, including in the north-west and in and around Liverpool. As the House knows, we have committed to invest £13 billion during this Parliament to improve regional connectivity so that northern towns and cities can pool their strengths and create a single and more interconnected economy. The Liverpool sub-region is a very important part of that policy. As the hon. Gentleman knows, it is a centre of innovation, industry and culture that serves a local population of 2 million and a global population of billions. There are important economic sites in the area, including the Daresbury enterprise zone, Liverpool John Lennon airport and the Omega site in Warrington, but this Government, like colleagues across the House, recognise that the area requires greater investment to support economic growth.

To that end, we have provided nearly £300 million of local growth funding for a number of transport improvements in the region to boost the local economy. Those include the Halton curve, the Warrington waterfront transport infrastructure scheme, improvements at junction 8 of the M62, access improvements to the Knowsley industrial park and the Knowsley expressway, and the M56 junction 11A scheme, which we expect to provide a new junction with the Mersey Gateway bridge and to support the Daresbury enterprise zone. We are doing a lot, and we plan to do more. Subject to future decisions, we could also see improvements such as a high-level crossing of the Manchester ship canal in Warrington and improved access to the port of Liverpool, which is already included in my Department's road investment strategy.

There has been great growth in this area, and there will be more, with the support of public investment in infrastructure, as has been recognised across the House and in this debate. But it is also clear that, in the middle of all this, the Silver Jubilee bridge in Halton became a victim of the success of the local economy. It is a vital link between the two halves of Halton and one of the few strategic crossings of the Mersey, and it is therefore vital to the wider sub-regional economy, as has been widely pointed out today. It has been upgraded over the years so that it can cater for significantly higher levels of traffic than it was originally designed to accommodate. Nevertheless, as has been recognised, it faced serious congestion, which was holding back local growth. There were delays of up to 10 minutes at peak hours and gridlock on the local network, and there were significant increases in incidents and pollution, as has been recognised. At some point, whether we like it or not, and whatever might have happened to any other river crossing, that bridge would have had to be closed and upgraded. It is important to understand that.

Of course, the new Gateway bridge was itself the product of significant local care, thought and attention. There was a long gestation period, which began before studies in 1994 and included extensive public consultation.

[*Jesse Norman*]

It was always clear that both bridges would be tolled, not just the new one. As has been mentioned, there was a public inquiry during May and June 2009, which was chaired by an independent planning inspector. It considered seven planning applications and legal orders, and those orders were confirmed in 2010.

That is a very important backdrop, because it makes clear the context in which we are presently operating. The new bridge, as a striking addition to the local landscape, is already helping to cut congestion, improve journeys and boost the region's economy. We have heard that there are already 80,000 journeys a day on it, which testifies to its strength. As Members have recognised, it is an astonishing achievement. It is more than 2 km of bridge and road, with 239 enormous beams weighing up to 106 tonnes. It will create nearly 5,000 permanent jobs and will add an estimated £61.9 million in gross value added from new jobs every year by 2030. As the hon. Members for Halton (Derek Twigg) and for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) said, it is a fantastic achievement to have delivered that scheme on time and on budget.

**David Hanson:** Will the Minister give way?

**Jesse Norman:** I have no time. The right hon. Gentleman can ask his question if he wants to, but I really want to respond to the points that have been made.

The Government have provided £288 million so far to fund this piece of infrastructure, on top of the £86 million already provided to Halton to develop the scheme and to pay for land and for decontamination. It has been the policy of successive UK Governments—this Government and previous ones—that major estuarial crossings should be tolled. That has been the case with similar English crossings and with the Mersey tunnels, and it was decided that the Gateway bridge would not depart from that policy.

The tolling proposals have been integral to the scheme and to the financing package for the new bridge. As was recognised, it is a practical impossibility to have a situation in which the new bridge is tolled while the adjacent Silver Jubilee bridge is not. That would mean that most users would opt to use the existing bridge, which would defeat the objective of bringing that bridge back to more local use and upset the agreed financial package. There is nothing new here. These issues were all considered and debated at the public inquiry into the legal orders that Halton Borough Council sought to construct the new crossing.

It is important to recognise that, at the final approval stage in 2014, the then Chancellor announced that the Government would fund the difference, to allow eligible

residents unlimited use of the bridges for registered private cars only. As a result, there is a discount scheme for local residents. The residents of Halton are in the unusual position that the existing bridge connects the two parts of the borough either side of the River Mersey. We continue to feel that it is right that those who live in that situation receive free crossings, as is the case with the Dartford crossing in Kent. Many hon. Members said that there is therefore a case to be made for the extension of free tolling to residents of councils beyond Halton. As I have said, we have looked at that, but it is a practical impossibility, for two reasons. First, the cost to the Government and to local authorities would be substantial. Extending the benefit to residents of just the five neighbouring authorities would cost more than £600 million. We would expect the cost to be split according to the ratio that has been used so far. That would leave nearly £370 million to be found by the five councils.

**Derek Twigg:** Will the Minister give way on the point about bands G and H?

**Jesse Norman:** The hon. Gentleman raises the issue of people in bands G and H. There has to have been a socioeconomic basis for that, otherwise the problem could not have been addressed without a leakage, but I am very happy to revisit the letter that he received with Treasury colleagues to see whether further consideration can be given to that issue.

I want to give the hon. Member for City of Chester a chance to wind up, so let me say very quickly that it is not fair to point to the crossing on the M4 in Wales as a precedent, because that bridge had been paid for through its tolls. Yes, there have been teething problems and snags. Those are issues for Merseyflow and Halton Borough Council.

Let me conclude by reminding those present of the significant transport investment that the Government have made and wish to continue to make in the Liverpool sub-region. These crossings are the subject of local governance by the relevant bodies and I am delighted that the bridge opened successfully on schedule.

**Ian Paisley (in the Chair):** There is no time for a wind-up speech—whether to allow one is at my discretion—so I will put the Question.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered tolls on the Mersey crossings.



## Mineworkers' Pension Scheme

11 am

**Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Mineworkers' Pension Scheme.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I applied for the debate for one reason: because miners and their families deserve a fair deal from their pension pots. In the time I have, I will talk a bit about the scheme—what it is, what the issues are and what could be done going forward—but first, I want to talk about why it matters.

I have a very personal stake in this because of where I am from and my family. Like much of south Wales, coalmining is a big part of Blaenau Gwent's history. We were the crucible of the industrial revolution in Wales. Steel and coal propelled the Welsh economy, shaping our landscape and employing hundreds of thousands of people. There were tragedies as well, such as at Senghenydd and Six Bells in my constituency—I could go on.

Like many people in Blaenau Gwent, mining also played a big part in my family. I was named after three colliers—my three uncles on my mum's side—Nicholas, Desmond and John. I still remember the 1974 coal strike: I went with my Uncle Dessie to pick coal off the patches high above Tredegar to help keep our homes warm. They were all members of this scheme. Working deep underground, miners like my uncles helped keep our country running for decades. It was dangerous work, but they just got on with it. Oakdale colliery, where a lot of my family worked, shut 28 years ago. The British mining industry is almost gone, but what is left is former mining communities such as Blaenau Gwent and pensioners like my uncles.

In 2006, there were 280,000 total members of the scheme. By 2016, there were just over 177,000 members. The scheme projects that that number will fall by about 50,000 in the next 10 years, which would take total membership down to about 127,000—a drop of 55% over 20 years. Those members who are left deserve a duty of financial care from our Government.

**Stephanie Peacock** (Barnsley East) (Lab): I have hundreds of constituents who have paid into the scheme and deserve the money, in contrast to the Government, who have not made a contribution since 1994. In discussions, the Government have said that they do not intend to agree to changes that are not in their interests. This is simply not fair. They need to think again.

**Nick Smith:** My hon. Friend makes a really good point that gets to the nub of the question we are considering.

I called for the debate following the productive meeting that Labour colleagues and I had with the scheme trustees recently. At the meeting, we looked at ways of improving outcomes for the scheme's members, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero) for organising it.

On the scheme itself, in 1994, there was an agreement between British Coal pension trustees and the Government. The Government made a guarantee that any pensions earned up until privatisation were safe and would not fall in cash terms. In return, if the schemes were in

surplus and doing well, that surplus would be split 50:50, with half going to scheme members and the other half to the Government. The sharing of the surplus is at the heart of our discussion.

Since 1994, the Government have taken £3.5 billion out of the scheme, without making any payments into it. It could be argued that £830 million of that was British Coal's original share of the surplus being paid back to the Government—I sort of get that and it is a fair point.

**Chris Evans** (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): I am glad that my hon. Friend mentions British Coal. He will know that British Coal made no employer contributions between 1987 and 1995, when a Conservative Government were in power. Does he agree that that was an error by that Government that clearly proves that, in their time in government, they did not care about ex-mineworkers?

**Nick Smith:** My hon. Friend and neighbour really captures what has happened.

**Wayne David** (Caerphilly) (Lab): As my hon. Friend has said, the surplus gets to the heart of the issue. Does he accept that the surplus the Government have received is far in excess of their own expectations for what could have happened?

**Nick Smith:** My hon. Friend and neighbour, like my hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans), gets right to the bone. Nearly £2.7 billion has come from the scheme to the Government as their share of the subsequent surpluses. That means that the Government have taken the same share as the people who earned the pensions in the first place.

Instead of paying in, the Government act as a guarantor in case things go wrong. That is a good thing and has been helpful—the trustees say that. The Government say that they take the money because they will step in and protect the value of pensions if the fund encounters difficulties. The trustees accept that this protection has enabled them to pursue more lucrative investments than might otherwise have been the case. I would like to be clear: we are glad that the Government guarantee is there. It has made a difference and helped to lead to better returns.

**Ben Bradley** (Mansfield) (Con): I have also met the trustees. Does the hon. Gentleman accept what they have said—that the guarantee is the most important part of the agreement, and that they would not wish to give any movement on that guarantee within the scheme for any price?

**Nick Smith:** The hon. Gentleman is right. When we met the trustees, they told us that the guarantee was important, and I accept that. It has been helpful in terms of pursuing lucrative investments, which have aided scheme improvements and its funding. It has also given miners the peace of mind that the pension they earned will not go down in value, no matter what happens in the markets. It is a good thing. The basic nature of the guarantee is not in dispute. The concern is about how much money is being taken out of the surplus in return for it. That is the question we have to try to tease out.

**Ann Clwyd** (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on getting this important debate. The miners feel deceived and that they have been led down the garden path. As he and many colleagues know, there is anger in mining communities because they feel they have been duped. Waiting and waiting for some kind of resolution is not good enough. May we have an inquiry by the Treasury Committee into the scheme? Would he agree with that?

**Nick Smith:** I agree. More parliamentary consideration of this important initiative and where it goes next would be valuable.

**Jonathan Edwards** (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate, the tone of his remarks to date and the manner in which he and colleagues are campaigning. Will he explain why during 13 years of Labour Government the deal with the trustees was not renegotiated at all?

**Nick Smith:** The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point, but this is not about looking backwards but about looking forwards and looking after the hundreds of thousands of people I mentioned in my introduction.

The Government have provided the guarantee, which is an important commitment, but I would like to ask the Minister three things and I would like three answers today, please. How many other pension schemes that the Government guarantee have delivered them a windfall of billions similar to that in this instance? Do the Government still think that the 50:50 share of the surplus is fair? Importantly, will the Government consider taking a reduced share in the future?

It has been estimated that the Government will receive windfalls of £51 million each year between 2016 and 2019—another £200 million. Lots of people feel that that belongs to the retired miners, not the Government, and I agree with them. Today, I call on the Government to revisit the surplus sharing arrangements, and in particular I urge them to meet the trustees of the scheme to chart a way forward. I am sure that I speak for many colleagues in saying that there is support for change in our constituencies, and that we should do the right thing by retired mineworkers and their families. The time has come for a better way to help the trustees support our communities. This is the miners' money. They earned it through years of hard work at the coalface, and they deserve a better and fairer share of it.

11.11 am

**Gloria De Piero** (Ashfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) for securing this debate on an issue that we feel passionately about.

The Government profiting from the pensions of ex-miners over all these years is nothing short of a national scandal, and billions have been pocketed by the Treasury since 1994 because, as colleagues have said, of the unjust 50:50 surplus-sharing arrangement. That sum was agreed at the outset, with little analysis or justification, and the split has weighed far too favourably in the Government's favour. It would never have been forecast, or expected, that the Treasury would make so

much money without ever having to pay a penny into the fund. We cannot rest until we put that right, and I will continue to raise this issue in Parliament.

I have met the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, and I have organised meetings between colleagues and the trustees of the pension scheme. I and colleagues have been told by Ministers that the surplus-sharing agreement is working well, that only the trustees could change it, and that no objections have been raised. However, I have met the trustees, and they want the arrangement to be changed so that miners can benefit from the scheme's success to a greater and fairer extent. The ball is in the Government's court. They are forecast to pocket many millions more over the next three years. That is wrong, and it is time to say that enough is enough. It is time for justice for ex-miners and their widows. They have waited long enough.

11.13 am

**Ben Bradley** (Mansfield) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I thank the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) for securing this important debate. I ask hon. Members to bear with me, because while I will probably reach the same conclusion as others, my rhetoric might be slightly different.

Like many hon. Members, a number of my constituents who are beneficiaries of the mineworkers' pension scheme have contacted me with concerns about its arrangement. I, too, recently met the scheme's trustees, and had a long and productive discussion with them. The closure of the mines was obviously a major blow to people in my constituency. The mines represented their livelihoods and communities, so I understand why this is such an emotive issue.

I am not here to retread history. Successive Governments have undoubtedly ignored this issue, but the existing scheme also has a number of benefits. The guarantee that the Government provided for this scheme, and careful investment, has meant that the pensions of ex-mineworkers are a third higher than they would have been had the guarantee not been made. We should be clear that, at that time, the profit-sharing arrangement corresponded with the risk assumed by the Government in underwriting the fund. However, times have moved on, and thanks to the scheme's excellent financial management, investments have thrived and the Government and pension holders have done well. With that in mind, I would like more of the profits from the scheme to go to the people whose hard work and dedication paid into it, and I ask the Government to consider changing the profit-sharing model in line with the fund's success.

Mansfield has long felt ignored and alienated from Westminster, and it has never believed that this place has its best interests at heart. As the constituency's new Conservative MP, I want that attitude to change, and I urge the Government to revise their share of profits from the scheme down to a fairer but sustainable level, without compromising that guarantee. It is now time to have that discussion directly with trustees, and to show that a Conservative Government have a commitment to supporting coalfield communities in the future.

11.15 am

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington):** It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship for what

I think is the first time, Mr Paisley—I hope it will not be the last—and I thank the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) for securing this debate, and other hon. Members for their contributions.

Pensions are complex, and I asked to respond to this debate on behalf of the Government because I was previously the Pensions Minister. Although I was not involved specifically with this case, that role gave me—I hope—an understanding of all aspects of pension funds. The Philip Green case received a lot of publicity, and there are lots of other cases, but this is the first time that I have come across a pension fund in such a situation of surplus, compared with the usual story these days of low interest rates and low returns for investors.

In his eloquent speech, the hon. Gentleman asked whether there were other schemes of a similar nature, and the only one that I have come across—again, this was in my previous role—is the rail workers' pension scheme, which, as I remember, was significantly in deficit all the time. I have not previously come across this type of circumstance, but if by chance I find other examples, I will meet or write to the hon. Gentleman.

I know that time is limited and the hon. Gentleman may want to respond to the debate, so I will do my best to keep within the time allowed. The mineworkers' pension scheme is big—it has 177,000 members, pays pensions at an annual cost of more than £800 million, and has assets in excess of £11 billion. It is managed by the trustees. The Government's role is as guarantor. Officials in the Department meet the trustees regularly to discuss the operation of the scheme. Many hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley), have also met those trustees—they seem rather more open to meeting than other trustees I have known, which is good. I have not had the chance to meet them, but if I had had, I certainly would have done.

When the scheme was set up in 1952, members contributed no more than 20p a week, and benefits were small. From 1975, contributions and benefits were linked to members' salaries, with British Coal making up the difference. At privatisation, the Government took on the role of British Coal, and the scheme had a surplus in 1994, half of which was used to enhance members' pensions immediately, with the other 50% payable to the guarantor. The Government of the day agreed to leave their share of the surplus in the scheme as an investment return. Those arrangements were agreed between the trustees and the Government in their role as guarantor—hence the mineworkers' pension scheme of 1994. At that time, all parties believed the equal sharing to be a fair settlement—this arrangement did not come about in conflict or anything like that; it was agreed to be a fair way of proceeding. The Government receive their share not because of their guarantor status—that is a big issue in the financial world, because it allows a much greater risk profile than a normal pension fund could have—but also because of the contributions that they have made to the scheme to make up the pool of money. Again, neither of those points are particularly controversial in themselves.

The guarantee means, of course, that however bad the work of the trustees—it is not bad; please do not think I am saying that, but in theory the trustees could be really poor investors who did not do their job—the Government would have to stand by and underwrite the

money to pay the pensions. That is what a guarantee would do. We see adverts all the time in which people are lent money with someone else guaranteeing it, but they do not quite say that the guarantor will pick up the bill if the person concerned does not pay. That principle is true in this case. It ensures that guaranteed pensions, including inflation increases, will always be paid, as long as the Government can pay—and hopefully that will be so for the rest of our lifetimes and many more to come.

It is indeed the case that early projections underestimated how well the scheme would perform. It was not expected to perform as well as it has.

**Jonathan Edwards:** How many times since the 1994 deal was struck have the Government had to step in with any cash to bankroll the scheme?

**Richard Harrington:** I think the implication of the hon. Gentleman's question is that he knows the answer, which I do not, and that it is zero, but I should like to write to him formally, because I do not want to inadvertently mislead anyone. I do not have the information to hand, but if he will bear with me until later today, I shall make sure he gets a letter or email straight away. It is a reasonable question, but, if I may put words into his mouth—although one never should—I think he really means to say that the Government have never been called on to put money in. I think that is a reasonable assumption; the scheme is unlike others, in that respect. However, Governments get a reward, as anyone would, for risk, and just because things are working one way, that does not mean that they always have or always will. I think that most people would accept that. By the way, I heard nothing unreasonable in the speeches that hon. Members made during the debate. There is realism here; it is a question of judgment about what to do with the surplus.

Some hon. Members have argued that the Government are taking money from scheme members. I think the word "robbery" was used, which is a bit inflamed, but I know what it means—that it is something improper. Others say that the pensions would be higher if the Government did not take their share of the surplus. Both those views might be true, but they do not present the full picture, because pensions are paid according to the scheme rules, so that the sums due to scheme members would not change. They could potentially benefit from bigger bonuses if they had a greater share of surpluses, but in that environment the trustees' investment strategy would be more risk-averse, and returns could be less than they currently are. In any event, would it be fair to ask taxpayers to take all the risk with none of the benefits?

The scheme has been a success, and at least the money is there.

**Chris Evans:** I just have a simple question: what is the cost to the guarantor, compared with the cost of the surplus? How much do the Government need in the pension fund to provide a guarantee on the pensions? Do we know the figure?

**Richard Harrington:** The cost to the guarantor is a contingent cost. It could, in theory, be all the money—the billions in the pension fund. That is the only answer

[Richard Harrington]

I can give, because, of course, that is what a guarantee is. If one guarantees a loan to a bank, to use the analogy I gave before, it is the whole thing. If the person who has borrowed the money pays back 25% of it, the guarantor pays 75% of it. The principle is exactly the same. However, the scheme in question has been a success, and I would argue, and I think the trustees would agree, that it is the guarantee that made that possible. All the other pension funds—I dealt with quite a few in my previous job—buy very low-risk Government bonds, all the time. They do it because of fear; obviously, they have got to pay money out. With their fiduciary duty they cannot risk it. That is one of the reasons that British pension funds do not invest in infrastructure and similar things as much as we would like. They cannot risk the pensioners' money, because of the need for returns. A guarantee on all pension funds would transform the whole pensions industry, but of course the Government would then have a contingent liability of I do not know how many billions.

**Gareth Snell** (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): I do not think anyone is arguing that the scheme has not been successful. I am a coalfield MP and have many constituents with long-term health conditions that are the effect of their jobs. My hon. Friends and I are saying that if the scheme has been successful, the success should be shared by the people who benefit from the scheme, and not necessarily by the Government, who have been involved in a technical role, as opposed to being an actual part of the scheme.

**Richard Harrington:** I hope that the hon. Gentleman understands that the role is more than technical. First, the Government have also contributed a lot to the scheme. Secondly, the guarantee is more than just technical; it is a golden guarantee. That is a good thing—I ask the House please not to think that I am saying it is not, but it is more than just technical. The fact that the guarantee has not been called on may make it look far less important than it is. I want hon. Members and others who listen to the debate to know that a lot of successful investments were made because the trustees have had the security of the knowledge that the Government are standing by.

Surpluses are calculated during scheme valuations, which happen every three years, by the Government actuary. That is not controversial. The trustees are

invited to give their views before conclusions are reached. There have been eight such valuations. I have set out the benefits of the guarantee during good times, but we must bear in mind the fact that future outcomes are not known. There may be very bad times ahead in the pension world. I do not know, and I hope not. If things turn out to be disastrous, and if investments turn bad—Members may have been listening to debates in the House about the European Union, and who knows what will happen?—it is for the trustees to consider the situation. It is for that very reason that a lot of general pensions will hold surpluses. Any volatility going forward would certainly affect the amount of money in the scheme. Taxpayers would then bear that burden.

There was a valuation in 2013, and pensioners were paid a bonus—a new bonus of 4% was given in March 2014. The trustees have subsequently been able to award those bonuses, so it is not as if the surpluses just stay where they are. However, I accept that it is the trustees' job to be prudent. They have a fiduciary duty to consider the position. I have not met the trustees, but I imagine that for that reason some of them would err on the side of caution and say, "We can't distribute the money," because that is their fiduciary duty. However, the bonuses that are paid are very important. It is one of those things. Current arrangements have certainly allowed the trustees to implement a high-risk investment strategy, but I want hon. Members to know that because of that strategy the typical pensioner receives a pension that is 33% higher in real terms than they would have with a normal Government bond-type of strategy. It is not as if they do not benefit from it. The strategy is backed up by the Government guarantee, which can be called on at any time, on demand, based on the ages of scheme members. We expect it to run for about another 60 years.

I accept the points that hon. Members have brought up, and am happy to meet and go into further detail or discuss new stuff. I am very open to representations. However, I have looked at the matter in the limited time I have had since I have been in the job, compared the scheme with others, tried to assess whether the risk element, the guarantee and compensation are fair in all ways—the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent mentioned that quite a lot of aspects are fair—and I have reached the conclusion that the existing arrangements in this case remain fair to all parties.

*Question put and agreed to.*

11.27 am

*Sitting suspended.*

## City of Culture 2021: Swansea Bid

[PHIL WILSON *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

**Chris Davies** (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Swansea's bid to be City of Culture 2021.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. Today I have the enormous pleasure of bringing forward this Westminster Hall debate. Hon. Members may be asking, "What is a city of culture, and why is it so important?" The UK city of culture is an award given to a city in the UK every four years. That city holds the title for the period of one year. The award was devised to support the sustainable regeneration of cities by positioning culture at the heart of city planning and development. Having previously reached the shortlist for UK city of culture 2017, Swansea is competing to be the city of culture 2021, and has once again been shortlisted. The panel of judges will make their decision this coming Thursday, 7 December, and my hon. Friend the Minister will announce it. We could encourage him to announce it in this debate if he would like to, but he is being coy.

The current holder of the title is Hull, which needs to be congratulated on its excellent year as Britain's culture capital. The winning city receives the right to hold various prestigious cultural events, as well as encouraging inward investment. While there is no monetary support or prize attached to the title of UK city of culture, Hull has successfully secured £15 million in Government funding, as well as £3 million from Arts Council England and £3 million from the Heritage Lottery Fund. In the first half of its year as UK city of culture, Hull hosted at least 450 events, exhibitions and cultural activities, attracting over 1.4 million visits. It is estimated that Hull's year as city of culture will lead to a £1 billion boost for its economy and an extra 3,500 jobs.

Swansea could replicate that, and indeed more. Swansea should be the next city of culture not because of unfairness, because we missed out in 2017, or because a city from Wales has never played host to the title; nor is it that Coventry, Paisley, Sunderland or Stoke would not make a worthy city of culture. It is because Swansea deserves it, and we all know how it would allow Swansea to develop and to begin a new chapter for that ever-evolving city.

**Albert Owen** (Ynys Môn) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that Swansea deserves the title in its own right, but he is also right to say that Wales deserves it. Here is a nation full of culture, wanting to share it with the rest of the world. I am from north Wales, but I will be supporting this all-Wales bid to have the city of culture. I have come off the fence: my son-in-law is from Coventry and my friends are from Sunderland, but I am sticking with the Welsh bid because we deserve it.

**Chris Davies:** I could not agree more with the hon. Gentleman. I am also surprised and delighted that he has some friends—that is even better.

The hon. Gentleman leads me on to a good point. Hon. Members may be wondering why the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire is introducing this debate, which some people would expect to benefit south Wales and Swansea constituencies. My northern Radnorshire boundary is 100 miles from the city of Swansea, but the southern tip of my constituency is only 15 miles from the city centre. Like him, I firmly believe that if the bid is successful—I hope it will be—the city of culture status will not only benefit my constituents in the up-and-coming cultural centre of Ystradgynlais in the upper Swansea valley, but will be of benefit right across my constituency and to the whole of Wales to the north, east and west of Swansea. I do not say to the south, because those who know Swansea well will know that they will get their feet wet, and a little bit wetter, if they decide to go south.

Swansea is where the coast meets the city, where the city meets the country, and culture is a natural thread running through it like an artery. I was lucky enough to be born and brought up at the bottom of the Swansea valley, in what was then a very rural area. Now, of course, it has developed as a suburb of Swansea itself. Since my childhood, Swansea has changed considerably, and it continues to change. It is an area that constantly embraces change, hence its status as such a cosmopolitan city today.

Swansea has also had an ever-changing past. In the late 18th and early 19th century it was one of the top seaside resorts in the UK and a true destination for tourists. Its long, sandy beach brought in tourists from far and wide, and the continuation of the coastline around the Gower Peninsula rivalled any beauty spot in the country. It was later to become Britain's first area of outstanding natural beauty. Then came a great challenge to the town, as it was then: tourism or industrialisation?

In 1840, a new identity was forged. New docks were built, foundries were established and Swansea became a key centre of the global copper industry. Wales can lay claim to being the world's first industrial nation. By the late 19th century, south Wales was a global centre for heavy industry, coal production and maritime trade, and Swansea was central to that. Swansea expanded considerably throughout the great industrial age, bringing great wealth and also great poverty to the area.

The bustling town was then reduced to rubble during the blitz of the second world war. As a major port, with its ammunition-making factories and foundries, Swansea was a massive target. But we are talking about Swansea and its people, and like the proverbial phoenix rising from the ashes, the centre was rebuilt, with new buildings emerging and new life brought into the centre of the still-important city.

**Mr Gregory Campbell** (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate—obviously a timely one, given the week it is in. As I live in and represent part of the city of Londonderry, the first ever UK city of culture in 2013, would he accept my saying that the phoenix rising from the ashes is an appropriate euphemism? One of the things that Swansea, if successful, needs to do is to harness communities across the city and the region of south Wales behind the bid and beyond the bid. There must be legacy projects so that people can say, "That is a tribute to what was achieved as a result of Swansea being successful," if it is successful on Thursday.

**Chris Davies:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. Londonderry is, of course, a prime example, so we listen with interest and take his words very seriously.

Not long after the blitz, change was again on the horizon for Swansea. In the 1970s and 1980s, as the old industrial areas and manufacturing industries closed, vast areas of previously productive commercial and factory sites became obsolete and turned into waste grounds. Swansea was getting ready for yet another period of change. The old Swansea vale, once dominated by the smoke and pollution of heavy industry, now became a magnet for industries of a different type. It became a modern industrial park with high-tech companies, with a progressive out-of-town shopping centre. The city centre still includes a busy shopping core, at the centre of which is the legendary Swansea market, where people can still buy that great Welsh delicacy, laverbread, to go with their cockles and bacon, followed of course by the cultural Welsh cake. There is still a way to go to fully regenerate the city and see Swansea again become the world leader it once was. Being awarded the city of culture prize would be the catalyst for that transformation.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing the debate to Westminster Hall. I offer him and all the hon. Members for Wales every best wish for Thursday. I hope they are successful. Part of that success spins off. As my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) said, not only Londonderry but the whole of Northern Ireland gained from the city of culture status. The whole of Wales would gain from Swansea's success.

**Chris Davies:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention; I am sure the Minister hears the cross-border, cross-country support for Swansea's bid. I am sure that will weigh heavily on his decision.

**Jo Stevens** (Cardiff Central) (Lab): I make a confession: although I represent Cardiff Central, I am actually a Jack—I was born in Swansea. I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing the debate and join him in hoping that Swansea is successful on Thursday. Not only would that bring benefits to Swansea, but a lot of the people travelling to Swansea to see the city of culture will travel through Cardiff.

**Chris Davies:** We are honoured by the hon. Lady's making such a confession in this Chamber. She should be truly praised for it.

We have heard of the history and the geography of Swansea, but what of the culture? Some examples of cultural initiatives run by Swansea include hosting the British Science Festival; the International Dylan Thomas Prize; an artist-led regeneration of the high street; a range of arts and literature festivals; and the work of theatre companies at large. One of Swansea's most famous sons is, of course, Dylan Thomas, who was born in the city and who based much of his early work on his experience growing up there. Do Not Go Gentle is a new fringe festival in the Uplands area of the city, where Dylan Thomas was born and lived for many years.

The Swansea Grand Theatre is the largest in the region, hosting many west end productions. Several independent theatre companies are also based there. In

the summer, outdoor Shakespearean performances are a regular feature at Oystermouth castle—I know the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) is a regular attender of those—and Singleton Park is the venue for a number of parties and concerts, from dance music to the outdoor BBC Proms in the Park.

In addition, Swansea hosts an international jazz festival every summer and an international arts festival in the autumn, where international orchestras and soloists perform in unusual venues, such as empty department stores, as well as Brangwyn Hall—a concert venue in Swansea praised for its acoustics for recitals, orchestral pieces and chamber music alike, not to mention its collection of the Brangwyn paintings. As a young man, prior to becoming a Member of Parliament, I sang there as a chorister. I am sure Opposition Members are terribly sorry they missed that, but I am sure the recordings are available at supermarkets near them.

Standing near Victoria Park on the coast road is the Patti Pavilion, which is used as a venue to stage live music and events and is named after the great Victorian opera singer, Dame Adelina Patti, who built her home at Craig-y-Nos in the upper Swansea valley, at the bottom of my Brecon and Radnorshire constituency. There are also many independent galleries and artist studios, such as the recently expanded Glynn Vivian Art Gallery—a regional partner to the Tate—as well as a large number of live music venues.

The Liberty stadium is home to Wales's only premier league football club—it is lucky for the hon. Member for Cardiff Central that she made that confession earlier.

**Jo Stevens:** I would not place too much emphasis on that, bearing in mind that Swansea City are currently bottom of the premier league and Cardiff City are second in the championship.

**Chris Davies:** Just as we are only partway through the Brexit negotiations, we are only partway through the football season, so let us see what happens.

**Stephen Kinnock** (Aberavon) (Lab): And it could not get much worse.

**Chris Davies:** If the hon. Gentleman means the football, that is a fair comment.

The Liberty stadium has a capacity of 30,000 when used as a music or event venue. There is also the Great Hall and Taliesin Arts Centre, which are owned and managed by Swansea University. The venue hosts a broad programme of events, including cinema screenings, an average of 10 visiting exhibitions per year and a variety of live performances, from dance and drama to jazz and world music.

Of course, there is also the rugby, the football, the churches and chapels and the great food and drink. There are the places of learning—the schools and the colleges and, of course, the University of Swansea, with its outstanding new Jersey Marine campus. Then there is the Welsh language, which is renowned throughout the world. Who could fail to be moved by Welsh song and dance, including by our many Welsh male voice choirs, which lead the world?

**Stephen Kinnock:** The hon. Gentleman is making a passionate speech. He mentioned the Swansea bay campus. One important thing for the record is that that campus is actually located in the great constituency of Aberavon—I

hope that has been noted by *Hansard*. On the internet coast proposal, to which we very much hope the Government will give their full support, does he agree that city of culture status would be a fantastic force multiplier for that investment in the Swansea bay city region?

**Chris Davies:** I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman is supportive of that scheme. Of course, Aberavon looks on to Swansea, and anything that benefits Swansea, or, indeed, Aberavon, will be of great benefit to Wales as a whole.

Swansea has produced many great sons and daughters who have turned into cultural icons of today and of yesteryear. Household names include, from broadcasting, Huw Edwards, Ian Hislop and Wynford Vaughan-Thomas, and musicians such as Sir Karl Jenkins, Bonnie Tyler and Dire Straits' Terry Williams. They also include rugby players and footballers including John and Mel Charles, Dean Saunders, Dan Biggar and Shane Williams, actors including Sir Harry Secombe, Rob Brydon and Catherine Zeta-Jones, and writers such as Dylan Thomas and Iris Gower. From the law—from the upper Chamber in this place—they include Lord Thomas of Cwmgiedd, the former Lord Chief Justice, and from the Church, of course, Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury. Many great politicians have come from Swansea—legends every one of them—but I shall save their modesty and not name anyone directly.

Swansea is now ready for the next chapter in its varied existence. It has the infrastructure in place to provide high-quality cultural services to its communities and to host a world-class product, but co-operation, collaboration and skills development across the sector, accessible to all its diverse communities, have not yet been realised. Swansea can build its reputation as a place of culture, learning and innovation. Although the universities are making great strides on that, many of Swansea's communities have low confidence and a tendency to look inwards rather than outwards. I strongly believe that becoming UK city of culture could help to overcome that in ways that would be otherwise unachievable. I am confident not only that Swansea can deliver an exemplary year artistically and logistically, but that the social and economic impacts will be strongly and widely felt. As the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) mentioned, legacy and sustainability are key, and the bid committee are agreeing the structures and delivery partners to secure that through long-term engagement, skills development and employment opportunities, alongside the continuation of audience development and funding partnerships.

Having the opportunity to share that, to tell a new story about Swansea and to enable its communities to see themselves and their city through a new lens will build connectivity, cohesion, confidence and aspiration that will secure a better future for the city. A better future for Swansea supports a much wider hinterland, Wales as a nation and, ultimately, its relations with the UK and its global profile, as it stands side by side on an international platform, celebrating and broadcasting world-class productions.

I congratulate the team, led by the City and County of Swansea Council, in putting together the excellent bid, as well as the partner organisations for their continued

and enthusiastic support. I hope that the city of Swansea, so described by the poet Dylan Thomas as the "ugly, lovely town...crawling, sprawling...by the side of a long and splendid curving shore", becomes the 2021 city of culture.

2.48 pm

**Carolyn Harris** (Swansea East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your excellent chairmanship, Mr Wilson. I congratulate the Swansea boy, the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Chris Davies), on securing this important debate.

I am so proud to call Swansea my home. It is the city that gave birth to Mal Pope, Bonnie Tyler, Russell T. Davies of Doctor Who fame, Harry Secombe, Mervyn Davies—known affectionately as "Merv the Swerve"—and Kev Johns, a senior local Swansea celebrity. As the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire mentioned, Dylan Thomas referred to Swansea as:

"An ugly, lovely town...crawling, sprawling...by the side of a long and splendid curving shore."

I am afraid I have to disagree with Dylan on that small point. Swansea was recently named the most beautiful UK city. It is hard to think of a more beautiful destination. We can admire the glorious coastline at Rhossili bay, voted Wales's best beach in 2017, get lost in Singleton Park or gaze down at all of Swansea in its splendour from Kilvey hill in the proposed Skyline cable cars.

It is estimated that approximately 5.7 million people will visit Swansea if it is awarded city of culture status, spending more than £431 million while they are there. That will be a welcome boost for the small businesses of Swansea and the surrounding region—businesses we are all supporting. Thousands of paid and voluntary roles will be created, including as artists, performers and apprentices and in tourism and event management. City of culture status may come with a one-year timeframe, but this is not a one-off arts project; it is a driver and accelerator of significant investment and a means to create more resilient and connected communities.

There will also be a programme for young people who are not in employment, education or training, as well as the disabled, those on low incomes and other social groups who need greater support to achieve their potential, by gaining work and volunteering experience. That will include 40 programmes run for and by older people, to address isolation and loneliness, communication, dementia and intergenerational support, alongside engaging some 2,000 students to volunteer or take part in cultural events or programmes that help them feel supported.

Culture is not simply about the arts. This will reinforce the culture of community integration and the wellbeing of the 685,000 people living in the Swansea bay city region. The unifying theme of Swansea's city of culture bid is "Turning Tides—A City Revealed". Would it not be fantastic to finally see the Government commit to Swansea bay tidal lagoon before 2021?

I represent the east side of Swansea—a constituency that I love and that no one could convince me to move out of at any cost. In that region of Swansea, families are more likely to have a lower income. The team behind our city of culture bid has recognised that and will implement measures to ensure that Swansea residents do not miss out based on geographical location. Residents

[Carolyn Harris]

of Swansea East will be supported through ticketing, transport and family learning activities in their communities and in the city overall.

The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport is shining the spotlight on each shortlisted city this week, starting with Coventry last Friday and Sunderland today. I see it as fate that Swansea is being celebrated on Thursday, the day that the overall winner of city of culture 2021 is announced. I will be watching “The One Show” avidly with bated breath this Thursday—parliamentary business permitting—to hear the city of culture 2021 announced as Swansea. I have every faith in Swansea’s ability to deliver a winning bid, and I for one cannot wait to share my ugly, lovely town with you all.

2.53 pm

**Tonia Antoniazzi** (Gower) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Chris Davies) on securing the debate. Having been brought up in Swansea East and educated at Morriston Comprehensive, he knows the area well.

Swansea and the Gower is the hidden gem of Wales and the United Kingdom and deserves far more attention than it currently gets. My constituency of Gower would benefit greatly from the extra publicity, with tourism being a major employer. Gower, located within the Swansea region, is one of the most beautiful and picturesque areas in the world. In fact, the Gower peninsula was the first place in the UK to be named an area of outstanding natural beauty.

Gower has so much to offer as part of this city deal. It has four blue flag beaches—Bracelet bay, Langland, Caswell and Port Eynon—and five beaches with the green coast award for natural and unspoiled environment, including the little-known Pwll Du cove. Going around the peninsula, Rhossili to the north was voted the UK’s best beach, as my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) said, as well as the third-best beach in Europe and the ninth-best beach in the world, with rare birds and wildlife and the sight of shipwrecks along the beautiful coastline. There are so many beaches and picturesque areas of coastline that there is even an app for people to navigate their way around the peninsula.

Sport is a way of life. The surfing and water sport beaches of Llangennith and Caswell are a great attraction for thrill seekers and beginners, with the option of lessons from the brilliant Gower surf school. Next summer, you may even catch me on a paddle board going around the Mumbles. Mumbles is always a popular attraction for tourists and has so much to offer. The Swansea bay rider, a land train operating between Blackpill and Mumbles, offers a fun way to travel and enjoy the bay, with great sights such as Mumbles pier, boutique shops and—thanks to Italian families such as my own in the area—the option of ice cream from Joe’s and Verdi’s. It also hosts the Royal National Lifeboat Institution lifeboat station, which is a vital service for ensuring safety across the coast.

Apart from the obvious highlights of the peninsula, my constituency has a lot more to offer, with heritage centres in Clydach and Gower, the latter offering a 12th-century working water mill. Loughor town hall is

undergoing a major redevelopment, and glorious woodland walks can be found in Coed Bach Park in Pontarddulais, which has green flag certification.

**Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): My hon. Friend is speaking with real passion for the constituency she represents. She is a true champion of the people and communities of the Gower. Just up the road is the equally wonderful constituency of Ogmore, which is full of rolling hills and valleys and lots of walking opportunities. Does she agree that part of the success of the bid, if it is granted, will be the wider cultural aspects and recreational and physical activities on offer in constituencies such as mine, as well as Aberavon and so on, for people who are visiting?

**Tonia Antoniazzi**: That is a very important point to highlight. Walking and exercise are very important and form the recreational part of the bid. What happens in Swansea will then filter down into nearby constituencies.

We also have some amazing food, from cockles and oysters from Oystermouth, to Salt Marsh lamb from north Gower, delicious Gower Cottage brownies and Gŵyr gin, which my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East has still to taste. We are unique in what Swansea can offer. We have the local Gower and Mumbles breweries—I believe my predecessor even brought some of those breweries’ products to the bar. I hope that Members will be ordering their Gower Christmas trees. A tree from the Gower Christmas tree farm in Three Crosses is proudly displayed in Downing Street this year.

However, there is room for strengthening our offer to be city of culture for 2021. The Swansea bay tidal lagoon would be a pioneering piece of infrastructure for renewable energy, harnessing the power of the tides. The lagoon will be a world first and will shine a light on Swansea with an inspiring new infrastructure, offshore visitor centre, arts programme, sculpture park and more. The deal is vital for the city, and I hope it is considered as well as the bid.

My constituency has so much to offer to secure this bid and deserves recognition as one of the cultural hubs of south Wales. Many parts of Gower are hidden gems just waiting to be discovered. Swansea’s being awarded the city of culture will put Gower on the map and bring much-needed investment, along with the £1.3 billion city deal. This bid is supported by many Members across the House and across the country, including my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), who has stated how Hull’s recognition as city of culture has had such a positive impact, not only financially, and is fully behind the bid for Swansea city of culture 2021.

2.58 pm

**Geraint Davies** (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): It is a great pleasure to follow my friends, my hon. Friends the Members for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) and for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), and of course the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Chris Davies). I am so glad we have come together as a team across Wales, having agreed at a reception that I convened to collectively put in this bid. Everyone in the room is so strongly in support of a successful bid for Wales and in particular for Swansea and the Swansea bay city region.



We have heard today a glowing history of where Swansea has come from, including its industrial history in relation to copper—it was known as Copperopolis—and coal, and the problems that we faced during the blitz. We were brought through industrial turmoil and change to where we are today, confronting a new era of challenges with Brexit and regional poverty and deprivation in the context of Europe. Of course, Swansea has a very rich history of culture, which has been echoed in the speeches today, in particular by my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East, and a rich natural beauty.

My own family have been in Swansea for five generations, and during that time we have seen a continuance of unity, creativity and resilience, alongside change. It is a changing community, but we still have a lasting identity. As has been said, we are the only Welsh city that has been put forward for the title, and we feel a great responsibility in holding the mantle for Wales: the language, the songs, the poetry and the nationhood. We feel proud to be coming forward.

Many of the famous stars of Swansea have been mentioned. In the context of the Swansea bay city region overall, we think of people such as Anthony Hopkins, Michael Sheen, Catherine Zeta-Jones and Katherine Jenkins, and of course Dylan Thomas is our most famous son, an international brand name that is known across the world. Indeed, Swansea itself is a global brand name thanks to our footballing success. There is a connectivity between the poetry and culture and the international branding. UK city of culture is also a very strong brand and would be another very important way of bringing vital inward investment to communities that are in many senses struggling.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gower mentioned our world-class coastline. In fact, Gower was the first area to be named an area of outstanding natural beauty in Britain, and it remains as she described.

Swansea is a community of communities, interlinked and interwoven, working together for the common good. That is one reason that Swansea's theme for the bid is "Every Wave has a Voice". The proposition is basically that we are all individuals, but working collectively we have a louder voice, and we will pull together, in harmony, for the good of all, particularly in difficult times.

We have a lot going for us. The Glynn Vivian Art Gallery has just been refurbished. The Taliesin Arts Centre puts on stuff. There is also the Grand Theatre. Of course, we have the Liberty stadium, which hosts great sporting events but is also a music venue. With the university, both the Bay campus in Aberavon and the Singleton Park campus, there is an opportunity to host cultural events. With our venues and communications, we have the means to be a first-class city of culture. We have the National Waterfront Museum, which is also a great place to host art.

**Jo Stevens:** My hon. Friend mentioned music. UK Music's most recent figures show that music tourism results in a direct spend in the whole of Wales of £95 million a year. Much of that will be spent in Swansea. Does he agree that our passion for music in Wales and in Swansea is an integral part of the city of culture bid?

**Geraint Davies:** Yes. I am very pleased to hear that intervention. Music is at the heart of all Welsh people,

across Wales, and in Swansea it is a vital part of our identity. I mentioned the Liberty stadium, where there have been various big concerts. Music is a vital part of our attraction for tourists. Again, we need to invest in the cultural infrastructure to amplify the voices of the local people and give them opportunities in culture and the arts.

The Minister will know from his own experience and office how important tourism and culture are to exports and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) has just said, how important music is. The music industry relies more these days on audiences rather than direct sales of records, as they used to be called, or even downloads. I am referring to live music, amplified, and we certainly want to be given opportunities to host that.

The Welsh language has of course been raised. We are very proud of our Welsh language, and the Government are supportive of it. Again, we would want to use the city of culture title as a way of amplifying and sharing more widely the diversity of the languages within the UK. We are moving forward into slightly unknown territory because of globalisation, and people are also looking back at their own identity. This is an important moment for Welsh history, and we hope that we can take this crown.

In Swansea, we face real challenges in relation to poverty. People living within a mile of one another might have a difference in average life expectancy of seven years. The Swansea bay city region of west Wales is regarded as one of the poorest parts of Europe. That is why we are beneficiaries of convergence funding, which we will no longer attract. It has been mentioned that in the case of Hull, something like £1 billion was generated through the magnet of tourism attractions and activity. We have a lot to offer, whether it is the football, the Ospreys, the music, the language or just the general friendliness and warmth of the people of Swansea. There is a community of restaurants and there are opportunities to go around the more than 100-year-old city centre market, whose fresh products go through our restaurants. That provides a new offering to visitors.

My hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East mentioned the lagoon. We have great support locally for our lagoon. Basically, the project involves green electricity from tidal energy, and we continue to press the Government on that. Again, we hope that, if successful—it was given the thumbs-up by the Hendry review—it would itself be a tourist attraction that would help us rise to the challenge of being the UK city of culture.

We have hopes for the electrification of the railways, alongside a Swansea bay city metro, which together would reduce the journey time from Cardiff to Swansea from an hour to half an hour, making the opportunities for visitors much greater. Of course, if we were the city of culture, there would be mutual benefit. The business case for electrification and the Swansea metro has been cast into doubt by the Government. They have been asking about the journey times and the level of demand: "What is the business case?" We are now saying that if we combine the half-hour reduction in journey time with the city deal that is coming forward and the extra investment for new jobs, and if on top of that we had the city of culture title, there would be an overwhelming case for electrification. The reduced journey time would multiply through, as my hon. Friend the Member for

[Geraint Davies]

Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) said, and give extra bonuses to an area that has been hit by difficult times.

We can look at the changes in social security. That might involve universal credit or a trimming down of public expenditure. It might be the bedroom tax. All these things have a disproportionate impact on Swansea bay and Swansea. The community wants the tools to succeed, and it is very much a cultural city, which would look to take full advantage of what could be a £1 billion investment.

We hope to attract more and more international visitors as well. The expansion of the university has enabled many more international friendships to emerge. We hope to use the university investment alongside the cultural investment to attract more tourism income, which would have a halo effect right across Wales and the UK.

I will not go on much longer, Mr Wilson; I know that other hon. Members are keen to speak. I will just say that the voices that we hear from Swansea are rich in terms of diversity—there are various communities and people have different nationalities, of course—and art, music and industry. The keenness to combine the cultural contribution and the economic contribution to provide a stronger, fairer future for Swansea is embedded in the proposition that “Every Wave has a Voice”. As the city of culture, we would help to ensure that those voices were heard.

Finally, as has been mentioned, Londonderry in Northern Ireland had great success as a city of culture; in Scotland, Glasgow is the European city of culture; and most recently, in England, Hull has been a city of culture, so we feel it is time for Wales to receive the crown. Who could be a more fitting successor than Swansea, the queen of Welsh hearts?

3.10 pm

**Chris Evans** (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): Why am I speaking today about Swansea when I represent a constituency some 25 miles along the M4? I cannot propose to speak with the same passion as my hon. Friends the Members for Swansea West (Geraint Davies), for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) and for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi). When we hear them speak, it is obviously a case of “Cut them and they bleed Swansea”. It is important to have representatives who feel so passionately about the constituencies they represent. I want to thank them on the record for everything that they do for the city they are so passionate about.

My experience of Swansea is limited to betting shops. I worked in Jack Brown bookmakers for several years. I remember the fantastic villages of Cwmbwrla, Gors and Townhill, and I still feel the fear running up my spine—no, I am joking. We are talking about the city of culture today, and I want to talk about my experience of living and growing up in Wales for the past 40 years of my life. I was born in the mid-’70s and brought up in the Rhondda in south Wales. We were made to believe that people did not care about us. We never heard anybody ever mention Wales. Or if they did mention Wales, it was always in a negative sense.

I remember, many years ago, the national lottery coming to the Rhondda Heritage Park. We all crowded

down there because it was a national event. We were all there, and there was a male voice choir dressed up as miners, with black marks on their faces, as though they had just come up from underground. We were disappointed, because that was not our image of Wales. The innovation, the cleverness of our communities was not coming forward in the national image. People had an image of us in soup kitchens and on the breadlines, only interested in going down the pub and getting drunk or whatever, because our industry had gone away. That is why it is so important that Swansea wins the bid to be city of culture.

We have an image problem still. There are people who do not visit Wales who believe that we are in some sort of post-industrial meltdown. I say let them come to cities such as Cardiff or Swansea to see how the Champions League, the premier football event, was hosted in Cardiff. Let them see how many tourists that brought in and how many people were shocked by our culture.

When I was a kid, I did not have many Welsh icons because there were none on the television. I remember being moved by my great hero, Richard Burton, who was born in Pontrhydyfen, just down the road from Swansea, as he quoted, “Do not go gentle into that good night”—

“Rage, rage against the dying of the light.”

That is what we must do when we are advocating Swansea as a city of culture. We are raging against that negative image of Wales. That is why it is vital we have the city of culture, but it is also important for Swansea itself.

For a city that has an unemployment rate of 5.3%—higher than the rest of the UK—the city of culture would be a massive confidence boost. It would mean that Wales is front and centre. When I look at previous bids, I am concerned that Swansea is the only flagbearer for Wales. If the city of culture goes to England once again, what message would that send to the regions of Great Britain? The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) talked about how Londonderry, or Derry City, benefited from being a city of culture. Wales must have the same thing. I am not denigrating Stoke, Coventry or Sunderland; I am just saying that Wales needs this more than ever. We need to be in the shop window.

As has been mentioned, we have great stars such as Catherine Zeta-Jones. Dylan Thomas has already been mentioned. When I think of Swansea, I also think of “Twin Town”—I think they are making a sequel—and we remember how they denigrated it and how somebody twisted Dylan Thomas’s words about an ugly, beautiful town and called it something else. I remember Dougray Scott standing outside the train station and saying Swansea looks like “a pretty”—bleep—“shitty city”. Oops, I just said it! [Laughter.] I’m going to be on the news for that one, aren’t I? I am sorry, Mr Wilson; that was a direct quote from a film, but that is how people saw Swansea, and Swansea needs to change that image.

Swansea has academic institutions. My old university, formerly Trinity College, Carmarthen, now Trinity Saint David, University of Wales, has a strong engineering section. We also have the Richard Burton archives in Swansea. We have museums, and heritage plays an important part, but much of our heritage has been lost. Swansea was called the copper capital of the world at one point, but as the heavy industry went away, the

heritage was taken away. The museum warehouse has the sailboats and vintage vehicles, but much of our heritage went away. We have only the culture now, which is what we need to put over. I do not know whether the Minister has ever visited Swansea, but it is a unique city. It has a seafront. It has wintry nights, and I know the Swansea Members here will say it is one of the most beautiful cities when it is lit up by the wintry sunlight as well.

I support the bid, not only because I know how beautiful Swansea city is and how beautiful the people are. Above all, I support it because if Swansea wins the bid to be the city of culture, Wales will win as well. We should get behind the bid and support it. Regeneration is important in post-industrial cities. Phil Redmond, the producer of “Brookside” and “Grange Hill”, comes from Liverpool and he will know how important regeneration is. I hope he will look favourably on the bid. I really hope we have some good news on Thursday.

3.16 pm

**Glyn Davies** (Montgomeryshire) (Con): Thank you for calling me to speak, Mr Wilson. It was a late decision to contribute to the debate, but I want to join in the enthusiasm in the Chamber and for Swansea to be chosen as the city of culture.

Montgomeryshire is a long way away from Swansea, but in my view it is Wales’s turn. It does not matter whether people are from Montgomeryshire or Ynys Môn—the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) has left the Chamber—the selection of Swansea would be a great achievement for Wales, and would benefit the whole of Wales. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Chris Davies) on securing the debate. He explained his support for Swansea with his constituency 15 miles away. Although I represent Montgomeryshire, when I was a Member of the National Assembly for Wales I represented Mid and West Wales, also 15 miles away from the centre of Swansea, and it included Pembrokeshire and Carmarthenshire. My main point is that I want to support Swansea’s bid.

The big issue in terms of fairness across Britain is the need to move investment and wealth away from the south-east corner and away from London. It is moving successfully to Cardiff, but we need to move it further west. That is the only way we will develop Pembrokeshire and Carmarthenshire. Swansea is a key staging post and developing the city of Swansea is absolutely key to the whole of west Wales. The same applies in mid Wales. The key to mid Wales might be Birmingham. In north Wales it might be Manchester or Liverpool. We have to draw the investment and economic activity west, which is what investment in Swansea does.

We have talked about the historical icons of Swansea. I have always been fanatical about sport and still am. I watch the Ospreys, but I do not watch Swansea at the moment because I do not get the chance—I desperately hope they manage to retain their premiership status. It is important to us and the derbies next year with Cardiff will be absolutely terrific. My greatest hero of all came from Swansea: John Charles. I met him and I am old enough to remember him playing. He was amazing. He was the greatest forward in Europe, and the greatest centre-half in Europe. I think £65,000 was paid for him to go off to play in Italy, which was unheard-of money

then. He was a precursor of Gareth Bale and more, but he was a back as well as a forward. He was a wonderful man. When I met him it was one of the greatest of privileges. The BBC invited me to a dinner that he was at. He was elderly and failing in health, but for someone so great he had incredible humility. I looked on him as the greatest sportsman I knew, and he came from Swansea.

I wish the best of luck to the bid. I desperately hope that it wins, for the sake of Swansea and Wales.

**Geraint Davies:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for supporting the Swansea bid. Apart from anything else, there are only 3 million people living in the whole of Wales, and he made the point that we are very connected, nationally. The Swansea bid, as he said, will shift the focus of investment from Cardiff, which is on the English side of Wales, westward through Ceredigion. The nation has only 70% of average gross value added. We can make the most of the investment, and in Swansea we will make sure that it delivers for the whole of Wales.

**Glyn Davies:** I completely agree. Let us all give our full backing to Swansea, and let it be known that we shall be most displeased if it is not selected.

3.21 pm

**Kevin Brennan** (Cardiff West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Chris Davies) on securing the debate and on his excellent speech in support of Swansea for the city of culture. He told us that his constituency stretches down very close to the boundary of Swansea in the town of Ystradgynlais, and reminded us of the city’s history, including, in particular, the fact that Swansea was among the cities that suffered heavily during the blitz in the second world war. Often that is not widely recalled; Swansea really suffered at that time.

We had a wonderful contribution from my very good friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), who is a passionate campaigner on many subjects—a successful one, who I am sure hopes to be successful on this occasion. Her description of Swansea made it sound rather like the garden of Eden.

**Carolyn Harris:** It is.

**Kevin Brennan:** I hope she is not suggesting that original sin was invented there, but her description certainly conveyed the beauty of the city and its environs very well.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) lives in a beautiful constituency at the edge of Swansea. I know it is beautiful because my sister, Colleen, lives there. I recommend anyone who has never visited the Gower to do so, because it is one of the most beautiful places in Wales, Britain or, in fact, the world. My hon. Friend’s talents know no bounds. I knew already that she had won nine caps for rugby, for Wales, and I knew that she had recently won the House of Commons darts competition; but I did not realise she was such an avid paddle boarder. We all look forward to coming down to Swansea to watch her undertake that pastime. She mentioned Joe’s ice cream: other ice creams are available—but not many, if any, are as good as Joe’s, and she was right to highlight that wonderful Swansea

[Kevin Brennan]

institution. She rightly challenged the Government about the tidal lagoon project. Although the Minister is a man of great influence and power, we do not expect him to make the announcement today in the debate—unless he is feeling so inclined—but I encourage him to encourage his colleagues to get on with it. We heard about the importance of Swansea's industrial heritage, but Swansea has a wonderful future, and is the best place in Britain to build a tidal lagoon. I hope that the Government will announce their support for the scheme in the near future.

My hon. Friend the Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) mentioned the Welsh language and its importance to the city of Swansea and to the city of culture bid. Perhaps we should mention its Welsh name, Abertawe, as the bid is a bilingual one, and it is right that even here in the UK Parliament, where we use English, we should use that name.

My hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) spoke passionately about the influence and impact that Swansea's becoming city of culture could have on the image of Wales. He is right to emphasise that issue. When I joined Cardiff Council in 1991 we set up a body called Cardiff Marketing and we did some studies of what image of Cardiff and Wales people had. Many people living in London thought Cardiff was about six hours away by train and full of coal mines—an utterly inaccurate picture. Swansea is, by car, a mere 45 minutes beyond Cardiff, and the journey would be much shorter by rail if the Government would get on with the electrification of the line beyond Cardiff to Swansea. That would have the kind of impact that my hon. Friend was calling for, if the title of city of culture were to be used to promote economic development and a better image. He quoted Dylan Thomas, and actually corrected his grammar to "Do not go gently", whereas Thomas did not use the adverb, and said "Do not go gentle" in the poem. I congratulate my hon. Friend on his superior grammar, despite his slight slip of the tongue later in his remarks.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies)—I want to call him my hon. Friend; I have known him for many years—who rightly mentioned John Charles. There would have been a big lacuna in the debate if he had not. The "gentle giant" was probably the greatest ever Welsh sportsman—and there have been many great Welsh sportspeople, including my hon. Friend the Member for Gower. John Charles was probably the greatest, and if it had not been for his being kicked off the park during the 1958 World cup and therefore being unavailable for the quarter final against Brazil, when Wales was beaten one-nil after a goal was scored by an unknown 17-year-old called Pelé, Wales probably would have won the cup.

I want to make a few of my own remarks about Swansea and the city of culture bid. The scheme was set up in 2009 by the Labour Government. They established a UK city of culture competition, with the aim of making creativity and culture part of the answer in difficult economic times, rather than a luxury for the small number of people who could afford them. I think it has been a successful programme, and I am pleased that the current Government are carrying on with it. I commend them for doing so. It allows cities and groups

of towns to show what culture means to them, instead of being told what it is through a top-down check list. The city and its residents are rightly at the heart of the process. As we have heard, in Swansea's case it is not just the city but a whole nation that is behind the bid.

Since 2009, the programme has had a tremendously positive impact in Derry/Londonderry, as we have heard, and currently in Hull. When Derry/Londonderry was city of culture, it became clear how much the city had changed since the time of the troubles, and it was an important way of changing its image. Hull residents have told us that since it was given city of culture status, people are even more ready than they were to gather together as a community, and that they feel even prouder of their city than they were before it won the prize. In both cases, becoming the UK city of culture has drawn attention to and encouraged parts of cities that were already flourishing, but that were not always seen beyond their own borders, in other parts of the United Kingdom.

It is clear, then, why a number of cities are bidding for the title in 2021. All the shortlisted contenders are strong. The House will understand why, speaking from the Front Bench, I cannot back a particular city's bid, even though I am a Welsh MP. I think that I have never disagreed with my neighbour and very good hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens). She made her own interjection in the debate—I will say no more than that.

It is clear that Swansea is an excellent candidate to be city of culture. We have heard a lot about the poet Dylan Thomas who, as well as his poetry, is known for his colourful personality. I remember learning "The Hunchback in the Park" at school:

"A solitary mister  
Propped between trees and water  
From the opening of the garden lock  
That lets the trees and water enter  
Until the Sunday sombre bell at dark".

As a lover of poetry, I think it would be wonderful for Swansea if it could win the title of city of culture, and Dylan Thomas could be even more widely recognised. Scotland has its Burns night, and I always think that we should have a Dylan Thomas night in Wales to recognise our greatest poet in the English language.

**Geraint Davies:** Does my hon. Friend agree that if Swansea were to win the city of culture 2021, people would be able to plan visits to Swansea, based around Dylan Thomas and other cultural icons? High Speed 2 will reduce the journey time from London to Manchester by half, down to one hour and eight minutes, and at the same time we are pressing to reduce the journey time to Cardiff and Swansea through electrification. Alongside fears that there will be a displacement of investment towards the HS2 corridor instead of to south Wales, does my hon. Friend agree that winning the title of city of culture would be a major influence in buoying up the local economy across south Wales and Wales, at a time of uncertainty?

**Kevin Brennan:** My hon. Friend will not be surprised to know that I agree with that.

We have already heard the famous quote by Dylan Thomas about Swansea as an "ugly, lovely town". Well, he was right, it is lovely, and perhaps once it was ugly.

Now, however, it is a beautiful city, not an “ugly, lovely town”, and today people can visit wonderful cultural institutions in Swansea, such as the Dylan Thomas Centre that we heard about earlier, which opened in 2014 to commemorate the centenary of his birth. They can also visit 5 Cwmdonkin Drive, and that is a short walk from Cwmdonkin park—the subject of the poem that I recited earlier—where there is a blue plaque and a permanent exhibition to commemorate him.

It is not only Welsh writers who have an association with Swansea. We have not yet heard mention of Kingsley Amis, who spent many years as a lecturer at University College, Swansea. He wrote “Lucky Jim” and “That Uncertain Feeling”—that was later made into a film with Peter Sellers called “Only Two Can Play”—while living in the Uplands in Swansea. It is a town with a real literary and cultural background. My very good friend, the artist Paul Edwards, is from Swansea. It is full of theatres, castles and galleries and has a vibrant cultural life.

As we have heard, Swansea University goes from strength to strength. I recently visited the new campus at Jersey Marine, and the Morgan Academy, which was set up in memory of the late, great Rhodri Morgan, who was my predecessor as MP for Cardiff West and the former First Minister of Wales. Given all that, it is clear that Swansea’s cultural life is truly worth celebrating, and its bid is very strong.

I would like briefly to mention the European capital of culture, because I think that relates to today’s debate. I have asked the Government for a list of meetings that were held in 2017 on that issue, given the recent announcement by the European Commission that Britain’s bid for European capital of culture will be withdrawn. Unfortunately, in answer to my parliamentary question, the Government referred me to a public list of meetings that goes only until June this year, and I think that we need a more serious response to explain what happened with the European city of culture. I hope that the Minister will be able to make a passing reference to that, and say a bit more about why the UK Government, and the bidding cities, which were spending money up until the last moment on their bids, were so blindsided by the announcement that the European capital of culture competition would not be going forward in the UK. I hope that the Minister will confirm—I am sure he will—that the competition for UK capital of culture will be going forward, and that the bidding cities have not been wasting their time and money.

We have heard a lot about the kind of impact that being city of culture can have. It does not magically create culture where it does not exist, but it celebrates and encourages great work that is already being done but is often under-publicised. As such, Swansea is already a city of culture, regardless of whether the bid is successful. I hope that the UK city of culture competition continues to thrive, and champions the cultural activities that make cities and towns across the UK such wonderful places that we can be proud of.

3.35 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (John Glen):** I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Chris Davies) on securing this important debate on

Swansea’s bid to become the UK’s city of culture 2021. As always, I acknowledge the contributions of all Members who have spoken so passionately this afternoon. The full spirit of the UK city of culture has been on show, and a great depth of knowledge has been shown about Swansea and all its cultural attributes. This has been a very worthwhile debate as we get into the final stages of this competition.

The House has already heard similar debates on the four other towns and cities shortlisted to be the next holders of the UK city of culture title—Coventry, Paisley, Stoke and Sunderland—so this debate will be the last in the present series. The hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) managed, with typical skill, to include in the debate the issues of the tidal lagoon and electrification. I will not be able to respond to those points from my position in DDCMS, but I acknowledge his concerns and will take them back to my colleagues.

Before I begin the substance of my speech, I wish to say a few words about the European capital of culture programme, which has featured in the headlines in recent days. I am sure that many Members of the House were, like me, shocked and dismayed by the position taken by the European Commission two weeks ago, which is that the UK cannot host the title in 2023. That went against everything that had happened up until that point, and we had no expectation that it would occur. Five UK cities have, like Swansea, invested huge amounts of time, resource and commitment in developing their bids, only for the Commission—at a point when the bids had already been submitted—to sweep the rug from underneath them. I know that Swansea, together with the cultural sector right across Europe, has expressed its solidarity with the five UK cities of Belfast, Dundee, Leeds, Milton Keynes and Nottingham. We are in urgent discussions with the European Commission about its action, and in positive talks with the five cities themselves—I met representatives from them all last week, and I hope to update the House more substantively in the near future.

The UK city of culture programme grew out of the success of Liverpool’s tenure as European capital of culture in 2008. As Minister for the arts, I see this programme as one of our nation’s Crown jewels. The winning area must build a high-quality arts and cultural programme of national significance that reaches a wide variety of audiences and participants. As we have seen with Hull, winning the city of culture title must be a catalyst to regenerate and transform an area. Cities must demonstrate that they are ready and able to grasp the opportunity provided by the title. I was moved by the speech by the hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans), who spoke about how things were when he was growing up, and the cultural gap that was perceived to exist. Providing an opportunity for transformation is exactly the purpose of this programme, and that case will be made by all the bidding cities.

This year, 11 places from across the UK set out their ambitions to become the next city of culture. Following a recommendation from the independent panel, chaired by Phil Redmond, I agreed a shortlist of five in July. It is hugely gratifying to know that those areas that regrettably did not make the shortlist—Hereford, Perth, Portsmouth, St Davids, Warrington and Wells—are all continuing with their ambitions. They see their bids as the beginning of something, not the end. I sincerely believe that that

[John Glen]

will be the case for all those that are unsuccessful this week. As has been referred to, Swansea bay was shortlisted for the UK city of culture in 2013 when it narrowly lost out to Hull, and it is clear that, while ultimately unsuccessful, the bid was an important step in the city's cultural development.

Now, for the shortlisted towns and cities, decision day is fast approaching. We have about 51 hours to go, and as we speak my officials and the independent panel are en route to Hull, where they will receive presentations from all five areas before making their final recommendation. As the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) said, Swansea will present its bid on Thursday morning, and I will announce the winner later the same day. Some might say that is an unusually quick and efficient process for Government.

**Geraint Davies:** I know that the Minister will be looking, as the panel will be, at the past, present and future cultural offering for Swansea and other places, but will he be looking very carefully at relative deprivation? I say that because, as he knows, the average UK gross income is £19,106 but the average in Wales is £16,341 and in Swansea, £15,604. Weekly, that is £550 for the UK and less than £500 for Swansea. Can he confirm that he will be looking at the impact on deprivation and the inclusivity of these bids?

**John Glen:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. The independent panel will be looking at a whole variety of factors. It will be looking at what advantages, and the extent of those advantages, the different bids are likely to accrue to their given cities, and the economic advantage will be one of the elements that they will look at very carefully.

As with the other debates, I thought it would be helpful to set out the benefits of the city of culture. Speaking of Hull, it is helpful to reflect in this debate on how much is to be gained from winning the UK city of culture title. Hull City Council estimates that the local economy has benefited from £3.3 billion in total investment since being awarded the title in 2013. Seven out of 10 Hull residents say that the UK city of culture status is having a positive effect on their lives. As I have mentioned in previous debates, Hull 2017's volunteers have already undertaken more than 300,000 volunteer hours. City of culture status has helped to restore local pride, and who can forget Hull City's fans singing, "You're only here for the culture!" at a premier league match earlier this year? Ironically, I think they were playing Swansea at the time.

**Jo Stevens:** Although this is just an anecdote, does the Minister think it represents Hull? I remember going to a Cardiff City match against Hull where the Hull fans had a big banner saying, "Ghetto of excellence." I think they can lose the "ghetto" bit now, after city of culture.

**John Glen:** The hon. Lady makes a fine point. Hull has seen brilliant engagement with the arts.

**Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Will the Minister give way on that point?

**John Glen:** Let me make a little progress and then I will come back to the hon. Gentleman. I wonder what he has to say.

Hull has seen brilliant engagement with the arts, with nine out of 10 residents attending or experiencing at least one cultural event in the first three months of the year—it might be higher now as we get to the end. That is more than double the number engaging in such activities before the city's successful bid.

**Gavin Newlands:** I was going to have a watching brief in this debate and hold my tongue because there have been many great speeches on why Swansea should be the city of culture. Based on the football element, the Minister will be aware that the local football side St Mirren has renamed its stadium the Paisley 2021 stadium in support of the bid. That highlights the huge support it has across Paisley, Renfrewshire and indeed Scotland.

**John Glen:** The hon. Gentleman, as expected and quite rightly so, makes another plea on behalf of his home bidding city of Paisley. I have received so many representations and passionate requests on behalf of the bidding cities. We do not have long to wait, but I do acknowledge the quality of the bids across all five cities, and it is very sad that only one can win this week.

I pay tribute to the many national institutions, from the BBC to the Government Art Collection, that have also contributed to the success in Hull. We have seen genuine collaboration across the whole of the arts and cultural sector.

I now come to the substance of this afternoon's debate: Swansea's bid to become the UK city of culture 2021. One of the enormous pleasures of my job is learning about the history and culture of towns and cities across the UK, and I try to visit as many of them as I can. I have learned that Swansea has an incredible 32 miles of stunning coastline, that Swansea Museum is Wales's oldest public museum, and that Welsh National Opera originated in Swansea. I was clearly already familiar with the "ugly, lovely town" described by Dylan Thomas and now a thriving city, as the hon. Member for Cardiff West pointed out.

Swansea is rightly proud of its most famous son and I know that the Dylan Thomas Centre is one of the city's great attractions, with ever-increasing participation figures. Back in 2013, the Heritage Lottery Fund awarded nearly £940,000 for a three-year project that centred on the celebration of the centenary of the birth of Dylan Thomas. A range of organisations across Wales participated in the celebrations, including the National Library of Wales, which showcased an archive of Dylan Thomas material in a major exhibition. Most importantly, the Dylan Thomas Centre has the lasting legacy of a permanent exhibition, "Love the Words", which opened on 27 October 2014—Dylan's 100th birthday. This interactive exhibition tells the story of the work, life and cultural context of Dylan Thomas, and includes a learning space, activities for children and a temporary exhibition area.

I acknowledge other important cultural institutions, including the National Waterfront Museum, the Glynn Vivian Art Gallery, Plantasia and the Grand Theatre. In fact, VisitBritain has included the Glynn Vivian Art Gallery's hosting of the "Leonardo da Vinci: Ten Drawings from the Royal Collection" exhibition as a key reason why international tourists should visit Britain in

2017. There are also many independent galleries and artists' studios, digital workspaces and live music venues. Wales's first dedicated space built purely for use by the creative industries is located in Swansea's Urban Village development in the city centre, and both the University of Wales Trinity Saint David and Swansea University offer a range of graduate and undergraduate courses in the creative sector, encouraging new and exciting start-ups and performing arts companies to thrive.

**Geraint Davies:** I am enjoying the Minister's speech, but I just want to point out to him that we have two engines in the universities there that are producing enormous numbers of qualified people in both the arts and the sciences. One of the things we lack is the retention of those people in the city. Does he agree that city of culture status would enable them to stay in their home and build the economy, with visitors and tourism helping to fuel that fire?

**John Glen:** Throughout this debate the hon. Gentleman has made a number of passionate interventions showing an encyclopaedic knowledge of Swansea, as anyone would expect, and he is absolutely right on this point. The effect of cultural investment in creating a stickiness and a magnet for businesses to want to continue to invest and for employees to want to stay is really important. That is a significant feature of what we have seen in Hull: more investment and people wanting to stay there. Whichever city is successful later this week, we hope that that will be replicated in four years' time.

Swansea has its own international arts festival and an international jazz festival, which I believe is now the largest in Wales. The Heritage Lottery Fund has provided almost £25 million for projects in Swansea, including the aforementioned Dylan Thomas exhibition, a number of HLF Young Roots projects and the All Saints Church restoration. As we have heard, following its city deal, Swansea is also going through a period of major physical transformation, investing in the largest regeneration programme the city has seen since world war two. I am very heartened to know that culture, creativity and this city of culture bid are right at the heart of these plans.

From all we have heard this afternoon, it is abundantly clear that Swansea, in common with the other shortlisted areas, has the heritage, vision, infrastructure and cultural leadership to be the next city of culture. Whichever city wins, I am sure it will be a very worthy winner. and will

continue the journey that began in Derry/Londonderry in 2013 and has continued so spectacularly in Hull this year.

In conclusion, I sincerely wish the city of Swansea the best of luck in presenting its bid to the panel this week. As I said, in just over 51 hours, I shall announce the winner on the recommendation of the independent panel, chaired so well by Phil Redmond.

3.50 pm

**Chris Davies:** I thank the Minister for his conclusion. It is clear that he is not the judge alone; he is the conduit to deliver the judges' address and result on Thursday, but any influence that he can exert over them would be gratefully received by those of us in Swansea. We have clearly heard today that this is not just a city bid but a national bid. We have had support from Anglesey to Aberavon, covering a vast area—a rural area and a city area—and adjacent cities and counties across Wales. This is a very important bid to the people of Wales, and certainly to the city of Swansea.

I thank all my colleagues from all parts of the House for the cross-party support for Swansea's city of culture bid. I am grateful to have so much support and to hear the various views and bids for Swansea to be given city of culture status. We have heard a lot about Swansea's background and history—it was how I began my opening speech—but the city of culture bid is all about the future. It could offer so much to the people of Swansea. From youngsters going through school to the children who have not even been born yet, all can benefit from Swansea being named the city of culture for 2021. This is very important to us. As I said during my initial address, I was not pushing and supporting the bid from a feeling of unfairness because we had missed out in the past. Like all my colleagues, I support it because Swansea truly deserves to be the 2021 city of culture. Let us all hope on Thursday for the right result to be announced—that Swansea will be that city of culture in 2021.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered Swansea's bid to be City of Culture 2021.

3.52 pm

*Sitting suspended.*

## Banking Sector: Fraudulent Accounts

[MR PHILIP HOLLOBONE *in the Chair*]

4 pm

**Mrs Maria Miller** (Basingstoke) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered fraudulent accounts and the banking sector.

It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, for the first time that I can recall. I hope we have a full and useful debate.

More than two years ago, a constituent approached me about having been the victim of banking fraud. I called this debate because I have been unable to get the spider's web of organisations with responsibility for making our banking system safe to act in the best interests of my constituent and bring to justice the perpetrators of a fraud that has left him £13,500 poorer.

The British banking system is one of the most advanced in the world, with an apparent cornucopia of legislation to give customers a comfort blanket of trust. My constituent fell victim to a simple fraud, paying £13,500 into the British high street bank account of an individual who had undertaken to deliver services that my constituent never received.

My constituent, under the impression that this country's extensive money laundering regulations meant that bank accounts could be opened only by legitimate individuals with established UK addresses, reported the crime to the police when it became clear that the services that he paid for would not be provided, and that he had been the subject of a fraud. He was told by the police that available information about the person who opened the bank account was insufficient for them to proceed with their inquiries, and that the bank account involved had been opened with a provisional driving licence. Following cursory police investigations, it became immediately clear that the individual concerned had never lived at the address supplied to the bank when the account was opened. Indeed, the address given was incomplete.

To this day, Lloyds bank insists that it made no errors in allowing the opening of the bank account used to defraud my constituent, even though the police have confirmed that the suspect has never resided at the address given to Lloyds. Furthermore, for more than a year afterward, the Met police did not pursue inquiries into the crime because they thought, erroneously, that Lloyds would not give them the account opening information that they needed to pursue more thoroughly the criminal involved. In fact, that information had already been given to another police force in Bedfordshire. By the time the error was established, the case was a year old and lines of inquiry were cold.

I have spent two years being handed from one organisation to another in the attempt to have this case properly investigated. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister can explain how Lloyds can be held to account for the situation. Is he content that a bank account can be opened without a valid postal address for the applicant? Is that not in breach of money laundering regulations? I am not a lawyer, but I have read the regulations, and it would seem so.

The police thought that Lloyds would not divulge the application details, yet they found a year on that that was not the case. Why is there no established protocol for banks and police to follow in fraud cases such as

this? Which organisation is responsible for ensuring that Lloyds complied with money laundering regulations when, as a result of the bank's actions, there is insufficient information for the police to investigate possible criminal money laundering breaches? Is it perhaps time to review banks' responsibilities when it comes to fraud, and bring them more in line with the credit card industry?

**Mr Alister Jack** (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend on securing this debate. She mentions the credit card industry. She will be aware that the protections afforded to people using credit cards are far greater than those afforded to people using debit cards or making online transfers. Does she agree that those protections should be extended to forms of banking other than just credit cards?

**Mrs Miller:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right to bring up that inconsistency in how financial consumer protection works. Many people would be taken aback to understand how little protection they might have on a bank account money transfer when, if they simply used credit cards, they would be far more protected. The difference seems reflective of the situation in the past when credit cards were set up, when they might have been seen as a much riskier proposition. The evidence that I am giving suggests that banks are also a bit of a risky proposition when it comes to fraud. He makes an excellent point.

The cost of fraud across payment cards, remote banking and cheques to banking customers and shareholders was more than £768 million last year, involving almost 2 million separate cases. Given the scale of the problem, it is little wonder that the police are not always in a position to act.

For the past two years, I have done all that I can to get justice for my constituent, only to be passed around a bewildering array of organisations. Lloyds bank says that it made no error, yet the police say that the individual who opened the account never lived at the account opening address. The ombudsman says that it cannot investigate how an account was opened, the Financial Conduct Authority tells me that it does not investigate individual cases and Action Fraud and the National Fraud Intelligence Bureau do not investigate crime, it appears, but pass it to the relevant police force. Who exactly ensures that money laundering regulations are followed, and that banks allow new accounts to be opened only with proper evidence of identity and residence?

In this case, the police are clear: their investigation shows that the person who opened the account never resided at the address. I feel trapped in a Catch-22 situation. Lloyds allowed inaccurate information to be used to open an account, but because the identity evidence that Lloyds collected is so poor, the police have no grounds to do anything further, and it appears that only the police can take action to enforce money laundering regulations. The Payment Systems Regulator has admitted that bank fraud is causing customers harm and the industry is not doing enough, and that banks could be doing far more to identify fraudulent payments, but has rejected calls to put more pressure on banks to prevent fraud by making them responsible for reimbursing victims, as is the case with credit card fraud. At a time when the payments industry can spot credit card fraud using algorithms, surely we can expect banks to properly check the ID of their customers.



Financial Fraud Action UK, an industry body, is calling for the payments industry to be more transparent about the scale of the problem and to take a common approach to how frauds are handled. *Which?*, the consumer magazine, is also clear that banks should shoulder more responsibility for money lost due to fraud, but they need to be incentivised to do so and to focus more on detecting and preventing fraud.

Failure to check account opening details correctly is a serious criminal offence, with a criminal penalty to match. The banking code is clear that documents must prove ID and address. The police say that the reason their investigation is not ongoing is that the person involved never lived at that address, yet no one appears to be willing to hold Lloyds to account, perhaps because the evidence available does not meet the criminal standard of proof.

Will the Minister explain why my constituent should be satisfied? Surely Lloyds has breached its own anti-fraud requirements. Lloyds closed the account because of fraud. In correspondence with me, the bank has admitted that a provisional driving licence was used, but will not confirm what other information was used and why it failed to check the address, given that it was incomplete. Lloyds allowed a fraudulent account to be opened and there appears to be a reasonable case for saying that that is a breach of money laundering regulations. Will the Minister investigate, or at least tell me who might investigate? I have tried for two years, but I simply cannot find out who that might be.

Some cases similar to my constituent's have received compensatory payments from other high street banks because of the investigative journalism of somebody at *The Daily Telegraph*. I find it a miserable state of affairs when we rely on journalists' intrepid work to ensure that our banking system is fair and accountable.

In February 2016, the Home Secretary, now the Prime Minister, established a fraud taskforce. Can the Minister update the House on what has been done through that taskforce to stop banks allowing accounts to be opened fraudulently? My constituent, who quite rightly wants to protect his privacy, needs to have justice, but he also wants his experience to lead to changes that will help to stop this situation happening to many other people.

4.11 pm

**The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Stephen Barclay):** It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I pay tribute to the tenacity with which my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) has championed the cause of her constituent, who has clearly suffered from the traumatic case that she rightly raises with the House today. She outlined that she has been working on this case for some time, including exchanging correspondence with Treasury Ministers last year. I welcome the opportunity to update her on the work of the taskforce that was set up, as she correctly said, by the Prime Minister and on developments with the payment systems regulator and others.

To be clear, banks must take action to prevent accounts being used for criminal purposes. The Financial Conduct Authority is responsible for ensuring that firms meet their legal and regulatory obligations. As my right hon.

Friend is aware, the FCA is an independent body. That is vital to its role; its credibility, authority and value would be undermined if it were possible for the Government to simply intervene in its decision making.

I will discuss the positive steps that the regulators and industry are taking shortly, but I will first touch on the issue at the core of my right hon. Friend's concerns. Bank accounts used for fraud and other criminal purposes are a serious concern of the Government, the FCA and the industry, particularly given that authorised push payment scams—the type of fraud to which she refers—are the second biggest payment fraud after card fraud. The FCA's rules expressly require banks to have systems and controls to counter the risk that they are misused for the purpose of financial crime, including money laundering and fraud.

The money laundering regulations require banks to verify the identity of their customer and to assess the purpose and intended nature of the business relationship when a customer opens a bank account. A key part of the regulations is a requirement to carry out customer due diligence, which was another of my right hon. Friend's core concerns. Customer due diligence measures mean verifying the customer's identity on the basis of information or documents obtained from a reliable source that is independent of the customer. As I understand it, Lloyds maintains that when it opened the account, it was applying the "industry-wide acceptable documentation", but I know that my right hon. Friend has concerns in that regard.

Since my appointment, I have encouraged the industry to consider the use of new technologies where they are as effective or more effective than existing practices. The increasing digitisation of financial services and products means that it is important that customers can prove who they are online. Firms should develop robust tools to ensure that they know who they are dealing with. In essence, there is scope through an electronic footprint to enhance the standard of customer due diligence in the future.

Where a bank assesses greater risk, it may take additional measures, including seeking additional documentation and checking the customer's source of wealth or funds. Banks must conduct ongoing monitoring, including scrutiny of the transactions undertaken throughout the course of the relationship, to ensure consistency with the customer's business and risk profile. Banks must also undertake reviews of customer records so that information obtained for the purpose of due diligence is kept up to date.

The FCA is responsible for supervising banks' compliance with the money laundering regulations and for ensuring that they maintain systems and controls to prevent financial crime more generally. If the FCA finds evidence that a regulated firm has not undertaken due diligence checks, that firm would be in breach of the money laundering regulations. That addresses one of my right hon. Friend's core questions about who is liable and who enforces the money laundering regulations: it is the FCA's responsibility to ensure that firms have systems and controls in place to avoid money laundering.

**Mrs Miller:** The point that I made was that when I wrote to the FCA, it said that it did not take on individual cases. The Minister is right to say that it looks at systems and processes, but not at individual

[Mrs Miller]

cases. I hope he might be able to refer me to who does look at individual cases, because, frankly, I have not worked that out in two years—but he is much cleverer than I am.

**Stephen Barclay:** I will come to some of the steps that are being taken to mitigate that. The key point is whether the standards applied met the requirements of the money laundering regulations or whether there was a loophole. I know that my right hon. Friend has corresponded with the FCA on that point.

As I say, if the FCA finds evidence that a firm has not undertaken its due diligence checks, that firm would be in breach of the money laundering regulations. Where a bank falls short of its obligations, the FCA has shown that it is capable of taking action through multi-million pound fines for two of the largest banks in recent years. At the same time, the FCA must ensure that its supervisory regime is proportionate and efficient and that its unintended consequences are minimised.

I am sure my right hon. Friend will appreciate and recognise that there is a balance to be struck in terms of the level of scrutiny required for due diligence checks. Recently, the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) raised the issue that, at the other end of the spectrum, refugees often experience concerns about their ability to open a bank account because banks ask for levels of documentation that give them the impression that they are being prevented from opening accounts. So the balance is between a proportionate level of due diligence checks and a level that does not stop refugees, for example, being able to legally open a bank account.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke also raised the issue of the Payment Systems Regulator, which is leading the work on this type of scam where someone is tricked into making a payment to the wrong account or into paying the fraudster directly. The Government have made it clear that more should be done to stop that happening and to mitigate the harm caused when it does happen. I am pleased to say that progress is being made. The PSR's ongoing programme of work with industry aims to reduce the risk of the scams occurring and to reduce the damage that they cause. Existing initiatives include better data sharing between banks, a function to enable customers to be sure who they are transferring money to and best practice standards for the reporting of scams. The PSR has outlined milestones for those initiatives to ensure that the momentum is kept up.

Although the PSR accepts that not all scams can be prevented, it has taken a decisive step to align incentives and to reduce harm. It has proposed a contingent reimbursement scheme in which banks would reimburse victims when the banks have not met the required best practice standards, provided that the victims had taken appropriate care when making the payment. That speaks to a further point that my right hon. Friend made about compensation. The PSR's consultation on that scheme is open until 12 January 2018. The consultation gives a clear sign to consumers that the regulator is on their side, and the PSR will respond to it in due course.

Banks and the FCA must do all they can to prevent fraudulent bank accounts from being opened in the first place, but fraud is a much wider problem. The joint

fraud taskforce, as my right hon. Friend mentioned, was set up by the Prime Minister when she was Home Secretary in 2016 as a partnership between Government, law enforcement and the financial sector. The taskforce is working in innovative ways to deliver a more effective response to fraud, including by investing £3.1 million, with industry, in a campaign to improve the ability of people and businesses to protect themselves from fraud; working to understand how even more funds can be returned to fraud victims; pursuing a cross-industry strategic plan on so-called “card not present” fraud; and considering what makes victims susceptible to fraud and how to reduce vulnerability.

The Home Office has asked Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services to conduct a review of police response to fraud at a local level, which my right hon. Friend also raised as a concern. The review will assess how local forces deal with demand, assess risk and provide victim care services and will examine the role of the City of London police as the national lead force for fraud.

I thank my right hon. Friend again for raising these issues. The Government recognise the terrible impact of this type of fraud on its victims. There are already strict rules that banks must comply with when opening new accounts, and the independent FCA is responsible for ensuring they do so. The PSR and the industry are doing robust work to tackle all types of fraud, working with the Government's joint fraud taskforce. The Government will continue to drive appropriate action on these issues, which are so important to all of us in this House.

**Mrs Miller:** I sense that the Minister is drawing to a close. His remarks have addressed the generalities of the banking system, which I understand are hugely important to the regulator and the Government, but may I press him again on particular instances in which individual constituents such as mine have been let down? It is very difficult to see what recourse they have when banks fail to abide by their own codes of practices and rules, leaving them poorer for it.

**Stephen Barclay:** As I understand it, my right hon. Friend draws a distinction between systemic responsibility for the rules of a firm as a whole and responsibility for individual cases, but if I have mischaracterised that distinction, I am happy to write to her. My understanding is that responsibility for firm-wide systems and controls falls to the FCA, but specific one-off cases of fraud are in the police's remit, so it is for the police to look at individual cases. I am very happy to follow up that point in further discussions.

**Mrs Miller:** May I detain the Minister a moment longer? The problem is that if a bank fails to gather information about a perpetrator of a crime who has opened a bank account, it leaves police unable to follow the perpetrator. Ultimately, it is very difficult for the police to find the criminals if information on their addresses and names has not been collected in the first place.

**Stephen Barclay:** I am acutely aware of the problem that my right hon. Friend raises. Whether the correct information was collected in her constituent's case is an

issue of fact: I understand from Lloyds that it was, but my right hon. Friend may care to differ. Her point about the remit of the police illustrates the reason the Prime Minister asked Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary when she was Home Secretary to review the role of the police in addressing these issues.

All hon. Members recognise how traumatic these cases are. Prevention is better than cure, which is why the industry is taking measures through the PSR. Where fraud occurs, we need to look at how the responsibility of the banks aligns with potential compensation. The PSR consultation is open until mid-January, and I am sure my right hon. Friend will want to contribute to it. We need to look at the balance of responsibilities between the FCA as regulator and banks in individual cases.

I hope my right hon. Friend will be reassured to hear that, partly as a consequence of her tenacity in raising her constituent's case, the Prime Minister has announced a review of police response and a suite of measures on the FCA, on standards and on the role of the PSR, to ensure that others do not suffer as my right hon. Friend's constituent has.

*Question put and agreed to.*

4.25 pm

*Sitting suspended.*

## World AIDS Day 2017

4.30 pm

**Stephen Doughty** (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered World AIDS Day 2017.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and to see by Members from across the House in attendance. I am thankful for the fact that this important debate has been granted because, as we all know, on Friday—1 December—it was World AIDS Day. This World AIDS Day was particularly important to me because it was my first as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on HIV and AIDS. I personally thank, on behalf of the all-party group officers, the hon. Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer), who unfortunately cannot be with us today, for all his hard work while he was chair of the group. I also thank those officers who have been able to join us today, and I draw attention to our relevant declarations in the APPG register.

This World AIDS Day was one of many anniversaries. It was the anniversary of Positively UK and the 30th anniversary of the National AIDS Trust. It also marked 30 years since the first UK Government public health campaign on HIV—“Don't Die of Ignorance”—the famous tombstones adverts for which we must pay credit to the Lords Speaker. He has made an enormous contribution to the HIV cause, both then and over the years since. It was a delight to join him and the Commons Speaker in Westminster Hall last week at the exhibition of the iconic AIDS memorial quilts, which have been placed out for the 30th anniversary. The AIDS Memorial Quilt Conservation Partnership organised the exhibition, and I am sure that many Members have seen it. It was moving to see such a visual display of a deep and personal part of our social history and to meet family and friends who lost loved ones to AIDS in the 1980s and 1990s. It was also a reminder of how far we have come in tackling the HIV epidemic, in the UK and abroad, but, perhaps more importantly, it highlighted that there is still so much further to go. Given that it is a Department for International Development Minister who is responding to the debate, I will focus the majority of my remarks on the international aspect, but I will also touch on a number of issues to do with the UK domestic situation.

Last week, as well as joining with the Terrence Higgins Trust, Positively UK and the memorial quilts organisation, I met some absolutely incredible young people—Davi, Horcelie and Masedi—at the incredibly powerful and personal World AIDS Day event that Youth Stop AIDS held in Parliament. The young people spoke about their experiences in Indonesia, the Congo and southern Africa, and the challenges so many people around the world still face. Hearing their personal stories of how HIV and AIDS have affected their lives and those of their families was very moving and, I am sure Members will agree, it is important for us as parliamentarians to understand how our international policies can directly affect people's lives. We are truly grateful for their courage to speak out about their status and their experiences.

Before we begin to look at the areas in which more work must be done, I want to highlight some of the excellent progress that has been made to date. Here in

[Stephen Doughty]

the UK, as Public Health England data have shown, this year marks the first time since the epidemic began that new HIV diagnoses have decreased among men who have sex with men—by 18%. That is a real achievement and is testimony to the hard work of Governments of many different types over the years, the HIV sector—including non-governmental organisations and all those who work in our health service—and many other stakeholders who have dedicated their expertise to improving HIV prevention and treatment. Clearly, something is working.

Internationally, huge strides have been made since the beginning of the epidemic, with a 48% decline in deaths from AIDS-related causes, from a peak of 1.9 million in 2005 to 1 million in 2016, thanks largely to the global scale-up of antiretroviral therapy. Having worked with a number of NGOs that work on the epidemic, including World Vision—which the Minister knows well—and Oxfam, and latterly in my time at the Department for International Development and then with Oxfam International, I have seen the epidemic and some of the efforts around it changing over the years, along with some very positive impacts. However, there are still 36.7 million people worldwide living with HIV, 14.5 million of whom do not know their HIV status.

Stigma is still a major barrier to accessing treatment. Even here in the UK, the Terrence Higgins Trust is working hard to get the message through that undetectable equals untransmittable—the U=U campaign—and that is also vital globally. Later in the debate we will talk a little about pre-exposure prophylaxis. PrEP is a game-changing drug that could reverse aspects of the epidemic, but access is a problem, particularly in low and middle-income countries—we have only just seen major trials and major availability in this country. Some 17 million people, or 46% of people living with HIV, are now on antiretroviral treatment and 38% of people are virally suppressed. That means that we are therefore still a long way from reaching the UNAIDS 90-90-90 targets, which are that, by 2020, 90% of all people living with HIV will know their HIV status, 90% of all people with diagnosed HIV infection will receive sustained antiretroviral therapy, and 90% of all people receiving antiretroviral therapy will have viral suppression. UNAIDS has reported that progress on the decline in new infections has, unfortunately, slowed down and that we are now off track for achieving those internationally agreed targets. In 2016, there were 1.8 million new infections worldwide; the target is to reach just 500,000 by 2020.

Although overall new infections among adults have declined since 2010, progress has varied according to region. For example, in eastern and central Europe new infection rates have increased by an alarming 60%, and we have heard very worrying news from Russia this week, where there have been soaring infection and death rates from HIV/AIDS in recent years, as the epidemic has spread from intravenous drug users to the broader population. Russian and global health experts say that that is the result of the authorities' long-running refusal first to acknowledge the problem and then to back internationally recognised policies to combat it, such as health education, drug substitution programmes and large-scale antiretroviral treatment programmes. That is alongside the suppression we see of the LGBT+

community in Russia and many parts of the former Soviet Union. Figures are merely statistics, however, and unless we look more closely at what they mean for people living in the poorest countries, and some middle-income countries, we do not see the real impact on lives and the devastating effect that HIV and AIDS can still have.

Although here in the UK AIDS-related deaths have been significantly reduced since the terrible days of the 1980s and early-1990s, worldwide, millions of people are still dying from AIDS-related causes. I would like to praise the leadership that DFID has shown on HIV over many years, under many Governments, particularly its recent contribution to the global fund. I was delighted to meet the fund's interim executive director a few weeks ago here in Parliament, with members of relevant APPGs, and I congratulate Peter Sands on his recent appointment to that role.

HIV is treatable and should not result in death, but there are a number of reasons why it still does, and I will try to cover them. HIV is still the leading cause of death for women of reproductive age. According to UNAIDS data, young women aged between 15 and 24 are at particularly high risk of HIV infection, accounting for 20% of new HIV infections among adults globally in 2015. Although the UK Government are clearly committed to improving women's rights and opportunities there is some concern that HIV is being overlooked in that area, given that there is, for example, no mention of HIV in the recent update of the strategic vision for girls and women. Will the Minister comment on that, and agree that, given the importance of HIV as the leading cause of death for women of reproductive age, he will consider adding in a specific reference to HIV when the strategy is next updated?

The all-party parliamentary group on HIV and AIDS is currently conducting an inquiry into the withdrawal of aid from middle-income countries and its impact on women and girls living with HIV, which we hope will shine some light on this crucial issue. Multilateral aid, such as that given through the global fund, is vital, but it is not the only answer. The UK has shown a very significant presence, both in its personnel and its ministerial involvement at international conferences and, crucially, at country level. A presence on the ground through bilateral aid is also crucial, and that is something we have recently discussed with the global fund and other organisations. Those bodies require partners on the ground with whom they can work, and we have a proud track record on that, which we do not want to see decline.

Young people are also particularly vulnerable, because they are often denied the information and freedom to make decisions about their sexual health and do not know how to protect themselves from HIV. Therefore, along with women we need to ensure that young people are at the heart of the UK Government's HIV prevention and treatment strategies globally. Will the Minister tell us what steps he is taking to ensure that young people are at the heart of the agenda? Will he look at DFID's youth agenda and include specific reference to young people living with HIV and AIDS?

I mentioned earlier that there has been an alarming increase in new HIV infections in eastern and central Europe. One of the key problems—aside from those issues I mentioned about stigma and the lack of

commitment to education and treatment—is that some of the middle-income countries, particularly in eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, are falling through funding gaps. As international aid is pulled out, their Governments are unable or unwilling to provide funding for HIV prevention and treatment services.

DFID's support of the Robert Carr civil society Networks Fund is crucial in providing the necessary funding for civil society groups in those harder-to-reach places with harder-to-reach populations. We heard about the importance of the work funded by that network in the event with STOPAIDS last week. UNAIDS's latest report, which was released on World AIDS Day, highlights that outside of eastern and southern Africa, HIV prevalence is highest among men, particularly within key populations, and that they are the least likely to seek treatment. UNAIDS warns that that is a blind spot within the current HIV response. DFID has given £5 million over the past three years to the RCNF. Will the Minister tell the House whether his Department plans to increase that amount to make further progress towards the 90-90-90 target?

While we have seen a significant increase for multilateral funding and the global fund, others are not doing their bit. What discussions has the Minister had with other donors about their responsibilities and their funding for the global fund and bilateral funding? STOPAIDS released an important report looking at UK bilateral funding, which had some worrying statistics. While I absolutely welcome the funding we have seen for the global fund, the RCNF and other things, we have worries in the sector that some of our bilateral funding is perhaps not what it should be. Will the Minister say a little about that and the steps we can take to increase the transparency of DFID's funding in this area?

DFID is currently using a policy marker to estimate its HIV spend, which essentially means that a programme identified as having a significant HIV outcome is able to automatically attribute 50% of its budget to HIV tracking. The problem with that is that it risks overestimating our contribution in those areas. That might seem like a technical issue, but I am sure the Minister will agree that we need to know how our money is getting results and where it is being used. Currently, there is no way of accurately telling. Will he look at that issue and how we can improve our transparency on that spending?

Another crucial area is access to medicines. In our 2014 report, we highlighted some of the barriers to accessing HIV medicines. Sadly, three years later we are still grappling with some of the same concerns. While the cost of first-line treatment has come down from a high of £7,500 to £75 a person a year, thanks to generic competition and huge civil society pressure, third-line treatment remains prohibitively expensive for people living in low and middle-income countries, and there are still too few paediatric formulations available. Unfortunately, that is one of the downsides of the current system. We have close, frank and regular dialogue with those in the pharmaceutical industry, but we have to find ways of working with the sector to improve access issues.

While many great initiatives already exist—the International Partnership for Microbicides, the International AIDS Vaccine Initiative and various other public-private partnerships, the Medicines Patent Pool, multilaterals such as Unitaid and the Clinton Health Access Initiative

and others—there is still more we could be doing to improve the situation. For example, we should ensure that where public funds are used, there are sufficient conditions in place to safeguard public return on research and development investment. Will the Minister say a little about the work his Department is doing to ensure that we have access to medicines for all those who need it? It is important that we continue to invest in vaccines. We need to invest in the prevention technologies that will ultimately be the way to secure a sustainable end to the epidemic.

Those are some of the challenges we face with HIV internationally, but before I conclude I want to reflect briefly on some of the domestic issues. The issues of stigma, discrimination and access to treatment for vulnerable groups apply across the board. I was astounded to read the other day that a YouGov survey found that one in five Britons would be uncomfortable wearing the red ribbon for World AIDS Day because people might think that they have HIV. There should be absolutely no stigma surrounding HIV status. We all need to do our part to ensure that we stamp out that stigma for once and all. I publicly had an HIV test at the Terrence Higgins Trust centre in Cardiff last week. I was proud to share that on social media and encourage others to take a test during national testing week. I thank all Members, including those here today, who have worn their ribbons in the past few weeks and who have been along to take tests.

I pay particular tribute to His Royal Highness Prince Harry and his new fiancée Meghan Markle for the part they have played by making one of their first public engagements going along to a THT centre. His Royal Highness took a test last year, and I understand that that increased testing rates significantly. As an all-party group, we were delighted to meet him recently and discuss his passion for and commitment to the cause. I am sure we all applaud that work.

**Catherine McKinnell** (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): Before my hon. Friend finishes his excellent and timely speech, I commend him on securing the debate and apologise that I am not wearing my red ribbon, although I am wearing my sustainable development goal badge. “It ain't over”—those are the words of the pledge we have all made to recommit our energies to ending AIDS/HIV by 2030, but we will not achieve that goal unless we are committed politically and financially to ensuring that it becomes a reality.

**Stephen Doughty**: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. “It ain't over” was the central message from STOPAIDS when we met last week. We need to get that message out there loud and clear. The challenge has not gone away, although we have seen much progress.

On the domestic front, I want to mention two issues. I would be grateful if the Minister reflected on them and perhaps discussed them with his colleagues in the Department of Health. First, we have seen the fragmentation of services. The all-party group published a report last year called “The HIV Puzzle”. It looked at some of the fragmentation of services in England since the Health and Social Care Act 2012 and some of the resulting challenges for people in accessing treatment and prevention services locally. Some worrying statistics are coming out about treatment availability in some

[Stephen Doughty]

areas. Secondly, while we welcome the trial of pre-exposure prophylaxis in England and the announcement in Wales and Scotland, in England PrEP will be available to only 10,000 people over three years. What will happen when we reach 10,000? Will we suddenly stop making PrEP available? Surely that cannot be the case. The many organisations that campaign for PrEP want to see it available to all those who need it.

I conclude by thanking all the Members who have come here today to support the debate on World AIDS Day 2017. We will never forget the millions of lives lost to AIDS, and we will continue to fight in their name for HIV and AIDS to become a thing of the past.

**Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair):** This is an hour-long debate that will finish at 5.30 pm. Six Members are seeking to speak. I am obliged to call the first of the Front-Bench spokesmen at seven minutes past 5. There are guideline limits of five minutes for the Scottish National party, five minutes for Her Majesty's Opposition and 10 minutes for the Minister, with three minutes for Mr Doughty to sum up the debate at the end. [Interruption.] Mr Doughty is generously declining to have the full three minutes, but he will perhaps take a minute or so. I am afraid there will have to be a time limit of three minutes so that everyone has a chance to contribute. The next speaker will be Ross Thomson.

4.47 pm

**Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) for securing this important debate. Last Friday was World AIDS Day, and I was pleased that the day was commemorated by MPs across the House donning the red ribbon. It is a symbol of solidarity with the almost 37 million people globally living with HIV/AIDS and the millions who die every single year from HIV-related illnesses. It is one of the most destructive pandemics that has not yet been eradicated.

Since the 1980s we have come a long way in tackling HIV and AIDS, as well as the stigma surrounding the issue. We are so close to getting to zero new infections, an achievement of which we would all be proud. However, stigma still stands in the way of reaching that target. We must tackle discrimination around HIV wherever it occurs—ignorance and isolation limit the opportunities for those with a diagnosis.

Across Scotland and the United Kingdom, buildings were lit up in red to mark World AIDS Day. In Aberdeen, the granite from Marischal College to King's College glowed red to remind us of the work that is still left to do. In Scotland, more than 5,000 people are living with HIV. That figure has doubled since 2001. The figure is far too high and is growing far too fast. Knowledge is a powerful tool, and information liberates us from our current ignorance. Education is vital to progress and is key to tackling the growing figure. Some 79% of young people believe that pupils should have access to up-to-date and effective sexual health education, yet three in five pupils in Scotland do not remember receiving any HIV information in school. With two young people diagnosed with HIV every month, that is not acceptable.

Globally, we are moving in the right direction, as in 2016 there were 300,000 fewer cases than in 2015. Breakthroughs in scientific research have meant that an HIV diagnosis is not a death sentence, and that it does not have to be passed on. Those with a diagnosis are our colleagues, friends, partners, children and neighbours. They lead lives that in the 1980s would not have been thought possible. Such people are a living testament to how far we have come.

We all have a part to play in eliminating HIV-related stigma. Eliminating AIDS and having an AIDS-free generation is within our grasp, if we continue to reach for the goals that we have set. We have fought AIDS and now must work to eradicate the pandemic.

4.50 pm

**Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab):** I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this important debate, and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on securing it. Earlier this year, on 20 April, I led a debate in the Chamber on tackling infectious diseases. It was a wide-ranging and well-attended debate, with interest from across the House. A lot has happened since then, however—not least the snap election, and the appointment of a new Minister covering health at the Department for International Development and a new Secretary of State.

In three minutes, I will try to cover two or three areas very quickly. I am the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on global tuberculosis. Hon. Members may not be aware of this, but in recent years TB overtook AIDS as the world's leading infectious killer. What is worse is that TB is the leading killer of people living with HIV/AIDS. Together the diseases form a lethal combination, each speeding the other's progress. In 2016, TB was responsible for almost 40% of all AIDS-related deaths.

Next year, the UN will convene its first ever high-level meeting on TB. I urge the Minister to ensure that DFID engages fully in that process, and presses for global agreement and investments to end the deadly duo. Last year, I welcomed the Government's increased commitment to the global fund. Its investments do great things; it has been at the forefront of tackling co-infection and is on course to save another 8 million lives over the next couple of years.

When DFID's HIV strategy lapsed in 2015, it was not renewed. Without a strategy to guide DFID's work, it is little wonder that there are gaps in its financial and programmatic commitments. Ministers have dismissed calls to renew DFID's strategy, but I urge the new Minister to reconsider, so that we can have a strategy in operation in the coming years.

Will the Minister outline what his Department is doing to ensure that we develop the tools we need to end the epidemic? On balance, much progress has been made, but as the STOPAIDS campaign says, "It ain't over" yet. There are many challenges, but there are also opportunities, and we must seize them.

4.53 pm

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** I congratulate the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on such a great presentation of the issues.

Every year, I run a dinner for my association and invite an MP from this place to come across for it. It is an occasion to raise a bit of money, but the great thing is that half of the monies raised through that dinner go to Eden Mission, which has a charitable orphanage in Swaziland. Swaziland is a little country with about the same population as Northern Ireland. The people, like my constituents, are warm, friendly and ever so helpful, but unlike my constituents, almost one in every two of them has AIDS. The epidemic has resulted in a lost generation, with grandparents raising their grandchildren on a massive scale, as the middle generation is dying of AIDS. Every year, the Eden church in my constituency brings over a choir of children, and this year managed to raise some £50,000 for that orphanage and for other projects that Eden Mission has in Africa as well. Those children are still children, but some of them, through no fault of their own, are ill with AIDS. With a healthy diet and medication, AIDS is no longer the death sentence it once was, as the hon. Gentleman said very clearly when introducing the debate.

It is always nice for the children to come and sing in my office, in return for the small part I play in fundraising to allow them access to life-saving drugs. I am proud to wear a red ribbon today as a homage to that lovely choir and the many people throughout the globe who have AIDS. I am very proud to wear that ribbon, like other hon. Members here today. However, looking at home, more people are now diagnosed with AIDS in Northern Ireland than ever before. The figures came out just last week—more than 1,050 people. We are above the norm in the United Kingdom, and that is just the over-50s. Again, just to put a marker down, we look across to Swaziland, other African countries and elsewhere, but perhaps we also have to look at what is happening a wee bit closer to home.

We also have to look at how we deal with this matter in schools. We probably all had to go through an uncomfortable sex education class at some stage; it has to be done. Let us understand it better, and do it better in schools. We should preach the importance of safe sex.

Furthermore, as all of us in this Chamber know, the spread of HIV/AIDS is not simply down to unsafe sex. It can happen through blood transfusions or something as simple but deadly as someone not knowing that they have AIDS and therefore not being careful about the spread of bloods from cuts. It has been transmitted to those who are hooked on drugs and share needles. Babies are at risk of getting it from their parent, yet there are measures that can be taken during delivery to help mitigate the risks if the condition is known about, so there have been massive advances.

It is always very hard for us to fit all the things we want to say into just three minutes, but I conclude with this: we cannot and must not pigeon hole this disease, but equally we cannot and must not ignore the uncomfortable truths that may prevent more people from unknowingly getting HIV. We must address the issue head on, and do what we can to stop the spread and to educate people of all ages, races and genders.

4.56 pm

**Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty)

not only on introducing the debate, but on his speech and his ongoing work with the all-party parliamentary group.

It is extraordinary to believe that with political will we could achieve the sustainable development goal of ending the AIDS epidemic, to all intents and purposes, by 2030. As others have said, however, and as the recent campaign has highlighted, “It ain’t over”. Success is a long way from being a certainty. Indeed, to get close we will all need to up our game, as it seems that the 2020 interim target is likely to be missed. As the statistics cited by the hon. Gentleman illustrate, the scale of the progress gives us grounds for optimism, but the scale of the remaining challenge is formidable.

Some key obstacles are pretty predictable in the context of international development. One is, of course, money, with the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS predicting that a \$7 billion annual funding gap needs to be filled by 2020 if we are to get back on course. In fact, we seem to be going in the wrong direction. A second obstacle, which other hon. Members have highlighted, is attitudes. Epidemics will flourish where fear and prejudice stop people receiving the services that they need to live healthy and productive lives. Horrifyingly, there remain HIV criminalisation laws in no fewer than 72 countries.

Now more than ever we need a detailed strategy, and careful and generous funding—so where is the UK in all this? Undoubtedly, the UK has an immensely strong track record, and has been a world leader, particularly through its founding role and contributions to the global fund. However, there are genuine concerns that it has been losing its relentless focus and leadership role, so it is welcome that this debate has provided an opportunity to air those concerns.

There have been concerns about a decline in funding for certain HIV and AIDS projects, including cuts to direct funding for civil society organisations, which are so important in overcoming stigma and prejudice. There has been an overall shift away from bilateral programmes and HIV-specific projects. I accept that the Government will offer justification for that, which does have some reason behind it. Moving disease-specific programmes into wider sexual health or health and development programmes can, if done well, be more effective and sustainable. However, done badly it can undermine the work towards the goal. For example, among the clear challenges of such an approach is the problem of assessing exactly how much we are spending and what impact it is having. The hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth highlighted the example of the HIV policy marker, which seems rather opaque.

Over the last couple of years, as other Members have said, we have been without specific position papers or strategies to help assess priorities and the UK’s impact. Finally, there is a concern about a lack of ministerial presence and leadership at international meetings and summits.

There is no doubt that what DFID seeks to do is good and welcome—supporting country-led and integrated responses that meet the holistic needs of target populations—so why not say that loudly and boldly with a strategy? At the very least, be more explicit about HIV and AIDS policy goals in frameworks. Why not make funding more transparent, and the assessment of progress towards clear goals more robust? Why not

[*Stuart C. McDonald*]

once again play a robust, outspoken leadership role? The opportunity is there to meet the 2030 goal, and for the UK to be pivotal to that achievement. Let us grasp that opportunity.

4.59 pm

**Dr Paul Williams** (Stockton South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on securing this debate.

Ten years ago on World AIDS Day, I was leading an HIV/AIDS programme on the edge of the Bwindi Impenetrable Forest on the border of Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. I started the clinic out of a shipping container, supported by a team of local health workers. It was baking hot and packed full of people desperate for care, in a place where all most people knew about HIV was encapsulated by the name that they used—*akakoko ka silimu*, translated as “the little insects that make you lose weight”. I saw too many people who did not know what was happening to them until they started coughing up blood from HIV or gave birth to a child who mysteriously died a few months later.

Within a couple of years, more than 2,000 people were getting treatment. Mother-to-child transmission had dropped from 30% to 1%. Every school child understood the basics about HIV and stigma was lifted by brave people, who were proudly positive. Yes, it was the drugs, and huge credit must go to President George Bush and the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief for making massive financial contributions at the right time to HIV/AIDS care but, more importantly, it was about the health system and the people delivering care.

In a part of the world where, on any given day, half of all health workers in Government facilities are absent, and where drug supplies rarely find their way to the front line, it is a huge leadership challenge to have happy, paid and competent health workers in the same place as needy patients, and with the drugs they need to help them.

I contacted a friend working in the field in Africa over the weekend. She told me that we are still a long way off where we need to be. She said that men are still not coming forward to test, that

“we don’t have enough drugs for everyone and are challenged by low stocks of ARVs”

and that adherence to treatment regimes is still a challenge. With the end of the HIV epidemic within our sights, now is not the time to disinvest—but disinvestment is exactly what we are starting to see, with a decline in funding between 2012 and 2015, from £416 million a year to £324 million a year, and a massive drop in funding for civil society organisations through the Robert Carr civil society Networks Fund.

I have two asks of the Minister. First, it would be really helpful to understand what the Department for International Development’s HIV/AIDS strategy is. We are currently investing more than £300 million a year of public money into HIV/AIDS, but without seeing that strategy, it is hard to communicate priorities or measure impact.

My second request is for reconsideration of the amount of financial investment. In many ways, the 20 million people currently on treatment, who were referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth, are the easiest-to-reach people. In healthcare, we need to spend more, not less, to reach the most disadvantaged. There are still 15 million people who either do not know their status or are not on treatment. In order to reach them, we need to invest more to engage them. If we do reach them, we have the potential for an amazing prize—the end of HIV as a global public health problem.

5.2 pm

**Martin Whitfield** (East Lothian) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on securing this debate.

Members will be aware of the importance of the global fund, and I want to pay tribute to the important work the fund does in the diagnosis and treatment of HIV. It is clear today that without a supply of new medical tools, we are not going to meet our global goals promise to give young people the opportunity of a future free from AIDS.

In 2009 a trial showed for the first time that the risk of HIV infection can be reduced by a vaccine, and improved vaccine concepts are now entering new efficacy trials. There is no doubt that vaccine development is a long process, but vaccines are proven to be one of the most effective and cost-effective public health tools. With that in mind, I wish to pose two questions to the Minister about UK scientific innovation.

The Government recently published their industrial strategy, which placed life sciences at its centre. Will the Minister make representations to his counterparts in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy about the need for research and development for new HIV prevention tools to be part of that?

There has been little, if any, discussion about how the industrial strategy will offset the uncertainties for UK science created by Brexit. In recent years, the European Commission has overtaken the UK to become the second-largest funder of global health research and development after the US, with many UK scientists benefiting from the pooled funding and collaboration. Will the Minister reassure UK scientists about what the future will hold?

I asked the Minister a question last week. I was grateful for his answer and for the correction yesterday to that answer for accuracy. HIV is still the greatest health challenge of our time. Although it does not quite command front-page attention any more, it must not be put to the back of the Government’s and people’s minds. Investment in research and development will keep the fight against this challenge alive.

**Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair):** We now come to the Front-Bench speeches, the first of which will be Chris Law from the Scottish National party.

5.5 pm

**Chris Law** (Dundee West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen



Doughty) for bringing this important and timely debate and for his continuing work with the all-party parliamentary group.

This debate is an opportunity to reflect on the estimated 35 million people who have died from AIDS-related illnesses and to show solidarity with the millions of people living with HIV worldwide today. It is an honour to wear a red ribbon in solidarity with all of those people. However, for many of them, stigma remains a problem. Stigma leaves people feeling ostracised and experiencing poor mental health and social outcomes. Stigma is also one of the biggest barriers to testing and treatment, and fear of a HIV-positive diagnosis discourages individuals from getting tested and engaging with health services. For some, stigma means living in perpetual fear of their HIV status being revealed to those with whom they live, work and spend time.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) said earlier, in Scotland last week the First Minister took an HIV test, which gives instant results, as part of efforts to reduce the stigma surrounding the disease. Not only that but voluntary sector bodies, along with people living with the condition, joined together to unveil a new action plan in Scotland ahead of World AIDS Day. The anti-stigma strategy “Road Map to Zero” set out how organisations such as the National AIDS Trust, the Terence Higgins Trust, HIV Scotland and others will continue to work with the Scottish Government and others to end HIV-related stigma.

We should all take pride in the fact that Scotland is a leader in HIV policy. It was the first nation in the UK to make PrEP available on the NHS and I pay tribute today to the campaigners who worked tirelessly for that to happen. PrEP is making a huge difference to the lives of many people in Scotland and I hope the UK will follow in Scotland’s footsteps.

At an international level, incredible achievements have been made in the global response to HIV. Some may argue that the worst is behind us, but sadly HIV is still a death sentence for many people across the globe. Sub-Saharan Africa remains most severely affected, with nearly one in every 25 adults living with HIV.

One of the UN’s sustainable development goals is to end AIDS by 2030. To reach that target, significant work still needs to be done. There are signs that the HIV response is beginning to stall. Key challenges remain. One is that the level of new infections each year is still too high. Only last week, the World Health Organisation highlighted the fact that the number of new infections in Europe is growing at an “alarming rate”. In central Asia, infections have increased by more than half since 2010. Key populations—for example, men who have sex with men, transgender people, people who use drugs and sex workers—are disproportionately affected by HIV. A further challenge is the high price of intellectual property and drug prices, which remain a barrier for HIV patients’ access to medicine. UNAIDS predicts we would need an additional \$7 billion annually to respond to the global HIV challenge. However, total DFID HIV funding decreased by 22% between 2012 and 2015, and the Department’s last strategy on HIV expired more than two years ago. It has no plans to renew it.

Without a strategy, DFID has no way to set and communicate priorities or measure impact. I would therefore urge the Minister to increase overall levels of

UK funding for the global HIV response, in line with UNAIDS recommendations, and to formalise and make public its approach to HIV. With current tools, we can hope to control the epidemic, but as the Gates Foundation has highlighted, to make headway towards ending it, we must bring down the number of new infections at a much faster rate. That will require new and better prevention technologies, such as an effective vaccine.

The Minister noted during last week’s DFID questions that the UK has been a long-standing supporter of the International AIDS Vaccine Initiative. We all agree about that, but it now needs action. The Government must increase research and development so that we have the necessary tools for the future.

We want to live in communities that have positive and non-stigmatising attitudes towards people who are affected by HIV. World AIDS Day and debates in Parliament help us to share that goal. Ultimately, World AIDS Day reminds the public, and MPs, that HIV has not gone away. Great scientific and medical progress has been made. As others have mentioned, treatment is dramatically more effective, and many more people are living long and healthy lives. At least that is the case in wealthy countries; it is not everywhere. The UK must show leadership in the global response to HIV and AIDS.

5.9 pm

**Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods** (City of Durham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Mr Hollobone. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) for securing this important debate. As we all know, World AIDS Day was last Friday. I am glad that this debate has given Parliament an opportunity to reaffirm its commitment to tackling HIV and AIDS, both at home and abroad, which was evidenced by the large number of parliamentarians and others wearing red ribbons last week. I hope that that demonstrates our solidarity with those suffering from AIDS and our determination to bring it to an end. It was good to see town halls and other buildings around the country lit up in red last week—that was certainly the case for the town hall in my constituency. Again, that was evidence of our desire to do something about AIDS.

There has been progress on this issue globally. For the first time ever, more than half of the people living with HIV are receiving life-saving treatment. New HIV infections in 2013 were 38% lower than in 2001, and new HIV infections among children have declined by 58% since 2001. We should welcome that decline. Nevertheless, in 2016, there were 1.8 million new HIV infections worldwide, which is 1.8 million too many. That represents more than 2,700 deaths from HIV every day.

As my hon. Friend said, 36.7 million people live with AIDS globally, 69% of whom live in sub-Saharan Africa. Sustainable development goal 3, on good health and wellbeing, has a target of ending the AIDS epidemic by 2030. Despite some progress towards that goal, however, STOPAIDS has estimated that there is a funding gap of \$7 billion, which needs to be filled to reach that target by 2030, and the US’s global gag rule will lead to a further decline in HIV funding.

I will ask the Minister later about what he intends to do about the funding gap, but in passing I note that women remain more vulnerable than men. In sub-Saharan Africa, which has the highest rates of HIV infections in

[Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods]

the world, there are three new infections among adolescent girls for every one among adolescent boys. Of course, HIV has a disproportionate impact on marginalised groups, especially in middle-income countries. That is further evidence of the systemic inequality that underpins our societies globally, which plays out particularly in terms of health services, information, education and economic opportunities, which are simply not attainable for many people.

I recognise that the Government have made much progress, but there are some issues I would like the Minister to address. Although the UK remains the second-largest donor to the global HIV response, it is concerning that total DFID funding for HIV/AIDS declined by 22% between 2012 and 2015. Although the UK has increased funding through multilateral institutions such as the global fund, that has not made up for the sharp decline in funding for DFID country office programmes, which fell from £221 million in 2009 to £23 million in 2015. There has been a decline in DFID funding for civil society organisations, which do such important work on the ground to tackle AIDS and HIV. We should pay tribute to them and ensure that their work is funded properly. Does the Minister intend to stop that reduction in funding and to fund those organisations properly?

Other hon. Members said that HIV and AIDS work is absent from the UK AIDS strategy. Does the Minister have plans to rectify that and bring forward a new strategy? Political leadership is important. DFID has not always been represented at international AIDS conferences. Does the Minister plan to ensure that we have a young representative attending those conferences? I want to finish by thanking my hon. Friends for their excellent contributions to this debate.

5.15 pm

**The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Alistair Burt):** It is, as always, a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) for securing this important debate to commemorate World AIDS Day. I thank all hon. Members who contributed; this subject unites everyone in the House, including my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson), the hon. Members for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma), for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald), for Stockton South (Dr Williams) and for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield), and the two Front-Bench spokesmen, the hon. Members for Dundee West (Chris Law) and for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods). They asked a range of questions. In the time available to me, I will not be able to cover them all, but in the time-honoured way, my Parliamentary Private Secretary has very kindly got a note of everyone who is here, so I will cover the questions I do not answer by way of letter. I will make sure the answers get out there.

This is an opportunity for colleagues to reflect on where we have got to. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth for mentioning the Lord Speaker, who did so much when he had the opportunity to do so, and the haunting quilt. It was particularly

noticeable when there was the odd square of anonymity because somebody still did not want to reveal something. I think of the pain behind that expression, of what people have been through in the past, and of what some people still go through. The fact that they are unable to talk about it, when for many of us it has become much easier to deal with and talk about, is a measure of the pain behind some of those issues.

None of us has the experience of the hon. Member for Stockton South. We all noted his work in Uganda, where he used his commendable skills in the best possible way. I still remember visiting AIDS orphans in South Africa with my daughter at a time when it was very clear that the babies could not be kept at home because of the shame and stigma attached to the disease, so they were just dispatched. I remember thinking that the nurses looking after them were making an extraordinary contribution. The afternoon that we saw them, my daughter and I said we did not know what we could do in life that would possibly be as valuable as the love that those people demonstrated towards those children. That was 20-odd years ago. Time has moved on and we are doing so much more.

Let me reflect a little on the progress that has been made, which colleagues mentioned, and then answer some of the tougher questions that come the way of a Minister. It is all part of the day job, even for an issue on which we are all broadly moving in the same direction. I commend the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth for his speech, and the work of the all-party parliamentary group on HIV and AIDS, which has achieved so much over the years. I thank him for advance sight of the questions in his speech. It was much appreciated.

We have come a long way since the first ever World AIDS Day in 1988. We now have 20 million people with access to potentially life-saving HIV treatment—a big improvement on the year 2000, when less than 1% of those in need had access. We can be very proud that the number of new infections in children has also dramatically declined. It is important to put on the record the UK's contribution to those achievements. Colleagues have been generous about that, and of course it covers Governments of all persuasions. The UK continues to play its role. We are proud to be the second-largest international funder of HIV prevention treatment and care. That work is impossible without our partners, through which we invest. Our contribution to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria helped to provide more than 11 million people with antiretroviral therapy by the end of 2016. Our significant pledge of £1.1 billion to the fifth replenishment of the global fund will now help provide enough life-saving antiretroviral therapy for 1.3 million people living with HIV.

Our investments in research and support to Unitaid help improve access to medicines, diagnostics and prevention for those affected by HIV in low-income countries by bringing promising new health technologies to scale faster and more cheaply. The hon. Member for East Lothian was right to raise the importance of carrying on with such research. We must also recognise UNAIDS for its continued leadership of the global HIV response, for pushing for ambitious global targets to stop new infections and to ensure everyone living with HIV has access to treatment, for protecting and promoting human rights, and for producing the data we need for decision making.

Civil society with its links to communities and people living with HIV also has a critical role to play in leading the social movement for prevention, championing the rights of the most at-risk populations and those living with HIV, providing care and support services to communities that others are simply unable to provide, and—vitaly—holding Governments to account.

**Jim Shannon:** In our contributions, some of us have recognised the good work of Churches and missions across the seas and at home. For the record, does the Minister too recognise the importance of their input physically, financially and emotionally into making the changes?

**Alistair Burt:** I do. The hon. Gentleman's connections with Churches and Church movements not only in this country but worldwide are well known. Absolutely, that is an important point to put on the record because to some extent it sets the record straight about the commitment of the Church and Christian communities to this particular sort of work, which is important. In some parts of the world, only the Church network is there to provide social care across the board. We would all be the poorer without being able to support that.

Mention was made of the Robert Carr civil society Networks Fund, of which we are proud to be a founding member. I cannot give a further commitment at this stage—we are yet to announce it—but I recognise the issue and we will come back to say what the future funding position will be in due course. I have noted what colleagues have said.

There is also greater shared responsibility from low and middle-income countries. Domestic resources constituted 57% of the total resources for HIV in low and middle-income countries, which is a step in the right direction, but more needs to happen to build a sustained response. As good as that is, as all colleagues have said, there is much more to do, so let me deal with some of the questions I was asked.

In terms of the broad strategy, the UK's ongoing HIV commitment is that we want to see AIDS ended as a public health threat by 2030. That is an important priority for us. We are proud to be the second-largest international funder of HIV prevention, treatment and care, as I have said, and as a leading donor we will use our influence to ensure that we collectively deliver on the global commitment—to end the AIDS epidemic as a public health threat by 2030—and that no one is left behind.

In relation to the gag, we will continue to show global health leadership by promoting and supporting comprehensive, evidence-based sexual and reproductive health and rights. We are the second largest donor for family planning assistance and we are the largest donor to UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund, so we will skirt around issues raised by the gag.

On a new HIV strategy, the note I have states that the 2013 review of the UK position paper on zero infections identified the integration of HIV as the key strategic priority. We intend to continue that approach, rather than to develop a stand-alone strategy or conduct a further review. However, I have heard what the House has said, so let me reflect a little on that, as I will on the Youth Agenda point—whether HIV is included. It is not currently. Clearly, the Youth Agenda is a very

important part of our strategy and we recognise, as all in the Chamber do, the significance of adolescent girls in particular and the related issues. Again, let me have a look at that to see whether we can say anything further about it. I will come back to colleagues in due course.

For women and girls generally, it was right to recognise the heightened risk. Empowerment of women and girls lies at the heart of our development agenda. DFID is supporting the generation of new evidence to improve outcomes for women and girls, including the development of female-initiated HIV prevention technologies, research into how gender inequality drives epidemics, and a particular focus on improving what works for adolescent girls in southern Africa.

The UK is also working with the global fund to increase its focus on girls and women, which I think is in accordance with the House's wishes. Giving greater attention to women and girls is a shared priority for us and the global fund. With UK support, the global fund has embraced gender equality as being central to accomplishing its mission of ending the three diseases as epidemics, including it as one of its four strategic objectives in the 2017 to 2022 strategy. Between 55% and 60% of global fund spending directly benefits women and girls. That includes programmes to prevent gender-based violence and to provide post-violence services. The number of HIV-positive women since 2002 who have received services to prevent transmission of HIV to unborn children has reached 3.6 million, and we will continue to press on that.

**Stephen Doughty:** I welcome what the Minister has said about looking again at the issue of a strategy and, in particular, the situation with young people and women and girls. We have obviously got the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting here next year. I suggest gently to the Minister that it would be very helpful to have a strong statement setting out the UK's views on HIV and AIDS in those communities while we have the Commonwealth Heads in this country.

**Alistair Burt:** It is a competitive field to get things on the agenda for the Commonwealth Heads of Government summit. I know that health will play a leading part, but the details have not yet been sorted. As would be expected, concerns about HIV/AIDS are certainly well up there and an announcement will be made in due course.

The UK Government will, however, be represented at the international AIDS conference in Amsterdam in July. Precise attendance is still to be finalised, but that depends on my diary and whether we can fit it in. I would really like to go because I think that is what colleagues would wish.

Turning to finance—on which I will write further—there are two issues. On the STOPAIDS suggestion of a 22% cut, our response is that the report gives a snapshot of the figures in a given year and does not always reflect everything that is going on as programmes come to an end and others start. It also does not reflect our huge multi-year global fund contribution. The timing of disbursements partly accounts for the difference in spend between years, but committing £2.4 billion since 2010 to multilateral funds is substantial.

The other issue was integrating the funds and the tracking. DFID uses an HIV policy objective marker to track spending on HIV within broader programming.

[Alistair Burt]

The system ensures that programmes address a range of developmental priorities, such as health-systems strengthening, governance, social protection and sexual, reproductive and health rights. I take the point that it is difficult to track, but it is important that we put the funds into integrated services, as well as spending them directly.

There are the technical challenges of tracking, so let me take that away as well—not necessarily to change it, but to see what might be done better to give more transparency. We will keep the process of integrating the funds going. It is right and proper to do so, along with the other commitments that we make. With that, let me sit down to allow the hon. Member for Cardiff South a couple of minutes to sum up.

5.28 pm

**Stephen Doughty:** I thank all the Members who have taken part today, and in particular the Minister for his encouraging response on a series of issues. I am delighted to hear that he is thinking of attending the international AIDS conference in Amsterdam. The signal sent out by ministerial and official attendance at such forums is crucial, particularly given the very strong leadership role that the UK has played over many years. When

people do not see us at those conferences and events, they wonder what is going on, so what the Minister said is really heartening.

I also welcome the Minister's willingness to go away and look at some of the issues we have raised on strategy and on funding and its tracking. I know that those things are sometimes not easy, but given the nature of HIV and AIDS, and other issues such as TB, for example, it is important to understand what funding is going towards those epidemics and how it is being spent, so that we can all hold the Government to account. In some cases, it is also important for the Government to show how they are providing leadership to other countries and international organisations.

Clearly, there is much unity across the House on the importance of keeping this issue on the agenda and of us all continuing to play our part in ensuring that we tackle the HIV/AIDS epidemic in this country and globally. The message is very clear that this is not over. We need to keep the issue on the agenda, and we will all play our part in doing so.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered World AIDS Day 2017.

5.30 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*





# Written Statements

*Tuesday 5 December 2017*

## TREASURY

### Double Taxation Convention: UK and Swiss Federal Council

#### **The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride):**

A protocol to the 1977 Double Taxation Convention with Switzerland was signed on 30 November 2017. The text of the protocol has been deposited in the Libraries of both Houses and has been made available on HM Revenue and Customs' pages of the [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk) website. The text will be scheduled to a draft Order in Council and laid before the House of Commons in due course.

[HCWS313]

## DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

### Heritage Statement

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (John Glen):** I am today publishing a Heritage statement, setting out the direction and priorities for the heritage sector in the coming years.

The statement builds on the commitments we made in last year's Culture White Paper. It links the heritage agenda to our wider agendas and strategies for industry, for regeneration and place-making, for skills, for the environment, and for an internationalist, outward-looking Britain. It applies to England only, except where it relates to international issues and UK-wide policies and programmes.

The statement is structured around four key themes: places, people, international, and sustainability and resilience. It focuses on areas where the Government can help to support and develop the heritage sector and add value to the work of heritage organisations and the many thousands of specialists, professionals and volunteers who care for and manage our heritage.

The Heritage statement is available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-heritage-statement-2017>.

[HCWS311]

## WALES

### Macur Review Report

**The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns):** On 17 March 2016 my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb), announced the publication of the report of Lady Justice Macur's Independent Review of the Tribunal of Inquiry into the abuse of children in care in the former county council areas of Gwynedd and Clwyd in North Wales since 1974.

Among other reasons, the report was redacted to avoid prejudicing ongoing and upcoming criminal prosecutions and trials. Most of the redactions in this category concerned the former North Wales Police superintendent, Gordon Anglesea. Following his criminal trial at Mold Crown Court, on 4 October Gordon Anglesea was sentenced at Mold Crown Court to 12 years' custody for an indecent assault against one boy and three indecent assaults against another boy. On 15 December 2016 Gordon Anglesea died in HMP Rye Hill.

In light of Gordon Anglesea's death there is no reason for his name to continue to be redacted, except where there is any risk that victims, witness or other individuals might be identified. I have today therefore laid a revised version of the Macur Review Report with references to Gordon Anglesea reinstated except where an ongoing risk has been identified. The other redactions in the report remain.

[HCWS312]

## WORK AND PENSIONS

### Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council

**The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds):** The Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council will take place on 7 December 2017 in Brussels. As Minister of State for Employment, I will represent the UK.

The Council will be invited to agree a partial general approach on the revision of regulations on co-ordination of social security systems—Long-Term Care and Family Benefits (883/04 and 987/09).

The Council will be invited to agree a general approach on the European Accessibility Act.

The Council will receive a progress report on the draft directive on equal treatment (Art. 19) and the draft directive on work-life balance.

The Council will be invited to give political agreement to the directive on Maritime Labour Convention (implementing a Social Partner agreement).

As part of the semester process the European Commission will present the annual growth survey 2018, the draft joint employment report, the alert mechanism report and the draft recommendation on the economic policy of the euro area. They will also seek the views and approval of member states on the employment and social aspects of the recommendation on the euro area.

The Council will be invited to adopt Council conclusions on the following three topics: the future of work: making it e-easy; enhancing community-based support and care for independent living; and on enhanced measures to reduce horizontal gender segregation in education and employment.

Under any other business, the Commission will present information on the EU action plan 2017-2019 on tackling the gender pay gap and on concluding the year of focused actions to eliminate gender-based violence. The Swedish delegation and the Commission will present information on the Social summit (Gothenburg, 17 November 2017) and the Bulgarian delegation will present the work programme of its incoming presidency.

[HCWS310]





# Ministerial Correction

*Tuesday 5 December 2017*

## DEFENCE

### Cadet Units: State Schools

*The following is an extract from Questions to the Secretary of State for Defence on 27 November 2017.*

**Sir David Amess:** Given the findings of the recently published report by my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), does my hon. Friend agree that schemes such as the combined cadet force at Westcliff High School for Boys are an excellent way to boost recruitment in the armed forces? Perhaps he will also encourage other schools to adopt the programme.

**Mr Ellwood:** I also pay tribute to my right hon. Friend's work on understanding the challenges we face with recruitment and retention. My hon. Friend is

absolutely right to say that, as a starting point, the cadet programme is important to encourage and open up opportunities in the armed forces. Some 20% of those who sign up for the cadets go on to become members of our armed forces, and the other 80% have an affinity and an understanding for them, and a desire to support them, which is also welcome.

*[Official Report, 27 November 2017, Vol. 632, c. 6.]*

*Letter of correction from Mr Ellwood:*

An error has been identified in the response that I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) during Questions to the Secretary of State for Defence.

The correct response should have been:

**Mr Ellwood:** I also pay tribute to my right hon. Friend's work on understanding the challenges we face with recruitment and retention. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that, as a starting point, the cadet programme is important to encourage and open up opportunities in the armed forces. **Some of those** who sign up for the cadets go on to become members of our armed forces, and **many others** have an affinity and an understanding for them, and a desire to support them, which is also welcome.



# ORAL ANSWERS

Tuesday 5 December 2017

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
<b>JUSTICE</b> .....	869	<b>JUSTICE—continued</b>	
Court System: Modernisation .....	885	Prison Officers: Safety.....	881
Exceptional Case Funding Scheme .....	883	Prisoner Rehabilitation: Sporting Activities .....	878
Female Offender Management .....	882	Prisons: Drones.....	880
Leaving the EU: UK Legal System .....	869	Prisons: Mobile Telephones .....	880
Legal Aid .....	871	Reoffending Rates: Custom House Building .....	875
Litigants in Person .....	876	Topical Questions .....	886
Prison Governors.....	879	Victims and Witnesses: Court Experience .....	873
Prison Officers .....	877	Youth Custody: Physical Restraint.....	884

# WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Tuesday 5 December 2017

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
<b>DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT</b> .....	45WS	<b>WALES</b> .....	45WS
Heritage Statement .....	45WS	Macur Review Report .....	45WS
<b>TREASURY</b> .....	45WS	<b>WORK AND PENSIONS</b> .....	46WS
Double Taxation Convention: UK and		Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer	
Swiss Federal Council.....	45WS	Affairs Council .....	46WS

# MINISTERIAL CORRECTION

Tuesday 5 December 2017

	<i>Col. No.</i>
<b>DEFENCE</b> .....	5MC
Cadet Units: State Schools .....	5MC

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons,*

**not later than  
Tuesday 12 December 2017**

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE  
PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

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## CONTENTS

Tuesday 5 December 2017

**Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 869] [see index inside back page]**

*Secretary of State for Justice*

**EU Exit Negotiations [Col. 893]**

*Answer to urgent question—(Mr Davis)*

**Report on Recent Terrorist Attacks [Col. 913]**

*Statement—(Amber Rudd)*

**Service Animals (Offences) [Col. 927]**

*Motion for leave to bring in Bill—(Sir Oliver Heald)—agreed to  
Bill presented, and read the First time*

**Opposition Day [6th allotted day]**

**Universal Credit Project Assessment Reviews [Col. 930]**

*Motion—(Debbie Abrahams)—agreed to*

**Petitions [Col. 1003]**

**Stroke Services [Col. 1004]**

*Debate on motion for Adjournment*

**Westminster Hall**

**Tolls on the Mersey Crossings [Col. 291WH]**

**Mineworkers' Pension Scheme [Col. 315WH]**

**City of Culture 2021: Swansea Bid [Col. 323WH]**

**Banking Sector: Fraudulent Accounts [Col. 345WH]**

**World AIDS Day 2017 [Col. 352WH]**

*General Debates*

**Written Statements [Col. 45WS]**

**Ministerial Correction [Col. 5MC]**

**Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]**

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