

**Wednesday
17 October 2018**

**Volume 647
No. 190**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Wednesday 17 October 2018

House of Commons

Wednesday 17 October 2018

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

SCOTLAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Leaving the EU: Devolution

1. **Brendan O'Hara** (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): What discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on the devolution of powers to the Scottish Parliament upon the UK leaving the EU. [907020]

3. **Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): What discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on the devolution of powers to the Scottish Parliament upon the UK leaving the EU. [907022]

6. **Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): What discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on the devolution of powers to the Scottish Parliament upon the UK leaving the EU. [907025]

9. **Mhairi Black** (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): What discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on the devolution of powers to the Scottish Parliament upon the UK leaving the EU. [907028]

12. **Kirsty Blackman** (Aberdeen North) (SNP): What discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on the devolution of powers to the Scottish Parliament upon the UK leaving the EU. [907031]

13. **Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): What discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on the devolution of powers to the Scottish Parliament upon the UK leaving the EU. [907032]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): The European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 confirmed that, where EU law intersects with devolved competence, those powers will flow directly to the devolved Administrations on exit day. This means that over 100 powers will go directly to the Scottish Parliament. We are also continuing to make progress in establishing common frameworks, which the Joint Ministerial Committee (EU Negotiations) discussed last week.

Brendan O'Hara: The Secretary of State is turning a blind eye to the depopulation crisis facing rural Scotland. His Government's refusal even to consider devolving immigration powers to the Scottish Parliament will cause further damage to these fragile communities. Will he explain to the people and businesses in my constituency how ending freedom of movement will help to solve that depopulation crisis?

David Mundell: The Smith commission, which was supported by the Scottish National party at the time, determined that immigration would not be devolved to the Scottish Parliament. I am acutely aware of issues surrounding depopulation and the demographic challenges. Indeed, I heard them mentioned directly in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. Migration is one part of the issue but, as I heard in his constituency, matters such as transport and housing are another part.

Patrick Grady: Is it not in fact the case that, by reappropriating powers to this Parliament without them going to Holyrood, he is the Secretary of State presiding over the biggest power grab since devolution began—not further devolution? Was his colleague Adam Tomkins correct this morning when he said that “Scottish Tories are unionists first and Conservatives second”? They never wanted the Scottish Parliament to succeed and now they are using Brexit to undermine it.

David Mundell: It is very clear that the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues want to break up our United Kingdom. I will defend our United Kingdom until my last breath.

Gavin Newlands: Not only have the Government taken the Scottish Government to court for trying to protect their own devolved powers; the Secretary of State is now saying that any measures offered to Scotland to reflect the overwhelming remain vote would cause him to consider his own position—a position confirmed this morning by Adam Tomkins as no idle threat made in the heat of the moment. Is he really surprised, therefore, that the Scottish people see this blatant Tory power grab for what it is, and will he follow through on his threat to go, and go now?

David Mundell: I make no apology for making it absolutely clear that the integrity of the United Kingdom is a red line for me and my Scottish Conservative colleagues in any deal on leaving the EU, and the position is exactly the same for our Prime Minister. I know that the preference of SNP Members would be a Brexit of the most disruptive kind, which they see as best able to take forward their cause.

Mhairi Black: The Migration Advisory Committee accepts the dangers to Scotland's labour force and economy under the current UK system. Sixty-four per cent. of Scottish voters now want to see immigration policy devolved to the Scottish Parliament. Given that we have seen the reality of the cruel system that the UK Government have implemented, why not give the Scottish Parliament the right to do things differently?

David Mundell: I made it clear in my earlier response that, when these matters were considered in depth by the Smith commission, it was agreed that immigration would not be devolved. At the recent Confederation of British Industry Scotland dinner, which was attended by the First Minister of Scotland, the director general of CBI Scotland made it clear that business did not support the devolution of immigration and having a separate immigration policy in Scotland.

Kirsty Blackman: If the Secretary of State really believes that he is “fighting Scotland's corner”, as he said in *Holyrood Magazine*, why is he supporting an

Agriculture Bill that will remove powers from the Scottish Parliament, and simultaneously failing to honour Tory promises on funding made to Scottish farmers?

David Mundell: Obviously, the hon. Lady did not see yesterday's announcement by the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs that there is going to be a review of convergence funding. No powers on agriculture are being removed from the Scottish Parliament, but there is a complete and utter lack of policy from the Scottish Government in relation to Scottish agriculture. They have brought forward no proposals for post-Brexit agriculture in Scotland.

Chris Stephens: Given the non-answers so far, can the Secretary of State tell us whether there are any circumstances in which he would support the devolution of powers to protect Scotland's interests after Brexit—or is it the case, given his threats to resign, that he would rather resign his own position than support any measure aimed at ensuring that Scotland is protected from a hard, right-wing Tory Brexit?

David Mundell: As far as I am aware, there is only one party in this Parliament that has so far declared that it will support a no-deal Brexit, and that is the SNP. Nicola Sturgeon was very clear on Monday—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Secretary of State has been asked a question. He is answering the question. In that context, a lot of finger pointing is, at the very least, discourteous to the Secretary of State.

David Mundell: Thank you, Mr Speaker. As you may be aware, on Monday, Nicola Sturgeon made it clear that she will order SNP MPs in this Parliament to vote for a no-deal Brexit. What they have to decide between now and then is whether they will blindly follow her through the Lobby or truly stand up for Scotland.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): With reference to the fairy tale of a power grab, more than 100 powers that are currently held in Brussels are to be transferred to Holyrood after breakfast—after Brexit, I mean. The sooner the better! Does my right hon. Friend agree that, far from removing powers from Scotland, leaving the EU will actually give the Scottish Parliament far more powers?

David Mundell: I will certainly use my best endeavours to ensure that those powers are transferred as soon after breakfast on the day we leave the EU as possible. My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Only the SNP would complain that the Scottish Parliament will have significantly more powers after we leave the EU than it does today.

Mr Speaker: There is an opportunity for the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) to come in on this question if he wants, because his question will not be reached. It is up to him.

14. [907033] **Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con):** Thank you, Mr Speaker. The devolution of significant amounts of welfare powers will represent a step change in the maturity of devolution in Scotland. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, in order for this to work for my constituents and his, it is absolutely vital that Scotland's two Governments work together properly?

David Mundell: Welfare is an area where there is a very good track record of the two Governments working together. We recently met in the joint ministerial group on welfare, which I co-chair, and we will do so again in the coming weeks. People in Scotland clearly want to see that, where the Scottish Parliament and Scottish Government are given additional powers, they use those powers.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend share my concern that north-east Scotland, the heartland of the UK fishing industry, received just 15% of grants made by the Scottish Government under the European maritime and fisheries fund? Can he assure me that, as we leave the EU, he will work with the Scottish Government to ensure that the fishing communities in the north-east get the funding they need to make the most of the sea of opportunity?

David Mundell: I absolutely share my hon. Friend's concern. As he has set out many times, as a champion of the fishing industry, it is of course the policy of the SNP Scottish Government to take Scotland right back into the common fisheries policy. It is our policy to leave the common fisheries policy but also to support the industry to take advantage of that sea of opportunity.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): We will leave the hated common fisheries policy, so does my right hon. Friend agree with me and the Scottish Fishermen's Federation that Brexit can lead to a fishing boom worth up to £2.7 billion to the economy? Does he share my concern that the Scottish Government's proposal to keep us locked into the CFP, with decisions being made in Brussels, will betray our fishermen and our coastal communities?

David Mundell: It is incomprehensible to me and to the nearly half a million SNP voters who voted to leave the EU that the SNP Scottish Government still propose taking Scotland back into the common fisheries policy.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that one potential devolution that the Government will never allow is for SNP Members to drag Scotland out of the UK against the will of the people, without even holding another referendum?

David Mundell: Mr Speaker, you have heard me say many times at the Dispatch Box that I want a second independence referendum taken off the table. What I did not mean was the solution of the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), which is that independence could somehow be declared without a referendum.

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): Holyrood will gain powers over agriculture after Brexit, but the Scottish Government have decided not to put a schedule into the Agriculture Bill. That is offensive and disrespectful to not only Scottish farmers, but my farmers in Northumberland who have cross-border farms. It will be incredibly difficult for them. Will my right hon. Friend support me in trying to encourage the Scottish Government to put a schedule into the Bill?

David Mundell: I think everybody outwith the SNP agrees that it would be preferable to proceed with such a schedule to the Bill, but Scottish farmers who speak

to me have one clear question: what is the Scottish Government's policy for agriculture post Brexit? The answer is that we just do not know.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): Over the weekend, the Secretary of State threatened to resign and almost typically managed to make a pig's ear out of it. Apparently he was so concerned that Scotland might join Northern Ireland in an outcome that would spare us the worst Brexit excesses that he would show them and go. Surely if anything requires his resignation, it is his inability to look after and protect the devolution settlement.

David Mundell: The hon. Gentleman and his hon. Friends have to look the people of Scotland in the eye and tell them why they are voting for a no-deal Brexit. Day after day, we hear from them how damaging that would be for the economy of Scotland, but on Monday Nicola Sturgeon ordered the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues to vote for it. He needs to show some backbone and stand up against her.

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): The Smith commission was signed up to by all five parties in the Scottish Parliament. Does my right hon. Friend believe that, instead of debating powers, the SNP Government should get on and make use of the powers they already have?

David Mundell: It is clear that the people of Scotland want to see the extensive powers that were devolved in the Scotland Act and the powers coming forward in relation to leaving the EU used, and agriculture, as we have just discussed, is a good example. The Scottish Parliament will have those powers, but we have no idea how the Scottish Government will use them.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): In the Secretary of State's first answer, he referred to progress at the JMC on the common frameworks, which will constrain the operation of devolved powers after Brexit. Can he update the House by saying in how many areas frameworks have been agreed, which they are and by which date he expects the remainder to be completed?

David Mundell: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that, under the European Union (Withdrawal) Act, the Government are obliged to inform Parliament on those matters, and a report will be brought forward in the very near future.

Tommy Sheppard: It sounds as if the Secretary of State does not know. The truth is that in only four of the 24 areas have frameworks been agreed, and it is now practically impossible for the exercise to be completed by 29 March. He has threatened to resign. This is something he should resign over but, if he does not resign, will he give an assurance today to rule out the use of section 12 orders to impose frameworks against the consent of a devolved Administration?

David Mundell: I am seeking to be helpful to the hon. Gentleman and respectful to Parliament. The Government are obliged to bring forward a report to Parliament—that is what it wishes—in which both his first and second questions will be answered.

Lesley Laird (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Lab): I ask for a moment of indulgence while I congratulate Kirkcaldy High School, which this week received the president's award from the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities as a rights-respecting UNICEF school. Well done to everyone there.

The Secretary of State claims that protecting the integrity of the UK is the most important thing to him. The invisible man in the Cabinet got a few headlines for himself this week by flip-flopping over his threat to resign: sources close to him claimed that he would resign, but he denied it yesterday. Let us be clear—is it yes or no? If there is a deal that creates a border in the Irish sea and undermines the Union, will the Secretary of State resign?

David Mundell: I am very surprised that the hon. Lady should touch on the issue of resignation, since her resignation from Fife Council was such an unmitigated disaster for the Scottish Labour party. Her colleagues on the Benches opposite may not be aware, but the Scottish Conservatives won her seat.

On the issue of a border down the Irish sea, it would not be acceptable to me or my Scottish Conservative colleagues.

Lesley Laird: It may have escaped the Secretary of State's notice, but that still leaves Labour in joint control of Fife Council.

The Secretary of State and his Government have just run out of ideas when it comes to Brexit, so let me give him a bit of advice: take a step further and support Labour's suggestion for a customs union. He says that protecting the Union is his top priority, but he was silent on English votes for English laws and he has made a mess of Brexit powers coming back to Scotland from Brussels. If he really wants to protect Scotland's place in the UK and stop a border in the Irish sea, he should back Labour's plan for a customs union—so will he?

David Mundell: What I am absolutely clear on is that, whatever kind of Brexit might be achieved, the worst possible alternative would be a Labour Government for this country.

RBS Branch Closures

2. **Danielle Rowley** (Midlothian) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with representatives of the Royal Bank of Scotland (RBS) on the potential effect on local communities of the proposed closure of RBS branches in Scotland. [907021]

11. **Rosie Cooper** (West Lancashire) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with representatives of the Royal Bank of Scotland (RBS) on the potential effect on local communities of the proposed closure of RBS branches in Scotland. [907030]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): With permission, I will answer Questions 2 and 11 together. Our position on branch closures is clear. These should be commercial decisions, not those for the interference of politicians, but equally, we do recognise some of the difficulties that constituents face when this

occurs. That is why we support the access to banking standard, which takes a number of steps both to support and to inform customers in that situation.

Danielle Rowley: RBS often says that, to make up for its pulling out of a town, the local post office will carry out the services. However, in Bonnyrigg in my constituency, the post office has shut as well, and now many businesses fear that they are going to have to close. What is the Secretary of State doing to stand up for local communities in Scotland?

Mel Stride: The hon. Lady raises a specific case of a closure of a post office in her constituency. I believe the Post Office is engaged in that particular matter but, on the general matter of post offices, they do provide a number of financial services, supported by the banking framework agreement, such that 99% of individual customers will have access for their financial needs and 95% of businesses likewise.

Mr Speaker: I call Rosie Cooper—let us hear from the hon. Lady.

Rosie Cooper: Question 11, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady's question has been grouped with Question 2, as the Minister advised, so we look forward to hearing from the hon. Lady on these important matters—she has now had time to think about it—now.

Rosie Cooper: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Sorry for the confusion.

Given that RBS is 63%-owned by the taxpayer and the majority of branch closures are in Scotland or the north-west of England, could the Minister tell us: what does the taxpayer get for their money if not banks and banking services?

Mel Stride: The hon. Lady is right to raise the issue of the taxpayer supporting the Royal Bank of Scotland to the tune of some tens of billions of pounds. It is right that the Government therefore expect the bank to show profitability and to come back into economic health. Our overarching principle is that the best way of achieving that is to leave commercial organisations such as the Royal Bank of Scotland to be in charge of their own affairs, rather than subject to political interference from Ministers.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it was wrong of the Royal Bank of Scotland to turn its back on rural areas such as Angus, specifically when online banking is simply not viable because the SNP Government in Edinburgh have not been fast enough at rolling out broadband?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend makes an important point about the speed of broadband roll-out. Of course, on the broadband issue, the Government in Westminster have recently made available £1 billion across the UK to stimulate market delivery of fibre and mobile coverage.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): Like rural Scotland, rural Cheshire has suffered from a number of branch closures that have left constituents without access

to services that can be provided only by banks. What can the Minister do to ensure that my constituents can access those services?

Mel Stride: As I have outlined, we support the access to banking standard, but post offices have also received considerable support from this Government and are able to provide a lot of the financial services that individuals and businesses require. In rural areas, for example, 99% of residents are within three miles of the nearest post office.

PIP Reassessment Cost

4. Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): If he will meet the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to discuss the potential cost to the public purse of the Government's reassessment of people who may be eligible for personal independence payments in Scotland. [907023]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): Yes.

Hugh Gaffney: The Labour party and the people of Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill, and of Scotland, all want PIP reassessments to be scrapped immediately. They are cruel, callous and entirely inhumane. Will the Secretary of State therefore agree that they should be scrapped?

David Mundell: I can advise the hon. Gentleman that the Scottish Government have had legislative competence over PIP since May 2017, as part of this Government's continued commitment to implement the Smith commission in full. At the Scottish Government's request, the UK Government will continue to be responsible for PIP until the Scottish Government are ready.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): On top of the misery that PIP reassessments are causing, by the end of the year the number of people on universal credit across Scotland will jump from 91,000 to almost half a million. The 13 Scottish Tory Members represent 82,000 people still to be moved on to universal credit, and even the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions now admits that many will find themselves worse off. Will the Secretary of State continue to let the poorest people in Scotland down, or will he have the gumption to resign unless this cliff-edge roll-out is sorted out?

David Mundell: Of course, the hon. Gentleman and others will have the opportunity to debate universal credit later today, but I am satisfied, in relation to my constituents in Scotland, that universal credit is the right approach that allows people to move into work, which is the best way out of poverty.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Every week, I am approached by constituents who have been threatened with having their PIP either taken away completely or reduced, which results in stress and has serious mental health impacts. Does the Secretary of State agree that the interviews are simply not fit for purpose and should be scrapped?

David Mundell: If the hon. Lady has specific cases, I know that the Department for Work and Pensions, which is always seeking to improve the process, will listen to what she has to say.

Scotch Whisky Industry

5. **Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on helping to develop the Scotch whisky industry. [907024]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): The Government are entirely committed to the Scottish whisky industry, which exported over 1.2 billion bottles in 2017, raising £4.3 billion for the UK economy. We have provided cuts and freezes in duty since 2013, with the result that the average bottle of Scottish whisky is now £1.19 cheaper than it would otherwise have been.

Alan Brown: Until Brexit, the biggest threat to the growth of the Scotch whisky industry was the right hon. Gentleman's Department using it as a cash cow. It is absolutely imperative that there is another freeze on whisky duty in the Budget. Can he confirm whether the Secretary of State for Scotland has made representations to Cabinet colleagues to call for a duty freeze?

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman has entirely overlooked the considerable support that we have already provided in duty cuts and freezes since 2013—a total of £4 billion. We will continue to support that vital sector, recognising its contribution to both the economy of Scotland and that of the wider United Kingdom.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): Over the past five years, the Scotch whisky industry has invested over £500 million in capital projects in Moray and across the country. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that shows how important a good Budget for Scotch whisky is for Scotland and the UK economy?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is entirely right. That is another example of why we should support the Scottish whisky industry. I have received many representations, not least from Conservative Members who represent Scottish constituencies, standing up for Scottish whisky and making sure that we make the investments we need going forward.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): The financial services sector is also critical for the Scottish economy and for my constituents in Edinburgh, but none of the Government's Brexit plans mention this service sector. What can the Minister say to the financial services sector in Edinburgh, and to my constituents whose jobs depend on it, about the Government's strategy for the service sector post Brexit?

Mr Speaker: With reference to whisky.

Mel Stride: If I interpret the question as relating to financial services specifically around whisky, Mr Speaker, the answer will be the same as for financial services generally. The Government are committed to achieving a Brexit deal with the EU27 that is in the interests of this country, that keeps trade flowing and that ensures we have an implementation period that will provide the opportunity for consistency and certainty going forward.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [907105] **Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 17 October.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Mrs Murray: In the public interest, will my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister publish in full all the Government's European Union exit modelling?

The Prime Minister: May I reassure my hon. Friend that we have confirmed that, when we bring forward the vote on the final deal, we will ensure that Parliament is presented with the appropriate analysis to make an informed decision? With negotiations ongoing, it would not be practical or sensible to set out the details of exactly how the Government will analyse the final deal, but we will set out our assumptions and methodology when we present the analysis to Parliament and the public.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I hope that the whole House will join me in paying tribute to Patricia Hollis, Baroness Hollis of Heigham, who died earlier this week. She was a tireless campaigner for social justice and played a pivotal role in defeating the cuts to tax credits this Government were imposing on low-paid workers. We on the Labour Benches will miss her dearly.

Given that the Prime Minister did not once mention Chequers either in her conference speech or in her statement to Parliament on Monday, does this mean the Chequers plan is now dead?

The Prime Minister: First, may I join the right hon. Gentleman, and I am sure the whole House, in expressing our sincere condolences to the family of Baroness Hollis? She was an outstanding parliamentarian. I am sure that Members on both sides of the House will remember how she was a dedicated champion for the poorest and most disadvantaged in our society.

The right hon. Gentleman asks if the Chequers plan is dead. The answer is no.

Jeremy Corbyn: Well, that is most interesting. The International Development Secretary and the Work and Pensions Secretary have both refused to say that they back the Chequers plan. Maybe the Prime Minister could share a pizza with them and see if that can sort it out. Will the Prime Minister confirm the Treasury legal advice given to Cabinet that, in the event of no deal, the Government would still have to pay the EU a divorce bill of £30 billion?

The Prime Minister: We have been very clear, throughout the negotiations in relation to the financial settlement that led to the figure of around £39 billion that appeared

following the December joint report, that this is a country that honours its legal obligations and we will do exactly that. But I would also remind Members that we have been very clear, as has the EU, that nothing is agreed until everything is agreed.

Jeremy Corbyn: Last week, 63 Conservative MPs wrote to the Chancellor to complain that Treasury forecasts based on Brexit negotiations are too negative. I am just waiting for them to write to say that the legal advice is too negative as well. In December, the Prime Minister signed an agreement with the EU, which stated:

“In the absence of agreed solutions, the United Kingdom will maintain full alignment with those rules of the internal market and the customs union.”

Will she confirm that this agreement still stands and that she signed up to it without any time limit?

The Prime Minister: If the right hon. Gentleman reads the December joint report, he will see very clearly that the first way to deal with the issue of the border between Northern Ireland and Ireland is through the future relationship. As I said to this House on Monday, we have made good progress on aspects of the future relationship based on the plan that we put forward in July. We then said that there could be some Northern Ireland-specific solutions—there are already Northern Ireland-specific arrangements that take place—and that failing that, we would look at those UK-wide solutions. We were clear then, and we are clear now, that the purpose of the backstop is to bridge the gap between the end of the implementation period and ensuring that the future relationship is in place. As we have said, I expect—and intend to work for—the future relationship to be in place by 1 January 2021.

Jeremy Corbyn: My question was that the Prime Minister signed an agreement that had no time limits attached to it. Does she stand by that or not? *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. We do not need heckling from either side. It is not in keeping with good order and demonstrations of respect, from whichever side it hails.

Jeremy Corbyn: It is very strange the way that every week, a Member hides over there, to shout and hurl abuse—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I know that I say it every week, but I say it again: the questions will be heard and the answers will be heard. That is the situation.

Jeremy Corbyn: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The car industry is clear that it needs a new customs union to secure investment in British manufacturing. Vauxhall recently said that it would continue to invest, but there are limits and:

“Those limits are customs barriers.”

Jobs are at risk. Why will the Prime Minister not back a customs union—supported not only by Labour and trade unions, but by businesses, and I suspect by a majority in this House—to protect those jobs?

The Prime Minister: What the automotive industry and indeed other industries such as aerospace have said is that they want to see frictionless trade across the

borders. Frictionless trade across our borders is exactly what lies at the heart of the free trade deal that is proposed in the Government’s plan, put forward after the Chequers meeting in July. That is what we are working to deliver for people in this country. We want to deliver a Brexit that delivers on the vote of the British people and ensures that we protect jobs and security. What would Labour deliver? They are hawking around. They think free movement could still continue. That will not deliver on the vote of the British people. They now want a second referendum, to go back to the British people and say, “Oh, we’re terribly sorry, we think you got it wrong.” There will be no second referendum; the people voted and this Government will deliver on it.

Jeremy Corbyn: My question was about investment in British industry. Jaguar Land Rover is holding off investment until it knows the terms of the deal. Jobs are at risk and manufacturers and skilled workers have little confidence in this Government, because they cannot even agree among themselves.

Last week, the Public Accounts Committee reported that the Department of Health

“could not assure us of its plans to safeguard the supply of medicines after the UK has exited the European Union”.

Does the Prime Minister dispute its assessment?

The Prime Minister: I think that the right hon. Gentleman was talking about the position in relation to a no-deal situation. The Department of Health is working, as are other Departments, to ensure that we have the plans in place, should it be the case that we end up in the position that we have no deal with the European Union. We continue to work for a good deal with the European Union—as I say, a deal that delivers on the Brexit vote but also protects jobs and livelihoods, and crucially protects the precious Union of the United Kingdom.

Jeremy Corbyn: The British Medical Association said that the NHS is woefully unprepared for this, and this week the pharmaceutical company AstraZeneca has suspended investments in Britain due to a lack of clarity over the future.

The Conservative party has spent two years arguing with itself instead of negotiating a deal in the public interest, and now, just days before the deadline, Conservative Members are still bickering among themselves. The Prime Minister and her Government are too weak and too divided to protect people’s jobs and our economy, or ensure there is no hard border in Northern Ireland—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Members are a little overexcited. Just calm down!

Jeremy Corbyn: The Prime Minister and her Government are clearly too weak and too divided to protect people’s jobs and our economy or to ensure there is no hard border in Northern Ireland, so she has a choice: she can continue to put the Tory party’s interests first, or she can listen to unions and businesses and put the interests of the people of Britain first. Which is it to be?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman has spoken in a number of his questions about protecting jobs. I note that he has said nothing about the

unemployment figures this week. I will tell him overall what this Government are delivering for the people of this country: the scrapping of the council borrowing cap, so that councils can build more homes for people; an end to austerity, so that people's hard work pays off; a freezing of fuel duty for a ninth year, so that there is more money in people's pockets; the lowest unemployment for 40 years; youth unemployment halved; and wages rising faster than at any time in a decade. Labour can play politics; the Conservatives deliver for the people of this country.

Hon. Members: More!

Mr Speaker: There will be more, and it will be from Mr Tim Loughton.

Q5. [907109] **Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): The Prime Minister is very familiar with my five-year campaign to extend civil partnerships to all couples, and my private Member's Bill has now completed its Committee stage, so I welcome her recent announcement that it is now Government policy, albeit without a timeline and with my having to find out about it by reading the press. Will she now support amendments to my Bill on Report in nine days as the quickest way to make equal civil partnerships a reality for the many thousands who want her to get on with it?

The Prime Minister: I am pleased that we are supporting my hon. Friend's proposal on civil partnerships. We are working with him on his private Member's Bill and will be supporting him on it. I understand that some small amendments are required, and officials will be discussing those with him.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): It is in all our interests—and in the interests of jobs, in particular—that the Prime Minister comes back from Brussels with the right deal. We will act as a constructive Opposition—the enemy is behind her. Yesterday, the former Conservative Prime Minister, Sir John Major, said that Brexit would leave the UK a poorer and weaker country. Previously, another Conservative party leader told the BBC that “People's jobs would be put at risk” as a result of Brexit. Does she agree with these statements?

The Prime Minister: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, the plan that we have put forward for our future relationship with the EU would protect jobs and livelihoods in this country and enable us to get not just that good trading relationship with the EU but good trading relationships around the rest of the world.

Ian Blackford: “People's jobs would be put at risk”—those are the words of this Prime Minister in June 2016. No Prime Minister should negotiate a deal that threatens jobs. She must accept responsibility and avoid an economic catastrophe. Prime Minister, go to Brussels, act in the interests of all citizens across the UK and negotiate to keep us in the single market and customs union. That will command a majority in the House of Commons. Does the Prime Minister not understand that staying in the single market and the customs union is the only deal that will get through this House?

The Prime Minister: As I have explained in the Chamber on a number of occasions, and will continue to explain, our proposal delivers on the referendum vote, but also ensures that we protect jobs and livelihoods across the United Kingdom. However if the right hon. Gentleman is interested in ensuring that the interests of everyone in Scotland are taken into account in the negotiations that we undertake, he should join us in recognising the importance of leaving the common fisheries policy.

Q8. [907112] **Sir Patrick McLoughlin** (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): The vast majority of people in the United Kingdom will wish the Prime Minister well in the very tricky negotiations that she must undertake, which no other Prime Minister has had to do in our history. Will she ensure that the outcome of those negotiations will allow us to continue to attract the levels of inward investment that we have been attracting, which have caused unemployment to fall by more than 1 million people in the last six years?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I thank him for raising that issue. Inward investment in the UK is important because it supports jobs here, and we want to ensure that we remain an attractive place for that investment. We also want to encourage it through the deals that we are doing with countries around the world. Free trade deals mean greater choice, lower prices for British consumers, more export opportunities for British businesses, and increased investment here in the UK. Leaving the European Union gives us an opportunity to forge even better relationships and even better connections with the rest of the world, to encourage that inward investment and bring yet more jobs to the UK.

Q2. [907106] **Steve McCabe** (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Even the Prime Minister's fiercest critics—I believe she has a few—must be full of admiration for the way in which she manages her diabetic condition and holds down such a tough and demanding job. I understand that she benefits from a FreeStyle Libre glucose monitoring system. Wouldn't it be nice if she did something to make that benefit available to the half a million people who are denied it because of NHS rationing? Perhaps we could call it “help for the many, not the few”.

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. I do use a FreeStyle Libre, and it is now available on the national health service, but it is not the only means of continuous glucose monitoring that is available on the NHS. Yesterday I saw a letter from a child—a young girl—who had started on the FreeStyle Libre, but, because of the hypos that she had been having, had been moved to a different glucose monitoring system. There is no one system that is right for everyone; what is important is that those systems are now available on the NHS.

Q9. [907113] **Steve Double** (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): The Government's announcement of a pilot scheme for seasonal agricultural workers has been warmly welcomed by fruit and vegetable farmers in Cornwall and, indeed, across the country, but that is not the only sector that relies heavily on seasonal migrant workers. The tourism and hospitality sector is anxious to be able to continue to access its seasonal workforce after we have left the

EU. What action are the Government taking to ensure that the tourism sector, which is so important to our economy, will still be able to access the workforce that it needs, and will my right hon. Friend consider a seasonal workers scheme for that sector?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting the seasonal workers pilot scheme that we have introduced. The horticultural sector is a particular British success story. Over the last 20 years we have seen a significant growth in soft fruit production: an increase of more than 130%. We have made clear that we are piloting the scheme and will assess how it will work. Obviously we will announce further details of the overall immigration policy that we have proposed, but we will ensure that we recognise the needs of the British economy.

Q3. [907107] **Alex Norris** (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Yesterday, Nottingham Citizens published a report on hate crime in our schools, which it highlighted as a growing issue. I was particularly struck by the lack of awareness among the children who were surveyed of what actually constitutes a hate crime. We have failed those children by not yet properly arming them with the knowledge and skills that will enable them to thrive in this challenging world. Will the Prime Minister meet me, and a delegation of young people from my city, to discuss how to change that?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman has raised a very important issue about hate crime, and we have been taking a number of steps over recent years. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has published an updated action plan, and I suggest that the hon. Gentleman and those young people meet the Home Secretary to discuss how that action plan can help to address the issues raised.

Q11. [907115] **Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Our joint Health and Social Care and Housing, Communities and Local Government Committees inquiry into the future funding of adult social care recommended a social insurance system of the type that has been so successful in Germany. Will the Prime Minister give her fullest consideration to this solution, which would mean that everyone is protected from the potentially catastrophic costs of care?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend and the health and the local government Select Committees for their work on this important issue. It is important that we get social care on a sustainable footing for the future and alleviate the short-term pressures on both the social care and health systems. Obviously we have given more money to councils, but we will be publishing a Green Paper later this year setting out proposals for reform. It will look across the board at a number of proposals that have been put forward in this area, and we will certainly consider those put forward by the Committee.

Q4. [907108] **Ian C. Lucas** (Wrexham) (Lab): Pensioners over 75 face having to find an extra £150.50 every year if current proposals to take away free TV licences come to fruition. Will the Prime Minister take responsibility for this policy, speak to the BBC and find a solution that does not pickpocket pensioners?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Gentleman knows, the arrangements for the free licences change were part of the last BBC settlement. The money is being made available to the BBC and it will take decisions on how it operates.

Q13. [907117] **Simon Hoare** (North Dorset) (Con): It is extraordinary that the Labour party has nothing to say about the good news of the fall in unemployment—falling by 50,000, and now at the lowest rate in my lifetime. More importantly I would suggest, wages are growing. That is particularly good news in constituencies such as North Dorset, where incomes are below the national average. Does my right hon. Friend agree that thousands of families across our country are now benefitting from the security of a regular pay packet and our balanced Tory approach to the economy?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the excellent news on employment: employment at a near record high, unemployment at its lowest rate since the 1970s, youth unemployment, as I said earlier, halved under this Government and at a new record low, and real wages rising. As my hon. Friend says, what that means is more people with the security of a job, more people with a regular salary, more people able to support their families. We are only able to ensure that that takes place by having a balanced approach to the economy, and that is the Conservative way.

Q6. [907110] **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The Bedouin community of Khan al-Ahmar in the occupied Palestinian territories faces imminent demolition and is currently being swamped with sewage from the nearby settlement of Kfar Adumim. Just this morning Israeli forces have tasered and pepper-sprayed activists there. Will the Prime Minister make it clear to the Prime Minister of Israel that this is occupied territory that these are refugees—protected people whose forcible removal would constitute, as the United Nations has stated, a war crime?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Middle East met the Israeli ambassador on 11 October. He made clear the UK's deep concerns about Israel's planned demolition of the village of Khan al-Ahmar. Its demolition would be a major blow to the prospect of a two-state solution with Jerusalem as a shared capital, and I once again call on the Israeli Government not to go ahead with its plan to demolish the village, including its school, and displace its residents.

Q14. [907118] **Mrs Kemi Badenoch** (Saffron Walden) (Con): My constituent Elliot Peters died earlier this year from hyperammonemia aged just 14. His parents, Holly and Andy Storey, are understandably devastated. Elliot's condition was not diagnosed early enough; by the time he was placed on dialysis it was too late. Will the Prime Minister meet me and Elliot's parents to discuss raising awareness of the condition and adding hyperammonemia testing to A&E departments when a patient presents symptoms?

The Prime Minister: This is an extremely tragic case, and I offer my sincere condolences to Elliot's family and friends. I understand that the condition is associated with an inherited metabolic condition. Some of these

conditions are very rare and staff are not always on the lookout for symptoms of such rare conditions, but we are committed to ensuring that the NHS always seeks to learn when things go wrong, to ensure that such tragic events can be prevented for future parents. I am sure that a Minister from the Department of Health and Social Care will be happy to meet my hon. Friend and Elliot's parents to discuss this.

Q7. [907111] **Pete Wishart** (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): In the face of clear breaches of electoral law where the Vote Leave campaign might just have cheated its way to victory, the police refuse to undertake a criminal investigation because of what they say are "political sensitivities". This comes on top of all the issues of unaccounted dark money sustaining the Scottish Conservatives. Does the Prime Minister believe that our electoral laws are fit for purpose, and what will she personally do to ensure that our democracy is defended from those who would seek to circumvent it?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Gentleman will know, the Electoral Commission is an independent regulator, accountable to Parliament and not to the Government. There is a very important constitutional principle in this country that politicians do not interfere with police investigations, and that everyone is innocent until proven guilty in a court of law, but we will be considering the wider implications for Government policy. We will review very carefully the Electoral Commission's recent report on digital campaigning and the Information Commissioner's recommendations on the use of data in politics. Also, the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee is conducting an inquiry, and we will look at its recommendations when it concludes. As regards the vote in the referendum, I must remind the hon. Gentleman that 17.4 million people voted to leave the EU, on a turnout of three quarters of the electorate, and it is up to this Parliament and this Government to deliver on that mandate.

Q15. [907119] **Alan Mak** (Havant) (Con): I welcome the Government's extra funding for our NHS. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that some of this new money is used to improve and upgrade NHS technology, which can both save more lives and improve patient care?

The Prime Minister: First, I should like to thank my hon. Friend for his report on the use of technology in the NHS. We are dedicated to using this new funding to support technology transformation and modernisation, and capital funding is being provided to the NHS to upgrade equipment and to construct new buildings and refurbish existing ones. In the 10-year plan, we want to see the NHS embracing the opportunities of technology so that we can not only improve patient care but save more lives and deliver healthcare more efficiently.

Q10. [907114] **Siobhain McDonagh** (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): In Mitcham and Morden, Brexit means that the Wilson hospital will not reopen, after funders pulled out due to economic uncertainty. Goodness knows how many communities are now going to lose their health centres and GP surgeries. We must have missed that Brexit bus. Will the Prime Minister give Mitcham and

Morden a people's vote on Brexit so that we can save our hospital, or will she today guarantee the reopening of the Wilson?

The Prime Minister: As we announced earlier this year, we have asked the NHS to produce a 10-year plan, and we will be providing a multi-year funding settlement for the NHS. Within that, we are able to provide extra money to the NHS as a result of not sending vast amounts of money to the European Union every year when we leave the European Union. That is an advantage of Brexit.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Will the Prime Minister join me in acknowledging the tremendous amount of hard work being done by the Thame remembrance project in my constituency? Three hundred people have travelled 150,000 miles to commemorate all the 212 who lost their lives in various conflicts.

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to join my hon. Friend in commending all those who have undertaken those journeys to ensure that that remembrance continues. It is important that we are able to recognise the contributions that people have made in conflict.

Q12. [907116] **Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): The Prime Minister will be only too well aware that people living in the remote highlands and islands are being penalised by extra charges for the delivery of goods and utilities. Indeed, I would say that this is a wholly unfair geography tax on my constituents. May I appeal to her to consider and look favourably upon the proposal that a royal commission be set up to look into these extra charges and into how they could be eliminated?

The Prime Minister: We have taken the price of parcel surcharges seriously, including those for more remote constituencies. We set up the consumer protection partnership to bring together various consumer bodies from the advice and enforcement world to look at the transparency, accuracy, level and fairness of delivery charges. I am sure that the relevant Minister from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy will be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss the matter further.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): Could I ask my right hon. Friend to impress upon our European friends two points that I hope the House will think reasonable and practical? The first is that the European Union may not break apart the Union of the United Kingdom, and the second is that the EU may not direct how we regulate our economy and govern ourselves after we have left the European Union.

The Prime Minister: Certainly, I am very clear that when we have left the European Union we will be taking decisions here in the United Kingdom on all the issues that were previously decided in the European Union. We will be taking control of our laws, our money and our borders. On my hon. Friend's first point, I made it clear earlier this year, have continued to make it clear and will carry on making it clear that we will not accept any proposals that would effectively break up the United Kingdom.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): Given that nothing is agreed until everything is agreed, does the Prime Minister accept that it would be difficult for the House to be asked to confirm a legally binding withdrawal agreement without having clear assurances and some precision about the details of the future trading relationship?

The Prime Minister: I agree with the right hon. Gentleman. As I have always said, when we bring the withdrawal agreement package back to the House, it is important that Members are able not only to consider the withdrawal agreement, but to have sufficient detail about all aspects of the future relationship. The trading relationship is important, but our future security relationship, for both internal and external security and other issues, is also of importance. It is also important to me that there is a linkage between that future relationship and the withdrawal agreement.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): Not long ago, we had the horror of three pigs' heads being left outside a Muslim community centre in Solihull. Then English Defence League thugs came to my proud, multicultural town, but we turned our backs on them. In the light of such events, will the Prime Minister join me in utterly condemning the actions of a Solihull Green councillor, as reported in the *Birmingham Mail*, who has written a guide to attracting and tricking British National party voters? There is no place for pandering to racism in my town or in our politics.

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. There is no place in our society for pandering to racism of any sort, and that message should be sent out clearly by the whole House. He referred to what happened at one of his local mosques. The Home Secretary has been pleased to make extra money available for the security of places of worship, because we sadly see places of worship of different faiths being subjected to attacks all too often. However, my hon. Friend's key point that there is no place for racism in our society is absolutely right.

Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): The Work and Pensions Committee heard evidence that the lack of automatic split payments for universal credit means that women are being trapped in abusive relationships. That absolutely disgusts me, but how does it make the Prime Minister feel?

The Prime Minister: We take the issue of domestic violence and abusive relationships very seriously indeed. Split payments obviously are available when they are the right thing for couples, but we need to take a sensitive approach to cases on an individual basis. We all want to ensure that women in abusive relationships are getting the support that they need, and we should send a message of clear condemnation of that abuse from across this House.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): The next time shroud-waving EU negotiators claim that a hard border is necessary on the island of Ireland, will the Prime Minister kindly ask them who would actually construct it? The Irish certainly will not and the British certainly will not, so unless the EU army plans to march in and build it, it surely can never happen.

The Prime Minister: I say to my right hon. Friend that we are all working to ensure that there will be no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland. That is the clear commitment of the United Kingdom Government as agreed by the European Union when we signed the December joint report.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): My constituent Matthew Hedges, a young PhD student, has been held in a jail in the United Arab Emirates for more than five months, and this week he was charged with spying. Will the Prime Minister ensure that her Government make it quite clear to the UAE that Matt was in the country to do academic research, and nothing more? Will she also ensure that he receives full consular and legal support, and a fair trial, so that he can return to his wife, Dani, in England as soon as possible?

The Prime Minister: Obviously this is a very difficult and distressing time for Mr Hedges and his family. Foreign Office officials are supporting Mr Hedges and his family, and they have raised the case with the Emiratis at the highest levels. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has personally raised this case with his Emirati counterpart. We are in regular contact with the Emiratis regarding Mr Hedges's health and wellbeing, and we continue to push for consular access to ensure that he is given the support he needs.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): In welcoming the Japanese Prime Minister's suggestion that we can join the Trans-Pacific Partnership when we leave the EU, and in wishing my right hon. Friend well in the upcoming negotiations, will she please confirm that our joining and fully participating in the TPP will not be hindered by the common rulebook of the Chequers agreement and that the whole United Kingdom will benefit?

The Prime Minister: I have been pleased to discuss our potential membership of the TPP with the former Australian Prime Minister and with the Japanese Prime Minister. I am pleased that the Australian Government and the Japanese Government are welcoming us in joining the TPP. One of the issues we looked at when we put forward our proposals for our future trading relationship with the European Union was precisely whether it would mean we cannot join the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership—the CPTPP. I am happy to reassure my hon. Friend that we would be able to join the CPTPP under the relationship proposed in the Government's plan.

Teresa Pearce (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): My constituent came to see me earlier this year about being sexually harassed at work by a co-worker. Despite many months of meetings with her human resources department and line management, she has been treated like the problem rather than the victim. Can the Prime Minister advise me on what I can do to help my constituent to return to work and feel safe when her employer is this House?

The Prime Minister: It is important that everybody is treated with dignity and respect in their workplace. There is no place for bullying, sexual harassment or abuse in any workplace, including this Parliament. I am

sure we are all very concerned about Dame Laura Cox's report. We have been working on this issue here in this House, and I particularly commend my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House, who has been working tirelessly to try to change our culture and practices. I hope there will be a very serious, very full and proper response to Dame Laura Cox's report. This should worry all of us, and I want to see a situation where the constituent of the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Teresa Pearce) is able to come to work in this House and be treated with dignity and respect, and not be subject to bullying, harassment or abuse.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): The UK Agriculture Bill is currently before this House. Wales, England and Northern Ireland are part of the Bill but, due to the Scottish National party, Scotland is excluded and isolated. Will my right hon. Friend commit this Government to working with all parties to deliver an Agriculture Bill that guarantees that Scotland and my constituents are not left behind?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises a very important point, and I am happy to give him the assurance that we will work with parties in this House to ensure that Scotland is not left behind and that we have an Agriculture Bill that actually works for all of us and for all our agricultural sector.

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Ind): The Prime Minister has an admirable sense of duty, so will she be honest about Brexit? There is now only one viable option in the short term that can reconcile the referendum result with

the interests of all parts of the United Kingdom, with the genuine concerns of many Members on both sides of the House about the impact of a flawed deal or no deal, with our communities and with Labour's tests. We should join the European Free Trade Association and the European economic area and seek EU agreement to remain in the customs union for a specified period from the date we leave. We should make it clear that, on joining the EEA, we will exercise our right to put an emergency brake on the free movement of labour. It may not be the perfect option, but our only consideration now should be the national interest.

Mr Speaker: We have got the drift, and we are grateful.

The Prime Minister: The only consideration for this Government is the national interest. That is why we have put forward a proposal that delivers on the vote of the referendum; that ensures that we leave the European Union on 29 March 2019 and will no longer send vast sums of money annually to the European Union; that ensures we will take control of our laws and borders; that ensures there will not be the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice in this country; that ensures that free movement will end; and that also protects jobs and livelihoods, and protects the Union of the United Kingdom. That is in the national interest and that is what the Government have proposed.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order.

Point of Order

12.41 pm

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek your guidance as to whether you have received notification from the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions that she will be making an oral statement on the employment and support allowance underpayments figures released this morning. The figures show that 180,000 ill and disabled people were underpaid by the Government—by almost £1 billion. That is significantly more than the 70,000 the DWP claimed were initially affected. I would be grateful for your guidance on how Members might have the opportunity to question the Secretary of State on these figures, as just under 200,000 disabled people may be affected.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her attempted point of order and for her courtesy in giving me advance notice of her intention to raise it. The short answer is that I have received no indication from a member of the Government of an intention to make an oral statement on this matter today or, indeed, imminently at all. Of course, a very important debate is to take place now. Whether she can use her legendary guile to highlight this matter while remaining within the terms of order is a test for her and perhaps also for others—that remains to be seen. The Secretary of State, who is in the Chamber, will have heard what has been said, and I feel sure that if the hon. Lady is persistent in seeking to raise this matter, there may be opportunities to do so in the coming days. I know she is new to the House, but she has already acquired great experience in that short time and she will know that there are mechanisms that enable Members to secure the presence of Ministers in the Chamber. We will leave it there for now.

If there are no further points of order, we come to the ten-minute rule motion, for which the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) has been patiently waiting.

Collective Defined Contribution Pension Schemes

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

12.43 pm

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to enable the establishment of collective defined contribution pension schemes; and for connected purposes.

Having worked as a solicitor specialising in pensions law for the best part of a decade before being elected to represent East Renfrewshire—yes, that was as exciting as it sounds—and as a member of the all-party group on pensions, I believe that the pension system is one of this country's great achievements. Throughout the decades, both state and workplace pensions have existed to provide for people's retirement, and to give them a comfortable and dignified later life. But over that long history there have also been times of great change. As circumstances change, as we live longer, and as new models and new approaches develop, the way we make that provision for people's retirement has changed. This Bill is about the dry business of reform of private pensions and fiscal stability in a globalised complex business environment, but it is also about the 140,000 men and women working for Royal Mail across the United Kingdom, including the 143 in East Renfrewshire who serve more than 30,000 households from delivery offices in Barrhead, Clarkston and Newton Mearns, and ensuring that they get the best possible outcome in retirement.

Royal Mail currently operates a defined-benefit scheme, but as life expectancies have risen and the regulatory burden has increased, the risks and volatility inherent in a defined-benefit scheme, which provides a guaranteed level of benefits on retirement, are increasingly unaffordable. At the same time, defined-contribution schemes, in which the level of retirement provision is linked to the "pot" saved during the accumulation phase, shift pretty much the entire burden of risk towards the employee. For some time, the industry has toyed with a middle way. That is what the Bill is about.

Royal Mail and the Communication Workers Union have agreed in principle to introduce for the first time in the UK a new kind of pension scheme: a collective defined-contribution scheme, or CDC. The fact that this innovative development has come as a result of co-operation between employer and union is a testament to the power of constructive industrial relations in benefiting company and workforce. As a Scottish Conservative, I know that constructive action is more effective than needless confrontation, and the work of Royal Mail and the CWU in developing the CDC proposal bears that out. Indeed, I hope that this kind of positive employer behaviour and positive trade unionism can serve as an example to businesses and trade unions up and down the country. I have been greatly impressed by the modern, proactive approach to the issue taken by the CWU, and its work does the union great credit.

CDCs claim the much needed middle ground between defined-benefit schemes and defined-contribution schemes, balancing in a slightly more even way the risks, rights and responsibilities between employer and employee. That should mean higher-quality pensions that are

affordable and sustainable for all involved. Although contributions, rather than benefits, are defined in CDCs, their collective aspect means that risks arising from matters such as longevity, investment and inflation are shared collectively, rather than borne by each individual member.

In an age of increased flexibility and choice, the flip from passive saver to engaged retiree can be difficult and the choice of retirement products confusing. Traditionally, annuities have offered poor value, while drawdown provides higher returns and is less reliant on market conditions at one snapshot, but the individual bears the ongoing investment risk and could exhaust their pot if they miscalculate their own longevity. If someone has a defined-contribution scheme, they effectively act as their own actuary and investment consultant or—more likely—they take a very low level of guidance on approaching retirement, having spent their entire working life invested in a default fund. That affects the level of their retirement saving.

Supporters of CDC schemes argue that they can deliver higher returns than traditional money-purchase schemes for the same level of contributions, partly because CDC pension pots would not need to take as cautious an investment approach as those in more conventional defined-contribution schemes. The need to de-risk in the years leading up to retirement to protect against a sudden drop in pot value is removed in a collective scheme. A report by the Work and Pensions Committee, which has joined the growing calls from employers, unions and others for action to allow CDCs to be established, has said that such enhanced freedom of investment could also benefit the wider economy, as CDC schemes invest more heavily in more innovative firms. It is clear that CDCs would offer major advantages for employees, compared with defined-contribution pensions. Understandably, unions and workers oppose the closure of defined-benefit schemes, but the reality is that were they to continue to open, many employers would go under and jobs would be lost.

In my seven years in practice, I advised a range of employers and trustee boards on the closure of dozens of schemes. In every case, the company in question made the same justification: the defined-benefit scheme was unaffordable and unsustainable in terms of cost and risk. Many such schemes are wholly legacy arrangements, often found in the industries least able to sustain them. Likewise, we must not ignore the fact that when a defined-benefit scheme becomes more and more of a burden on an employer, it restricts what else that employer can do. It is a drag on investment and a drag on the economy. Deficit-repair contributions and high levels of ongoing pensionable salary contributions reduce the ability to invest and to increase pay.

We need a solution that works for both employee and employer, and that is what I believe CDCs such as the one proposed by Royal Mail and the CWU to be. It would share the risks in a way that is fair and responsible. People might wonder why CDCs have not already taken off, why Royal Mail has not just gone ahead already or, indeed, why half the major employers in the UK are not rushing to set up CDC schemes. The reason is quite simply that they are not really possible under the current legislative framework. Innovative schemes of this kind cannot operate in the UK without primary legislation. Because of the way parts of the framework work,

particularly in relation to the statutory funding regime, an attempt to establish a CDC would run into all kinds of practical difficulties.

There have been calls to use the Pension Schemes Act 2015 or the Pensions Act 2011 to introduce CDCs, but those pieces of legislation are bound up with various other issues. I firmly believe that the best approach is to introduce clear primary legislation specifically aimed at the introduction of CDCs of the kind proposed by Royal Mail and the CWU.

CDC pension schemes already operate in countries such as the Netherlands, Canada and Denmark, and we can learn from that experience—both good and bad. I am pleased that the UK Government have recognised that. The UK Government's pension reforms, and automatic enrolment in particular, have been hugely successful, and I am glad that the Government have recognised that the introduction of these innovative and desirable pension schemes would build on that great success, but they are not a silver bullet. There are questions and considerations regarding the practical operation and scheme design, but that is not a reason simply to sit on our hands when employers and employee representative bodies wish to look seriously as this option for workplace pension saving. We should not be fooled into thinking that they are a magic solution to all problems—they are not—but they are a serious, credible and valid option that this Government should legislate to permit.

I very much welcome the announcement by the pensions Minister of a consultation this autumn on the introduction of CDC pensions—although I did kind of expect it to have been brought forward already—and I hope that the Government can make progress on that consultation as soon as possible. I hope that, by bringing in this Bill today, I can help to encourage that process along and give the Minister a helpful nudge along the way.

As a Conservative, I do not believe that we should allow the state and regulation to get in the way of employers and employees working together to develop an innovative solution that works to their mutual benefit. We should institute this common-sense, free market reform, so that this union-backed solution to a 21st century business problem can progress. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) was not seeking to contribute on this matter, was he?

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con) *indicated dissent.*

Mr Speaker: No. The hon. Gentleman was just taking some exercise. We are very grateful to him—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Vale of Clwyd (Chris Ruane) says that he is standing up for himself. Well, people often do not know whether or not I am standing up.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Paul Masterton, John Lamont, Kirstene Hair, Nigel Mills, Richard Graham and Frank Field present the Bill.

Paul Masterton accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November, and to be printed (Bill 274).

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In the urgent question on clinical waste incineration yesterday, in response to my question, the Minister for Health, the hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Stephen Barclay), assured me that the TUPE process was being pursued for my constituents in Normanton where they have lost the contract for NHS waste. However, I have heard from some of those constituents today that they have been told that they will not be TUPE-ed and that no process is being followed. This is clearly a very serious concern, given that we would expect there to be both legal and moral obligations towards hardworking staff who have great expertise and experience in waste management. Have you heard anything from the Department of Health and Social Care or the Minister about changing the answer that I was given yesterday, or about anything that has changed since?

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the right hon. Lady for her point of order. The short answer is that, no, I have had no indication that a Minister intends to come to the House to correct the record. As she will be well aware, every Member of this House, including every Minister, is responsible for the accuracy of what he or she says in this place. If it is thought that an error has been made, it is the responsibility of the erring Member to put the record straight. May I politely suggest that the right hon. Lady seeks to engage with the Minister today? She may well find that that provides some satisfaction. If that turns out not to be the case, I know of no Member more versatile and experienced in this place in ensuring that what she wants to be aired in the Chamber is aired in the Chamber. This matter will have to be resolved sooner rather than later—either privately or publicly. I hope that that is helpful to her.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Since I came into this House, I have campaigned on greater access to off-patent drugs for people with the most serious conditions. In recent years, the drug repurposing group has produced a very important report on this, and many people are waiting to see whether the Government will act on its recommendations. I put in a written question to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, and the response I got was simply that there would be a Government response in due course. That was disappointing to many people. Mr Speaker, can you advise me on how I might get a more precise answer to the question?

Mr Speaker: Well, the opportunities available to the hon. Gentleman are very real. [*Interruption.*] They are almost endless, as the hon. Member for Vale of Clwyd (Chris Ruane) chunters from a sedentary position with due mindfulness of what he speaks. First, the hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) can table further questions to try to extract the information that he seeks and, secondly, if he is still dissatisfied he can of course seek an Adjournment debate on the matter. Who knows? He might find that his application for an Adjournment debate, which would give him an opportunity for concentrated focus on the subject and engagement with the responsible Minister, would bear fruit. I think we will leave it there for now. I hope that that is helpful to the hon. Gentleman and that he feels enlightened and inspired.

Opposition Day

[17TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Universal Credit

12.56 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (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 following papers be laid before Parliament: any briefing papers or analysis provided to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions since 8 January 2018 on the impact of the roll-out of universal credit on recipients' and household income and on benefits debts.

Universal credit, the Government's flagship social security programme, has been beset by flaws in its design and delivery. It is causing immense hardship for many people wherever it is rolled out. It is hard to believe now, but universal credit was designed to lift people out of poverty and smooth the transition into work to ensure that it always pays. The reality is that universal credit is a vehicle for cuts: cuts in support for families with a disabled child for whom the basic rate of support is half what it is in tax credits; cuts in support for disabled people in work, such as the disabled person who wrote to us saying that they are more than £300 a month worse off since switching from claiming working tax credits; and cuts in support for lone parents bringing up children, who will get more than £20 a week less on average, with many losing far more.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is absolutely right to start with the issue on how universal credit is impacting on those with disabilities, the vulnerable and the unwell. I have a constituent who is caring for her disabled daughter and who has her own mental health problems. She was given the wrong advice by the Department for Work and Pensions and was left with £1,000 of rent arrears and universal credit not paid. What a shambles this policy is.

Margaret Greenwood: My hon. Friend makes the point so clearly: what a shambles and what a hardship for that family.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con) *rose*—

Margaret Greenwood: Let me make some progress.

Overall, 3.2 million families with children could lose around £50 a week. People are worried, but there is no clarity from the Government. The Prime Minister told this House that no one would be worse off, yet *The Times* reported that the Secretary of State told Cabinet colleagues that households could lose up to £200 a month. Being forced to manage on a low income that is then cut still further means tough choices for the families affected. The DWP's own survey of claimants published in June showed that nearly half of new universal credit claimants are falling behind with bills. Even six months later, four in 10 are still struggling to cope financially.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Margaret Greenwood: I will make some progress and then I will take some interventions.

For more than a year now, Opposition Members have been calling on the Government to address the policy's many flaws. I am talking about: the insistence on digital by default when many people trying to make a claim are either not able to use IT or do not have access to it; the monthly payment in arrears when so many people on low incomes are used to being paid fortnightly or even weekly; its inability to cope with fluctuating income that is part and parcel of life on low-paid, insecure work or self-employment; and the payment to a single person in a household that can make it more difficult for someone suffering domestic violence to leave an abusive relationship.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. Does she agree, first, that we should call a halt to this process; secondly, that many people have been driven into the hands of money lenders; thirdly, that many people have found themselves in rent arrears; and, fourthly, that usage of food banks has gone up as a result of this policy?

Margaret Greenwood: My hon. Friend makes a number of pertinent points. He is absolutely right to call on the Government to halt the roll-out of universal credit.

Other flaws include: the online journal in which people have to record the jobs that they have spent 35 hours a week applying for, but which work coaches often struggle to find the time to monitor; and the five-week wait for a payment at the start of a claim. According to the latest Government figures, 17% of claims were not paid in full and on time, and one person in 10 did not receive any payment at all. Groups such as carers or parents who need help with childcare are more likely than others to have to wait for their first payment. The latest figures show that only a third of people who are ill or disabled were paid on time.

Huw Merriman: Will the hon. Lady also spare some time to talk about the 700,000 people who will be better off by an average of £285 a month under universal credit, as well as those who find work through it?

Margaret Greenwood: The hon. Gentleman is getting ahead of himself, because there is no evidence that the Government can demonstrate whether universal credit gets people into work.

The Government's answer to the delays was to provide advances, but they have to be paid back, as do debts for utility bills, council tax or rent arrears that people will probably have built up while waiting. The maximum percentage that can be taken out of universal credit for repayments is 40%. How is someone already trying to manage on such low income supposed to cope when such a large slice of their support is taken away at the source? And yet—in the face of all of the evidence—the Government have insisted on pressing ahead and accelerating the roll-out of universal credit since May this year, at the same time as carrying out a rapid programme of closing one in 10 jobcentres. The Government plan to increase the workload of work coaches fourfold and that of case managers sixfold as the roll-out continues. Staff are under constant pressure

and are switched back and forth between processing claims and answering phone calls about problems with them.

From next year things are set to get a whole lot worse, as the Government prepare to embark on the next phase of universal credit—so-called managed migration—which will require almost 3 million people claiming the benefits that universal credit is replacing, such as tax credits and employment and support allowance, to make a new claim for universal credit instead. As hon. Members are aware, there is nothing managed about it.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the real issues is that, under this migration system, people who are in work are becoming worse off? How on earth can a system encourage work when it makes people in work worse off?

Margaret Greenwood: My hon. Friend hits the nail on the head; he is absolutely right to raise that issue.

The Government plan to place the entire burden on the claimants themselves to successfully make a claim, rather than the DWP automatically transferring them across. Under the Government's regulations—as currently drafted—a letter will drop through the letterbox on to the mat, telling people that their existing claim will end and that they will have a month to make a new claim for universal credit. Labour believes that it is without precedent for a UK Government to place all the responsibility of making a claim on the millions of individuals who the Government know to be in need, putting people at risk of falling out of the system altogether. The Government are doing this despite all the evidence of the serious difficulties that people are facing when making a claim.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Does the hon. Lady agree that one of the strengths of the system is that people apply for only one benefit under universal credit, so it is much less complex? Indeed, many people will get a benefit to which they did not previously know they were entitled.

Margaret Greenwood: When the hon. Lady looks at the drop-out rate and the number of people who actually fail to complete a claim, I think that she will probably revise the comment that she just made.

Over half the households that will be required to move across will be working families—people in work whose income is too low support them—while over a third will have been claiming ESA, which means they have been assessed by the Government as too ill or disabled to work. Just receiving the letter will be very unsettling for someone with a mental health condition or a learning difficulty.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Margaret Greenwood: I am taking no more interventions. *[Interruption.]* Well, I am short of time and many people have applied to speak.

Receiving the letter will also be unsettling when people have been on their existing benefit for a significant period. Of course, some people may miss the letter altogether. Also, they may well struggle to fill the form in on time and to get the necessary advice because, due

[Margaret Greenwood]

to this Government's cuts, the advice agencies are stretched to the limit. There is provision for the deadline to be extended but many people will not be aware of that. The Government have admitted that they do not know how many people overall will need additional support to make a new claim.

The Prime Minister assured us last week that people required to transfer to universal credit would not be worse off because they will receive transitional protection—an additional payment that tops up someone's universal credit to the same level of the benefits that they were previously receiving. However, that only lasts for two years and could be lost when someone's circumstances change, which can include such basic life events as moving in with a partner or separating from them.

If people lose transitional protection, they will find that the support they receive under universal credit is often significantly lower. For example, there is no enhanced disability premium, which is currently claimed by over 1.4 million people, and no severe disability premium, which is claimed by another 500,000 of the most severely disabled people who live alone. There is even a danger that many of the most vulnerable will fall out of the social security system altogether and be left without any income at all. According to the latest figures, almost 30% of universal credit claims started are never completed. Do the Government not care about what happens to these people?

The Government say that universal credit will lend to greater take-up, but not if people cannot make a claim in the first place. People with low literacy skills, a learning disability or no IT access are likely to find it difficult to cope with a complex online system. [Interruption.]

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way to give her voice a rest?

Margaret Greenwood: This is a really serious matter and the hon. Gentleman would do well to focus on the issue at hand.

If we translate the percentage of claims that are closed before they are completed to the nearly 3 million people the Government want to transfer across, we can see that nearly 1 million people are at risk of falling out of the social security system altogether.

Food banks are reporting that they are running out of food. In August, Department for Work and Pensions officials carried out a study to identify areas where DWP operational practices contributed to a rise in demand for food bank services. I think that any Member of the House will know the answer to that.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Margaret Greenwood: I am going to make some progress.

When the National Audit Office raised the alarm with its damning report back in June, the Government misrepresented its findings and stubbornly claimed that it did not take account of changes that they had made,

but they will not publish the figures that would enable the public and Parliament to hold them to account. This week in the Chamber, the Secretary of State met criticism of universal credit with accusations of scaremongering, so I will ask again: are Citizens Advice, the Child Poverty Action Group, the National Association of Welfare Rights Advisers, Mencap, Mind, Scope, Parkinson's UK, the Residential Landlords Association, the National Housing Federation, the Resolution Foundation, the National Audit Office, the Archbishop of Canterbury and two former Prime Ministers scaremongering? The confusion of the last fortnight has caused families real concern about the transfer to universal credit and they deserve answers, so will the Government publish all reports and analysis that they have carried out into the effects of universal credit since the Secretary of State took office? People have a right to know.

The social security system should be there for any of us should we need it, yet the Government's flagship programme has brought real hardship. How did it come to this—that people are facing hunger and destitution in the fifth largest economy in the world? It cannot be right. The Government must wake up and open their eyes to what is happening. That is why Labour Members are calling on the Government to stop the roll-out of universal credit.

1.7 pm

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Ms Esther McVey): It is good to be here again to update the House on universal credit—for the third time this week. I know that many Members want to speak in this debate. I know too, Mr Speaker, that you are always anxious to hear Back Benchers speak, as am I, so I will keep my remarks as brief as possible.

I have been forthright with colleagues across the House—and in my speech at Reform earlier this year—about universal credit's strong merits and the areas that we need to improve. In fact, in my Reform speech, I said that I would improve universal support, and I delivered on that this month. Since becoming Secretary of State, I have changed the system to provide extra support for those with severe disabilities, vulnerable young 18 to 21-year-olds and kinship carers. I am also working with colleagues to identify areas where we can make more improvements.

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that, although the Government will always want to do more, eight out of 10 universal credit claimants are actually satisfied with their experience, and believe that it is good and helping them into work?

Ms McVey: My hon. Friend is correct. Those are the figures and that is what people are saying. We know that universal credit is working and getting people into work because our employment figures that came out yesterday show that over 3.3 million more people are in work since 2010. So we know that we are moving forward.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Ms McVey: I will continue just a little bit further.

In less than 10 months, my ministerial colleagues and I have met over 500 colleagues, charities and stakeholders. We have come to the House on 56 occasions; visited 46 jobcentres, service centres and pension centres; tabled 34 written ministerial statements; and appeared in front of Select Committees 12 times. My Department has published 637 responses to parliamentary questions, 153 pieces of guidance, 102 statistical releases, 30 research reports, and 23 consultations. We have gone to great lengths to be open.¹

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Ms McVey: I will indeed.

John Redwood: I am very grateful to the Secretary of State, who is doing an excellent job in improving an intrinsically good system and dealing with the little difficulties we need to sort out. Given that it is crucial that there is enough incentive for people to get into work, will she confirm that one of the improvements is to lower the rate of withdrawal so that it is more worth while to work, and will she push for that to be improved further?

Ms McVey: My right hon. Friend is quite correct. As he will know—and everybody in the House should know—under the legacy benefits there were punitive tax rates of over 90%. We have now brought that down to 63%. As an advocate of people who want to get into work, he is right: we should aim to get that taper rate down even further.

We also took the unusual step, earlier this year, of publishing a summary of the universal credit business case, which explained the economic case for universal credit, showing that it will help 200,000 more people into work when fully rolled out, and empower people to work 113 million extra hours.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD) *rose*—

Ms McVey: I will indeed take a question. [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Before the hon. Gentleman intervenes, can I just point out that there are approximately 65 hon. and right hon. Members who wish to speak in the debate, and considerably less than four hours in which people can be called, so the less noise, the greater the progress.

Tim Farron: One in four workers in my constituency is self-employed—obviously, they are working and contributing. Is the Secretary of State aware that the minimum income floor means that many of them will be ineligible for universal credit if they cannot pay themselves the living wage in any given month? Surely we should be encouraging self-employed people, not penalising them.

Ms McVey: Obviously the hon. Gentleman will understand a lot about the minimum income floor because he was in the coalition when we came forward with those policies. We decided at the time that if people were not earning enough—if their business was not earning them enough and they were not on a minimum wage—we would then help them to go into work, and therefore they could have a better wage if their business was not working in that regard.

We published the information I mentioned alongside hundreds of reports on universal credit each year by outside bodies—independent organisations like the Office for Budget Responsibility, the National Audit Office, the Institute for Fiscal Studies, the Resolution Foundation, the House of Commons Library, and numerous others. So we are open with our information.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Ms McVey: I will indeed give way. Who shall I choose from this merry bunch?

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): One of the representations the Secretary of State will have received is from the Residential Landlords Association saying that a majority of its members are now not willing to let accommodation to universal credit claimants because they quickly get into arrears and cannot pay the rent. Is she proposing some change to address that specific problem?

Ms McVey: As the right hon. Gentleman will know, we have made various changes to make sure that we can pay direct to the landlords—that we can give alternative payments. It is only right that we do that. However, when we talk about the difficulties that claimants have got into, it is good to look at the legacy benefits and Labour's track record. Between 1997 and 2010, benefits claimants' debt to local authorities increased by £1.8 billion through overpayment and errors in the legacy system. On tax credits, introduced by the Opposition, claimants got into £5.86 billion-worth of debt through error and overpayments. That is a shameful record from the Opposition.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Ms McVey: Let me get back to the independent reports, what is happening, and what is being made publicly available. We are learning from the evidence, building on that evidence, and making decisions so that we can improve the system as it goes further. [HON. MEMBERS: "Give way!"] The power to choose who is going to get a question!

Chris Philp: Is not the real way to combat poverty to get people off benefits and into work, is not the evidence that people on universal credit are more likely to get back into work than people on the old benefits, and is not that the real test of this system's success?

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Ms McVey: My hon. Friend is exactly right. That is what Conservative Members agree about: helping people into work. For us, getting—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. I say to the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle), whose grinning countenance belies an aggressiveness of spirit in this matter, that it is not really in order to yell out, "On the same point," as a way of trying to ensure that one is called.

Neil Coyle: I am trying to stand out from the crowd.

1. [*Official Report, 22 October 2018, Vol. 648, c. 1MC.*]

Mr Speaker: Believe me, the hon. Gentleman does that perfectly satisfactorily in any case.

Ms McVey: Conservative Members have made sure that since 2010, 1,000 people each and every day have got a job. I want to give out a very, very important statistic that came out yesterday—youth unemployment has fallen by 50% since this Government have been in office. That is thousands of young people with a future that this Government have given them.

Neil Coyle: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Ms McVey: I will indeed.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Neil Coyle: I am really grateful to the Secretary of State—

Mr Speaker: Order. Before we hear from the hon. Gentleman—I am sure that his intervention will not be aggressive—we have a point of order from Frank Field.

Frank Field: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. As the Secretary of State is finding it so hard to see which Opposition Members are standing up wishing to intervene, might she use her glasses to recognise those of us who are doing so?

Mr Speaker: I did not have any impression that the Secretary of State was having any particular difficulty; I think she was spoilt for choice and taking a little while to exercise her choice. But we are always grateful for the right hon. Gentleman's advice, solicited or otherwise. *[Interruption.]* Well, I am not going to comment on the glasses situation—it is rather beyond the ken of the Speaker. However, we note the right hon. Gentleman's well intentioned advice.

Neil Coyle: The Secretary of State is making her usual robust case and claims that the system has improved. Why is it, then, that the Department acknowledges that thousands of landlords, especially private sector landlords, will never be part of the landlord portal; that the Government have had to exempt supported housing fully from universal credit; that 300,000 people will get late payments this year, according to the Department; and that underpayments and overpayments are increasing under universal credit to levels not seen with the legacy benefits?

Ms McVey: To be fair, 76% of people coming on to universal credit had arrears in their housing benefit, according to the report by the National Federation of ALMOs. That is the reality of it. I have given the figures for the extra debt people got into under the previous Labour Government.

Some very interesting speeches were given in the House in 2016, when people understood that we had to get the benefits bill down. This is what was said on the Floor of the House:

“The deficit has to be eliminated. We believe in controlling the cost of social security so that it is fair”

on

“the people who are paying for it”—*[Official Report, 20 July 2015; Vol. 598, c. 1265]*—

and for those who need it. That did not come from a Conservative Member but from Labour's acting shadow Secretary of State for the Department for Work and Pensions. We all believe in making a fair benefits system and getting people into work, and that is what universal credit is doing.

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): As a northern MP, I know that there was a much slower uptake of really great work in the north. Will the Secretary of State confirm that unemployment has fallen by half in the north-west, which is giving the security of a pay packet to so many more people?

Ms McVey: My hon. Friend is right that unemployment has fallen by more than half in the north-west. I am surprised that the hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) did not know that but, then again, the Opposition are not always too hot on their figures.

I want to give another important piece of information. Labour's position on the Welfare Reform and Work Bill in 2016 was, through the Labour Whip, to abstain on the changes. Some of them broke the Whip, but the position was to abstain, and this is why: in 1997-98, the welfare cost per household was £5,603 but, by 2010-11, when Labour left office, that figure had gone up to £8,350—up by nearly £3,000 per household. That was why everybody agreed in principle that universal credit was the way forward and that we had to get the benefit bill under control.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): The Secretary of State pointedly remarked at the start of her contribution that this is the third time she has had to come to the House just this week. Does that not tell her how badly these reforms are going? We are all receiving hundreds of representations, and few of her own party's Members are willing to turn up to support her. Is it true that, at the end of the debate, she will not have the confidence to ask her Members of Parliament to vote against the motion, because she knows that many of them agree with it?

Ms McVey: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kindly words and advice but, when the Division comes, we will see what happens. I am convinced that Government Back Benchers know how many millions more people we have got into work. I am convinced that they know that 1 million more disabled people will end up with more money under universal credit. That is what this is about—supporting the most vulnerable claimants.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Ms McVey: I will.

Toby Perkins: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I wonder whether you could provide advice. I understand that it is a matter of record whether the Government intend to vote for something. I have asked the Secretary of State specifically whether the Government will vote against the motion. Is it reasonable to ask that question?

Mr Speaker: It is perfectly reasonable for somebody to ask, and the Secretary of State can answer if she wishes or not if she does not, but there is no breach of

order in there not being a declaration of intent on that matter at this stage in the debate. At what point it becomes clear that there will or will not be a Division remains to be seen, but nothing disorderly has occurred. We were about to hear an intervention from Vicky Ford.

Vicky Ford: Does my right hon. Friend agree that protecting the most vulnerable is key? Can she reconfirm that over 1 million disabled households will be over £100 a month better off and that it is the Government's policy to continue to work for improvements, to protect the vulnerable?

Ms McVey: I am glad that there was some calm and hush for that question, so that I could hear it and give the response that it deserves. My hon. Friend is right: around 1 million disabled households will receive on average around £110 more per month through universal credit. If we were to follow the advice of the Labour party, those 1 million disabled households would be £110 worse off per month. That is what the Opposition are asking for.

Universal credit pays for 85% of childcare costs, compared with 70% under the legacy benefits. Because it is a simpler benefit, as I hear from Government Back Benchers, 700,000 households will get entitlements that they were not claiming under legacy benefits, worth an average of £285 per month.

We have taken a mature approach to rolling out universal credit. We have said that we will test, learn, adapt and change as we go forward. That has resulted in a series of improvements, and I will read some of those out. We are providing extra universal support with Citizens Advice, an independent and trusted partner. We have brought in the landlord portal. We have brought in alternative payment arrangements, 100% advances and housing running costs. We have removed waiting days and are providing extra support for kinship carers and those receiving the severe disability premium.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Do the Government recognise that, in constituencies such as mine in London, work does not pay the rent for most people, because rent levels in the private sector are almost equal to take-home pay? Universal credit is therefore essential. The majority of claimants in my constituency are working. Do the Government recognise the problems with pay-outs, delays and so on, particularly for people whose income changes from month to month, and will the system recognise the needs of the many working families in high-rent accommodation?

Ms McVey: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. Those are all things that we have to consider, in terms of how payments are made and how they work for the person in work. That is what we are doing, and that is why we have had a slow and measured roll-out. That was one of the things I said in my reform speech, if she cared to listen to it.

I would like to point out the news yesterday that we have seen the strongest wage growth for nine years. That is what this Government are doing—getting people into work and turning the corner of more wage growth. We will continue to roll out universal credit, and we will engage with colleagues across the House. I met the right

hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) yesterday—I think he saw me with my glasses on then, which is maybe why he felt the need to mention that—and I will meet him again. My door is always open. We will make sure we get this benefit right, and Government Back Benchers, who have genuine concerns, want to get it right.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Ms McVey: I will give way one final time.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I want to express the view of Government Back Benchers on the motion. We believe genuinely that the Secretary of State is listening to what needs to change with universal credit, which makes a mockery of the motion, and not a single one of us, myself included, will vote for it.

Ms McVey: I thank my hon. Friend for those kind words. She has fought tirelessly to make sure that universal credit is the best system possible. Like all our party's Back Benchers, she is not scaremongering but wants to help people into work and make sure that work pays.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I thank the Secretary of State for what she has said. Before I call the spokesman for the Scottish National party, I remind the House that in excess of 65 Members wish to speak in the debate, and therefore there is a premium upon brevity, and the starting time limit for Back-Bench speeches will be five minutes each. I remind the House also that interventions should be brief. If Members want to know what the textbook is, they can consult the right hon. Members for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) and for Wokingham (John Redwood), to give but two examples, although the book may by now be out of print.

1.28 pm

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Mr Speaker, I will of course endeavour quickly to get through what I have to say in the protected time I have been given.

I very much thank the Labour party for using some of its Opposition day time to bring the subject of universal credit back to the House. We will support the motion this afternoon. However, for maximum pressure to be exerted on the Chancellor ahead of the Budget, we are calling on Labour and Tory Back-Bench MPs to work with us to make the case for the investment in universal credit that is desperately needed to make it work. The papers called for in the motion are required to be published fully to inform the political and civic debate in the country ahead of the Budget. We know what the expert groups are telling us. I imagine they are telling UK Ministers, too, so to what extent are they being listened to?

In some ways, we have the wrong Minister sitting on the Treasury Bench this afternoon. The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions has suggested that she has already made the case to the Chancellor for further investment in universal credit. We do not know how much she has asked for and for what purpose she wants those cuts reversed, but that is now for the Chancellor.

[Neil Gray]

Universal credit is already causing misery to millions. The Chancellor should be here to hear that, not just the Secretary of State.

There has been much rumour over recent days about what the UK Government's plan for universal credit is, with some reports suggesting a delay to the roll-out until 2023. The Minister for Employment said yesterday that he does not comment on rumour, but when I asked him to circumvent that rumour by detailing the plans in the House, he came back with the same "flat-earth rhetoric" that was described by the BBC's Michael Buchanan as his experience of talking to UK Ministers about universal credit.

Ms Angela Eagle: Does the hon. Gentleman share my puzzlement at the experience of those of us in our constituencies where we have had universal credit rolled out and we have seen increases in food bank usage—in my own area, of 34%, which is 30 tonnes of extra food—and does he share my worry that the Government do not seem to understand that this demonstrates there is a real problem with this benefit?

Neil Gray: I absolutely take what the hon. Lady has said, and I think she is absolutely right. At the weekend, the UK Health Secretary claimed that he had not received any correspondence on universal credit, only—three hours later—for the *Mirror's* Dan Bloom to prove that was inaccurate as he had received an email from a constituent in West Suffolk just three days earlier. I will take with a lorry load of salt Conservative Members saying that they have had no problems with universal credit in their areas.

Let us be clear: even if the rumours are true, just delaying the roll-out will do nothing to sort out the problems people are facing with universal credit right now, such as in Airdrie and Shotts; it will only delay the inevitable for others. It will not solve the misery that is soon to be thrust on people in Aberdeen, Edinburgh and Glasgow. The only way to sort out those problems is by accepting that a significant investment needs to be made in universal credit at the Budget so that radical change can follow.

The biggest problem with universal credit is that, for years, it has been an all-consuming cash cow for Treasury cuts to social security. George Osborne's 2015 Budget and the subsequent Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016 cut universal credit to ribbons. Everyone's memory of the Budget in 2015 was George Osborne's U-turn on tax credits, but as we and others warned then, that U-turn did not cover universal credit and the cuts were engrained but to be seen another day. For the many Tory MPs who thought George Osborne's U-turn was enough, that day of reckoning is soon to arrive.

Frank Field: Before the hon. Gentleman finishes his speech, will he address the question that I wanted to ask the Secretary of State during her contribution: can we not have the roll-out until all these difficulties have been dealt with, so that we can safely ensure that each and every one of our constituents will not be messed around in the terrible way so many of them have been?

Neil Gray: The right hon. Gentleman will of course know that that has been SNP policy for some years, and I hope the Minister will be listening.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): This week, South Lanarkshire Council informed employees that they could lose their universal credit over the Christmas period simply because they are paid four-weekly. Does my hon. Friend agree that this is yet another example of the shambles around universal credit, and will he urge the Secretary of State to do everything in her power to ensure that low-paid staff at South Lanarkshire Council are not penalised this Christmas?

Neil Gray: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. She is absolutely right, and I will be coming on to that point later in my speech.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Neil Gray: For the last time, I will give way.

Stewart Hosie: My hon. Friend is making a very good speech. I am advised by one of my housing associations that every tenant—every single one—who has been moved on to universal credit so far has either gone into rent arrears or has seen their rent arrears rise. May I urge my hon. Friend to continue to press not simply for more money for universal credit, but for a complete halt to the roll-out and a complete redesign of the system?

Neil Gray: I agree with my hon. Friend, and as a result, he may enjoy the conclusion of my speech.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Neil Gray: I will give again later, but I will make some progress now.

When universal credit is thrust on people, it is catastrophic. The Secretary of State said as much last week. For many people on universal credit, incomes will fall by £2,400 a year, which is £200 a month or £50 per week. The Child Poverty Action Group estimates that taking all working age social security cuts together since 2010, they reach £37 billion. The benefit freeze is the single biggest cut, as support has failed to match rent or inflation rises for years. Over the decade, this will cost the poorest 10% of households over 10% of their income, and by far the worst hit are families with children and particularly those with more than two children.

Some 500,000 disabled people have lost £30 per week from the ESA work-related activity component cut, while 100,000 disabled children and 230,000 severely disabled adults will also have their money cut via universal credit. Bringing that together, the CPAG estimates that a single parent with a disabled child is set to lose £10,000 from tax and benefit reforms this decade. That should bring shame on every single Government Member. We cannot sit back and allow that to continue; we have to act for proper change. This does not need tinkering at the edges, but fundamental reform.

Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): Talking about the incredible losses under this policy, is it not tremendous that the Scottish Government are continually being asked by the UK Government to mitigate the policies and mistakes this UK Government have made and that Scotland never even voted for?

Neil Gray: As ever, my hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Scottish Government have already spent £400 million mitigating the Tory mess on social security. We have used flexibilities on universal credit to make the system better, but we cannot be expected to fill the gaps forever; the change has to happen at source.

Chris Philp: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that total spending on benefits relating to disabled people stands at about £50 billion a year and that it has gone up considerably in real terms? Since 2010, spending in total has gone up, not down.

Neil Gray: The hon. Gentleman has completely ignored the points I mentioned that have been made by the CPAG and other expert groups. He has completely ignored that. Government Members are deaf to the facts.

There are of course some cheerleaders for the version of universal credit before us. There are those who say nothing needs to be changed, and those whose loyalty makes them blind to reality. They continually say it gets people into work, but the National Audit Office has explicitly said that this claim is absolute patent nonsense. Page 10 of its report states:

“The Department will never be able to measure whether Universal Credit actually leads to 200,000 more people in work, because it cannot isolate the effect of Universal Credit from other economic factors in increasing employment.”

I would love to hear the evidence that directly correlates universal credit alone as the factor in increasing employment.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Is the hon. Gentleman concerned, as I am, by the fact that not only the NAO but the Universities of York and of Glasgow have shown, in a two-year study, that there is no evidence universal credit actually gets people into work and still less that it improves in-work progression? The Government continually misrepresent these facts. Is he concerned, as I am, about their doing this?

Neil Gray: I completely agree with the hon. Lady. It is great to have her contribution, which should be listened to across this House.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I could not get an answer to this yesterday. On the fact that the Government cannot prove that universal credit gets people into work, the number of claimants in my constituency is 930 higher than a year ago, which is an increase of 54%. The Library now confirms that we cannot make comparisons between one constituency and another where universal credit has been rolled out. It is a complete sham, and there is no way to measure this.

Neil Gray: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. On making work pay, the CPAG says that rewards from work are limited. A single person on the minimum wage would have to work full time for an extra two months in the year just to make up for the cuts—I would love to hear Work and Pensions Ministers explain how 14 months goes into 12—because the taper rate for work allowances makes those who are on universal credit the most highly taxed workers in the UK, at 63%. For every £1 earned, 63p is clawed back. That needs to be changed.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Neil Gray: I will make some progress, to allow other Members to speak. [*Interruption.*] The Secretary of State ignored my colleagues the entire time she was speaking, so it is only fair that I allow them to contribute to the debate.

We should also take with a lorry load of salt any claims from those cheerleaders on the Tory Benches who say, “Universal credit has been rolled out in my area and everything is fine,” after the UK Health Secretary’s embarrassment at the weekend.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Neil Gray: No, I need to make some progress.

I have had dozens of emails about universal credit from constituents over the past few days, in the run-up to this debate. One was Leeanne from Salsburgh. She is unable to work but volunteers at her local citizens advice bureau, so she, too, is seeing at first hand the misery of universal credit. She says that it is having a major impact on the food bank she attends weekly to help to give advice. She wants the message to get across and for this change to happen.

John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): In my constituency office we have had 10 new UC cases already this month—we receive about 20 to 30 a month, and that is just from those people who know to come to their MP. People are being left in poverty and having to go through an appeals process just to obtain what they are entitled to. While they appeal the DWP decision, they can be left with no money at all. People regularly wait hours on the phone to solve problems, and being able to put food on the table is literally a matter of survival. Does my hon. Friend agree that this delay is another admission?

Neil Gray: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is why we need to call for the changes to follow as quickly as possible.

At my surgeries, I have met constituents desperate for help with universal credit. I will give just two examples. The first is Shelby Bowrman from Airdrie, who has become a casualty of the disgraceful two-child cap. Shelby gave birth to her daughter, her third child, after the roll-out of universal credit locally—she was due to give birth before the roll-out but was late. Shelby has now been migrated on to universal credit, and it has cost her thousands of pounds. She has been told that the two-child limit, which did not apply to the childcare element of tax credits, now kicks in for universal credit. She returned to work just two weeks after giving birth, to provide for her three children, who are aged two and under. She worked as a dental assistant during the day and for Domino’s at night. The two-child cap in universal credit has made it impossible for her to work. After I raised the case with the Secretary of State on Monday, Shelby has been told that she can get support with childcare costs but has to pay up front and then be reimbursed. She therefore has to find £2,000. That is just ludicrous and highlights why the two-child cap is discriminatory, unfair, a barrier to work and needs to go.

Another constituent at one of my Friday surgeries highlighted how universal credit completely fails to support people with mental health conditions. Her son Jordon, from Airdrie, is currently receiving acute mental

[Neil Gray]

health treatment but needs his universal credit application to progress, for obvious reasons. Jordon's mental health condition is such that he is in crisis and in hospital.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order.

Neil Gray: With respect, Madam Deputy Speaker, I have protected time and there is a great deal that needs to be said in this debate. I will do my best to get through it as quickly as possible.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I am simply pointing out that a lot of Members wish to speak, and that the hon. Gentleman has now been speaking for longer than the official Opposition Front Bencher.

Neil Gray: The Opposition Front Bencher obviously made a decision about the length of their speech, and I am doing my best to get through what I have to say.

Yet jobcentre staff told Jordon's mum that his claim could not continue until he signed his claimant commitment—[*Interruption.*] I think it is important that Members listen to this, because I am talking about someone with an acute mental health condition. If he did not sign, he would have to apply for jobs from his hospital bed if he was to avoid a sanction. At what level is that not an abuse? I am not criticising jobcentre staff; they do the very best they can while implementing a disastrous policy from this UK Government. I suggest that the experience of frontline jobcentre staff rather differs from what Ministers would have us believe.

Universal credit, in its current form, is doing real damage to individuals and families. It is not just me saying that; experts are calling for change. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation says that cuts announced in 2015 will mean that 3.2 million households will typically be around £50 a week worse off on universal credit compared with tax credits.

Policy in Practice said this month that almost two in five households on universal credit will lose an average of £52 a week and that some 2.8 million households will see their income cut. Gingerbread says that the cuts to work allowances mean that the average single parent will lose £800 a year, and some will lose £2,000. Figures from the Office for National Statistics suggest that 91% of single parents are women, so they are being disproportionately affected once again. Trussell Trust data from March shows that in areas of full universal credit roll-out foodbank use was up by 52%, whereas analysis of food banks in places yet to receive the roll-out showed the rise to be 13%.

Shelter Scotland submitted evidence to the Scottish Parliament's Local Government and Communities Committee last year, stating that the UK Government's "ongoing roll out of Universal Credit, the benefit cap reduction and the capping of housing benefits...directly threaten tenancies and risk pushing more people into homelessness."

Other expert groups are demanding change, included the Resolution Foundation, Macmillan Cancer Support, Together for Short Lives—I could go on and on. The Scottish Government are using what limited powers they have to influence change, but as I have already said, we cannot continue to mitigate the mess forever.

So what needs to change? At the Budget, the Chancellor should start by investing to lift the benefit freeze, restore work allowances, scrap the two-child limit, lift the application waiting time, reduce the clawback from advances, sort the self-employed income floor, cut sanctions and restore the ESA work-related activity group and the disability components of UC. There should then be a halt to the roll-out until a fundamental review of universal credit is carried out, which should look at areas such as the digital-only approach, implicit consent, introducing split payments, rethinking the way people with mental health problems interact with the system and fixing the problems with the assessment period.

The problems with universal credit are fundamental and are causing misery, but they are problems that can be fixed with political will. This afternoon is the first test of that political will. We need to see the Government's analysis and the papers should be released. When that confirms what we all know, this House should unite and force the desperately needed change.

1.46 pm

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I want to start my remarks by noting the presence of my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), whose decision to drive through this policy was very far-sighted. He was motivated by a desire to make the benefit system fundamentally focus on enabling people to get into work and to make sure that work pays. I think that is incredibly important, and I will say more about that later in my remarks.

I suspect that many of the Members who will speak in the debate will compare the situation under universal credit with some mythical universe of perfection where there are no problems. I was first elected to the House in 2005, in the aftermath of the introduction of tax credits. They had been introduced with a big bang, which was a disaster. Nearly half the recipients were paid the wrong amount of money—nearly £2,000,000,000 was paid in error. I had constituents who had been reassured over and over again that the money was theirs to spend, but then Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs came to take it away. I had constituents in tears at my surgery. Let us not pretend that the legacy benefit system is perfect, because that is not what we are comparing universal credit with; we are comparing it with a legacy benefit system that is flawed and needs to be improved.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): Does the right hon. Gentleman not agree that the problems with tax credit overpayments resulted from a low excess income level, which was then raised by the Labour Government to £5,000 a year, meaning that we did not get overpayments? The previous Government reduced it back to £1,000, so we are again seeing overpayments because people earn more. That is the problem: we had a Government that did listen and learn, and now we have one that will not.

Mr Harper: I was in the House at the time, and I am afraid that the Government were pushed into action and threw huge amounts of taxpayers' money around in a way that did not target the problem.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Harper: No, I have made that point and want now to move on to the design of the system.

For me, the biggest advantage of the universal credit system is that it gets rid of the hours caps on what people can earn and the reduction in the withdrawal of benefit. The hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray), who speaks for the Scottish National party, talked about taper rates and the reduction of benefit as people earn money. He is right about that, but what he forgets to say is that under the legacy benefit system that withdrawal of benefit could be up to 90%. It meant that it was not worth people—[*Interruption.*]

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Harper: We do not have very much time to speak. I am afraid the SNP Front Bencher took up a huge amount of time, so I am not going to take any more interventions from the SNP. He spoke for longer than the official Opposition.

We have reduced the effective tax rate for people on benefits from up to 90% to 63%. It was 65% to start off with and we were able to reduce that.

The second important point is that for many people on benefits who had hours caps, jobs had to be designed not around the needs of businesses or individuals, but around the needs of the benefit system. My experience when I was a Minister in the Department for Work and Pensions was of meeting businesses that designed jobs around the needs of their business. However, when they took on a fantastic employee who did a great job and then wanted to increase their hours and offer that person increased opportunities to earn a living, that person had to say, “I’m terribly sorry. I can’t take that promotion or those hours because it will put at risk my benefits and I will not be able to guarantee a roof over our head for my children.” That has changed and that is a radical improvement.

Heidi Allen: For the record, I was one of those employers, and I got very frustrated that I could not give more hours to people working for me. On the taper rate, the situation is better than it was. Given the choice, I would restore the taper rate to 50%, where it was originally designed to be. Does my right hon. Friend agree that if we are going to have to choose wisely where to spend money, we should pump money into work allowances for those claimants most adversely affected? That is where we should focus money on in this Budget.

Mr Harper: I agree with my hon. Friend that if the Chancellor is able to find some money—I always think it is very good to not try to write the Chancellor’s Budget in advance—the work allowances are an area to prioritise. I know that that is what my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green thinks, too. I am sure the Chancellor will have heard the call in the letter that he wrote and in the debate today from my hon. Friend. Getting rid of the hours caps is really important. It means that jobs can be better focused on individuals and that we give people the opportunity to get into work, progress in work, and be able to earn for their families.

The final point I want to make in the one and a half minutes I have left—I will not take any more interventions, because it takes time away from other Members—is on

the experience of constituents. I still get constituents writing to me about universal credit—of course I do. But in the past year, since we rolled out universal credit in my constituency, I get about half the number I once did. I now get about half the number of problems that I used to get with the legacy benefit system.

I also want to take this opportunity—I hope the Secretary of State can take this back to the Department—to say that of course when one is rolling out a benefit system to millions of people there will be errors, but the experience of my constituency staff is that when we raise those issues with the Department it looks at them properly and we get considered, detailed responses to solve them for my constituents. The members of staff in the Department are very focused on doing their best for our constituents. I certainly had the experience—I have heard the Minister of State say this as well—from when I was in the Department of frontline staff saying that the introduction of universal credit was the first time they felt they could do what they came to work at the Department for, which is to help constituents get into work, earn more money and be able to provide for their families. That is a fantastic thing and I urge the Secretary of State to continue to roll out the benefit in a careful way.

1.53 pm

Shabana Mahmood (Birmingham, Ladywood) (Lab): I should not really be shocked. I have been an MP for long enough and I have heard the rhetoric from the Government for long enough not to be shocked. I have to say, however, that listening to the Secretary of State today, and the tenor of the interventions and comments we have heard from some Government Members, beggars belief. Their approach is utterly divorced from reality. This programme was supposed to be about so-called compassionate conservatism. If the Government really believed the rhetoric behind the programme when they set it up—that it was about making work pay and all those high ideals—they, and the Secretary of State in particular, would show some humility in their approach to the debate.

Clearly, the Secretary of State has made the political decision to front this out while our constituents are being forced to live in misery and face destitution. That is not compassionate, that is not humane and that is not moral. I urge the Secretary of State to reflect on the attitude she is displaying to the House, our constituents and the country in the way that she is approaching this debate, because it is not acceptable. It flies in the face of the rhetoric the Government themselves use. What they are doing today is unbelievable.

Chris Philp: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Shabana Mahmood: I will not.

It is not unusual for Government programmes to run into trouble. I am a member of the Public Accounts Committee and it is our bread-and-butter work every week to look at Government programmes that run into difficulties. A Government who cared about a programme—one that is not a vehicle for cuts and is not designed to force people to have less money than the system it is replacing—would actually engage properly and genuinely to learn lessons and make the programme better. Instead, the Government said that talk of cuts was somehow

[*Shabana Mahmood*]

fake news. The Secretary of State then had to admit that people are going to be worse off. We have heard the figures of £200 a month and £2,400 a year being mooted. That is a staggering sum of money to lose every year for the working poor and the vulnerable in our community. We know that the self-employed will potentially be up to £2,500 a year worse off compared with those who are not self-employed under the new system. These are the realities that the Government cannot deny. That is not fake news; that is just the truth.

The Government and the DWP said to the National Audit Office—this was recorded in its most recent report—that the organisations at the coalface of helping our constituents to deal with the troubles they face because of universal credit, whether the Trussell Trust, other people who run food banks or local government, which is now facing much higher levels of rent arrears than previously, are motivated by a desire to lobby for changes rather than accurately reflect what is happening on the ground. That is a disgraceful attitude for the Department to take towards organisations that, yes, may well have a different vision for how they think the social security system should work, but are absolutely telling the truth about the destitution and difficulties our constituents are facing.

I invite the Secretary of State and any of her Ministers to come and spend a day in my constituency office and to see the explosion in our case load that has been created by the roll-out of universal credit. My staff spend most of their time every single day on the phone trying to sort out difficulties arising from universal credit. I shall highlight just two cases we have had recently, the first regarding delayed payments. The Government say they are taking action on that, but I have a constituent who has not received any money since 12 July. He has no money for food, fuel or anything. I invite the Secretary of State to intervene and tell me what I should tell him about where he should get some money to try to survive while his universal credit is being sorted out.

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): I thank the hon. Lady for taking an intervention. What I say to her, and I have said this before in the House, is that if there are individual cases Members should bring them directly to Ministers. [*Interruption.*] I am sorry, but that is not what happens. What we hear are general comments. After this debate, if she is willing, I will talk to her directly about the cases that are affecting her constituents.

Shabana Mahmood: I wish it was just one case. I would happily bring them all to the Minister and he can tell me how I should respond to my constituents, but my experience of engaging with the Department on this matter is not a happy one. If he wants to become the constituency caseworker for the whole of the House for universal credit cases, he will be a very busy man. In fact, it would be easier for him to improve the system and fund it properly so that people are not forced into destitution in the first place.

There is a particular difficulty in my constituency relating to constituents with autism and other mental health conditions moving on to universal credit, often

because they have failed the assessment—they had previously been in receipt of employment and support allowance—having not been supported as they tried to navigate a very complicated online system. The support that is available is simply not enough. I invite the Government and the Minister, in that spirit, to revisit some of those issues, because they are not ones that he will be hearing from me for the first time.

In this context, it beggars belief that the Government wish to continue with managed migration. There is only one fair, humane and compassionate thing that they could do for all the people facing difficulty under the system: stop the roll-out and try to genuinely engage and fix the problems of universal credit right now, before they move on. Most importantly, however, they need to fund it properly, because this is a vehicle for cuts—they know it, we all know it, and our constituents are paying the price for it.

2 pm

Gordon Henderson (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Con): My constituency has been operating the universal credit full service since January this year, so I like to think that I know something about what is being delivered at a grassroots level and the effect it is having on my constituents who claim it.

Let me begin by saying that UC is not perfect, but nor is any benefits system that we have ever had in this country. UC replaced a legacy system that was deeply flawed and offered no incentive for people to work. It is true to say that despite a number of improvements that have been made to UC since its roll-out started, it still has a number of faults, which I will come to later. However, it is certainly not the disaster caricatured by right hon. and hon. Members on the Opposition Benches. For some time, the Labour party has been busy whipping up opposition to UC, criticising it at every opportunity. These continual criticisms are not only a metaphorical two-fingered insult to the incredibly hard-working staff in my local DWP offices—they are delivering an excellent service to my constituents—but are misleading the public and frightening some very vulnerable people.

Of course, the introduction of any system can be problematic. I, too, had concerns about how it would affect people in my area when it was rolled out, so I visited my local jobcentres and sat down with the staff to go through their plans with them to ensure that none of the claimants moving from the legacy system to UC would be disadvantaged. I was impressed by the commitment and enthusiasm of the staff and was satisfied that they would be prioritising the most vulnerable claimants.

At the time, I urged staff to contact me should they come into contact with anybody they were unable to help because of the system, and I promised to take up those problems with DWP Ministers. No such problems have been referred to me by the jobcentres.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): I went along to the Jobcentre Plus in Cheltenham and I had the same experience as my hon. Friend. Staff were enthusiastic about the benefits that it was creating, and crucially, people in work were, on average, receiving an additional £600 a year. Does he not agree that that important factor should be weighed in this conversation?

Gordon Henderson: Yes, that is an important factor. I also point out that Opposition Members often quote concerns raised by citizens advice bureaux about the impact of UC on local people. Well, I visited my local citizens advice bureaux and suggested that they work closely with my office to identify people with a problem, so that they could be helped. I did the same thing with a local church group that contacted me expressing concerns about UC. In addition, I used social media to ask people to contact me if they were facing difficulties because of UC, or if they knew of somebody facing difficulties. I have had only a handful of people referred to me since we went live in January and all the problems raised were resolved quickly by my staff.

The Opposition have also made much of the use of food banks, and I want to touch on that issue. My first experience of food banks in my constituency was when our local steelworks closed down and some workers were left without any money to buy food for their families. There was a long delay in getting those people the financial help that they needed and to which they were entitled. That delay did not arise under UC, but under the legacy benefit system. We hear repeated claims from Opposition Members that the transition to UC has forced more people to use food banks, so to check their claims, I went to visit a food bank in my constituency last week to find out for myself. *[Interruption.]* The volunteers who run that food bank are wonderful people for whom I have the utmost respect, as are the volunteers in the other food banks in my constituency.

Heidi Allen: I hope that my friends in the Opposition will forgive me for saying this, but everybody in the Chamber genuinely wants to get UC right, and I would rather that Opposition Members did not belittle my hon. Friend, who is genuinely trying to do his best to find out what is happening in his constituency.

Gordon Henderson: As my hon. Friend will understand, the claim is being made that some people who use those food banks were forced to do so because of the difficulties faced when claiming UC. When I pressed them about those difficulties, they said that one was the requirement for claims to be made online, which was also raised by the shadow Secretary of State. Some people claimed that they either were not computer literate or did not have access to a computer.

Neil Coyle: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Gordon Henderson: I will not give way again because I do not have time. I pointed out that such people could visit the local jobcentre, where they would be able to use one of the bank of computers installed there. In addition, they would be helped to navigate the system by a member of staff or a volunteer from one of the voluntary organisations that are now based in the jobcentre.

Of course, there were people who faced other difficulties, so I asked the food bank to provide me with details of those people so that I could get somebody to contact them to investigate and take up their cases with the DWP. When we received that information, we discovered that many of the people were living in a local hostel that provides temporary accommodation for homeless adults. A member of my staff contacted the people concerned and it soon became obvious that some of them suffered from underlying problems that affected their ability to

manage the transition to UC, and that forced them into using the food bank. Those problems included drug addiction, alcoholism, mental health problems, an inability to manage money, or plain fecklessness. Automatically blaming their problems on UC, which is what the Opposition appear to be doing, is doing those people no favours. If somehow the delivery of UC could be made perfect overnight, that would not make people any less dependent on drugs or alcohol. It would not solve their mental health problems. It would not help them to manage their money better and it would not make them less feckless. Of course, we have to do something to help those people, but the truth is that they would still have the same problems, whatever benefits system was put in place.

Luckily, such people are in the minority. However, there are some people who have genuine concerns, which leads me nicely on to the faults in the system that I mentioned at the beginning of my speech. My No. 1 concern is the five weeks' delay in the receipt of the first benefit payment made under UC. I urge the Department to look at whether there is a way in which that can be phased in over a longer period. Of course, people can get an advance payment, but some people are simply unable to manage that money well enough for it to last five weeks, so again, I ask for that to be looked at. I know of claimants, by the way, who spend the money in the first week and then have to resort to food banks for the remaining weeks.

The second problem is the repayment requirement for an advance payment. That is something else I would like the Department to look at to see whether it could be done over a two-year, rather than a one-year, period. The third problem is that under the legacy system, claimants were provided with a letter confirming what benefits they were receiving. Under UC, that is not provided and I would like that to be changed if possible. The final thing, which I have taken up with the NHS, is that there is no box for UC on the back of prescriptions, and I would like that to change as well.

2.8 pm

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Universal credit is causing undeniable and massive hardship in my constituency. I see it in my advice surgery, and we see it in the 34% increase in food bank usage in the Wirral since the full roll-out of universal credit. When we talked to the Trussell Trust, which provides the 15 food banks in the Wirral, it said that half of all the usage of food banks in the area is a direct result of the problems with universal credit.

The DWP is under huge pressure to deliver a huge change programme, which was badly designed to begin with and which the previous Chancellor took huge amounts of money out of—there were £4 billion of cuts. It is trying to deliver a change programme and save vast amounts of public money at the same time, while visiting the effects of this disaster on some of the poorest and most vulnerable members of our community.

It does not take long to realise that this benefit is in trouble when we see two former Prime Ministers, Gordon Brown and Sir John Major, both giving very stark warnings about it. Gordon Brown has predicted civil unrest if something is not done, because the benefit is too complex and causing huge suffering. As we have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham,

[Ms Angela Eagle]

Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood), people already under financial pressure are being expected to absorb the loss of £2,400 a year, or £200 each month. John Major, the ex-Conservative Prime Minister, has said that

“that degree of loss...is not something the majority of the British population would think of as fair, and if people think you have removed yourself from fairness then you are in deep political trouble.”

The Government are in deep political trouble with the roll-out of this benefit, and they know it. If they have nothing to hide, and if we are to believe the scarcely credible comments from Conservative Members, who seem to think that absolutely nothing is going wrong, they should vote to allow these papers, which the motion seeks to have published, into the public domain so that we can see the advice that they have been given, including the costs and benefits of the roll-out, and the analysis that seems to make the Conservative party so complacent.

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): The hon. Lady has said that many people on the Conservative Benches seem to think there is nothing wrong with universal credit. Could she indicate just one of them, for the benefit of the House?

Ms Eagle: I am tempted to say the Secretary of State, who has just left the Chamber and so is not listening to the rest of the debate. There is enormous complacency already evident in this debate on the Conservative Benches, perhaps because they do not have people in tears in their advice surgeries trying to get by with absolutely no money and no prospect of getting any.

The National Audit Office itself has said that more than half of those who apply for this benefit do not complete an application form on the first time of asking. That increases the delays. It is almost as if the benefit has been designed to put people off. In my constituency, I have recently had a case where somebody was advised in the jobcentre to migrate themselves voluntarily on to universal credit. They were told they would be eligible for £935 a month, but after the deductions, it was £513. By following the advice given to them by somebody in the jobcentre, they have made themselves much worse off. I could go through many such cases if there was time.

When people object to what is going on with universal credit, they have to go to a tribunal, but tribunal waiting times have increased massively. A recent written parliamentary answer told me that there was a 16-week waiting time in the north west, but a constituent has just received a letter saying there is a 33-week waiting time. Even if someone appeals against a dubious decision, they have to wait, with no money, for more than half a year. This is no way to treat the poorest and most vulnerable people in our society. As the previous Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, has said, this is turning our social security safety net to dust, leaving people reliant on charity rather than the social security system. That is the baleful legacy of this Government.

2.14 pm

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): I wrote a speech for today, but I am not going to stick to it. I must be honest: this place absolutely stinks today. This debate concerns some of our most vulnerable people.

[Interruption.] I am sorry? If you want to make an intervention, make an intervention, do not just shout something angrily that I cannot hear. Some of the behaviour here has been appalling. I indicated to the hon. Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) that she made something up to score a political point, on a subject concerning some of the most vulnerable people in this country, and it absolutely stinks.

How are we going to reform a welfare sector that in cities such as mine sapped the ambition from a generation of young people who wanted to go out, build a family— [Interruption.] Would the hon. Lady like to make an intervention?

Ms Angela Eagle: I am more than happy to make an intervention, although I am rather sorry I gave way to the hon. Gentleman during my speech. What I see in my constituency is a benefits system—universal credit—in serious trouble and causing serious hardship, and listening to Conservative Members pretending that nothing is wrong is not a good use of time.

Johnny Mercer: With the greatest of respect, I have listened, and nobody has said that; nobody believes that universal credit is perfect. People in this House can keep repeating this stuff—to make themselves believe it; to get a clip for social media so they can say they have had a rant at the Tories—but it is poor politics and it has to change.

Neil Gray *rose*—

Johnny Mercer: No, I will not give way to the hon. Gentleman. The other thing I will not accept in this House is the illusion that Conservative Members come to work to keep the poor poor and to feather their own nests. You gave the impression that nobody on the Conservative Benches cares about getting people out of poverty, but that is simply wrong. Individuals like me would not speak up against universal credit—and so become the lightning rod for abuse whipped up by some of the creatures on social media—and do something about it simply for our own ends. We would not be able to change this policy if we listened to you—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Obviously this debate is heated, but it is important that the hon. Gentleman not refer to other hon. Members using the word “you”. If you use the word “you”, it is to me.

Neil Gray *rose*—

Johnny Mercer: I give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Neil Gray: The thrust of my speech was an appeal for Conservative Members to listen to the experts. I listed dozens for them to listen to. Are they scaremongering?

Johnny Mercer: If any Member assumes that individuals on the Conservative Benches are driven by anything other than the evidence, they are seriously mistaken. I absolutely accept that there are groups in this sector working night and day that agree that we need to do more on things such as taper rates and work allowances, and we on the Conservative Benches will keep pushing for that, but the assertion that we do not see any of this evidence in our constituencies and act on it is just plain wrong. We have plenty of people coming into our

surgeries talking about universal credit, but instead of launching into a diatribe about how the Conservative party is attempting to keep people in poverty, we should look at the things that this Government have done, such as the reduced waiting times and the landlord portal—things that are actually making a difference in places such as Plymouth.

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman not remember that it was a Conservative Government who introduced universal credit, including the taper rate and the work allowance, a Tory Prime Minister who cut £4 billion from it, and a Conservative Secretary of State who in recent weeks admitted that more than 1 million families will be £2,400 a year worse off? Does that not worry him?

Johnny Mercer: The hon. Gentleman will be as aware as I am that people in this country are absolutely sick of Labour and Conservative politicians blaming each other for the situation we are in. The legacy benefits system sapped the ambition of a generation of young people in cities such as mine to go into work, to get a job and to build a family. That system needed reform. You cannot marry the idea that you should bin universal credit with a commitment to improving the life chances of our most vulnerable constituents: the two are not intellectually compatible.

We have heard about a lot of the problems with universal credit—

Several hon. Members rose—

Johnny Mercer: No, I will not give way any more. I have been on my feet for far too long already.

We must be realistic. When it comes to the most vulnerable in our constituencies—I have plenty of them in Plymouth—the single biggest factor in improving their life chances, which should be the driving motivation for every single individual in the House regardless of political background, is having a job. Whether we like it or not, unemployment is at record low levels in this country, and employment is at record high levels.

Several hon. Members rose—

Johnny Mercer: No, I will not give way any more.

Have we more to do? Of course we have. Am I happy? Do I think that this is an area in which we can reduce our financial commitment? Absolutely not. Do I think that the Conservatives can come up with a policy and not follow it through with funding? Absolutely not. I will continue to lobby, along with my colleagues, to ensure that, in his Budget, the Chancellor reinvests some of that money so that the policy works. Ultimately, however, this should be one of the defining principles of a modern, compassionate Conservative party. People out there in the country want welfare reform. They do not want to pay into a welfare system that does not encourage people to work, and, ultimately, they pay our wages. It is their politics, not ours. They want welfare reform, and we have a duty to deliver that.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Can we consider a different group: those with terminal illnesses such as motor neurone disease? At present, they are required to turn up at a jobcentre and speak to a job coach about universal credit and their work capability. Despite being

terminally ill, they are still expected to talk about their work aspirations. Will the hon. Gentleman support my Bill to remove that?

Johnny Mercer: Conservative Members deprecate the personal experiences of any individuals who have been at the wrong end of unacceptable circumstances, and I know that Ministers will work as hard as possible to ensure that people such as that are looked after. But let us get away from this whole idea that Conservative Members have no interest in improving the lives of the most vulnerable and that all that lies with the Opposition, because it is rubbish.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. There have been so many interventions that speeches have lasted much longer than five minutes. After the next speech, I shall have to reduce the speaking time limit to four minutes.

2.22 pm

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): The implementation of universal credit has been an object lesson in how not to carry out social security reform. A system that was meant to be fully implemented by April 2017 will not now be fully operational until December 2023, but some of us doubt that even that deadline will be met.

The evidence that we have seen is damning. The National Audit Office says that universal credit has been too slow to roll out, causes hardship and is not delivering value for money. Some claimants waited eight months for payment. In 2017, 25% of new claimants were paid late. A fifth of those were the neediest, and waited five months or more. Eight years in, only 10% of claimants are in the system, and the administrative cost is currently £699 a claim—four times as much as the Government intend to spend.

This type of chaos, and the hardship that results, is certainly what we have experienced in Liverpool. I will give just one example, although there are many more in my caseload. My constituent Kelly Redmond has three children, and her mother, who has chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and dementia, lives with her. Tax credits formed an important part of her income. On 28 May, her new partner, who was from Runcorn and claiming universal credit, moved in with her, and she advised the DWP of a change in circumstances. What followed was an administrative farrago of Kafkaesque proportions, allied to official indifference and incompetence, that systematically deprived the family of the means to live.

Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs cancelled Kelly's tax credit claim, and told her to claim universal credit. The DWP said that she could not claim universal credit because it had not been rolled out in Liverpool, and told her to claim the tax credits that HMRC had just cancelled. HMRC told her that she could not claim tax credits for six months because her partner was claiming universal credit. It then told my office that it had reinstated her tax credit claim, but it never did. The DWP promised my office on numerous occasions that the issue would be sorted out, but did not sort it out. By the middle of August, the DWP hotline was telling me that the DWP service innovation team and the HMRC

[*Maria Eagle*]

transformation team were trying to untangle the mess, and that it would be sorted out by 23 August. It was not. The DWP finally began to process a universal credit claim for Kelly on 31 August by entering a Runcorn address for her on its system. She has never lived in Runcorn, nor has she ever told the DWP that she lives in Runcorn.

Meanwhile, after three months of this chaos, Kelly had been deprived of much of her income and driven into extreme poverty. She was unable to pay for electricity, so her mother, who is supposed to use a nebuliser four times a day to ease her COPD, was frequently unable to do so, and she could neither clothe nor feed her children. The Mayor of Liverpool and local charities were the only people to whom she could turn for help. Only the Mayor's citizens support scheme, which provided an urgent needs award and a home needs award, provided some relief.

The children were only able to get the school uniforms that they needed because of a grant from the mayoral hardship fund. The family were only able to eat because a local charity, Can Cook, provided three weeks of food for them for nothing. Without Can Cook and the Mayor of Liverpool, the family would literally have starved. The children would not have been able to go to school in appropriate uniform, and Kelly's mum might be facing even more deterioration in her health because of her inability to pay for electricity. Destitution was certainly beckoning. Instead, Kelly has to cope with severe debt and huge amounts of extra stress.

So far, only 13% of families in Garston and Halewood who will be eligible are receiving universal credit. There are 6,000 more families on legacy benefits who will be subjected to the same nightmare. Only 10% of the children in households in my constituency have been put on universal credit, which means that 5,600 households with children may be about to go through that nightmare. My constituency is about to experience a tsunami of further hardship and poverty because of the roll-out of universal credit. Last year, the Liverpool citizens support scheme and the mayoral hardship fund spent £25 million on supporting homeless people and those in immediate need, but it will not be possible for that to continue on the scale that will be necessary if the roll-out goes ahead, and there will be nowhere else to turn.

It is not enough to slow the roll-out; universal credit must be scrapped. It will never work. It will punish the poor and create more destitution. Any Government who seek to continue this reform when it is not working and cannot work—when it is not meeting and will not meet its objectives—should be slung out of office, and the sooner the better.

2.27 pm

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): Let me say at the outset that I do not claim that everything about universal credit is perfect, or that everything has gone according to plan. I think it is inevitable that such a huge reform will involve issues that will need to be dealt with. To suggest that it should be scrapped, however—as the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (*Maria Eagle*) has just done—is to risk losing the significant benefits that it has brought about. We should not be in the

business of throwing the baby out with the bathwater, but that is precisely the attitude of those who say that this whole benefits system should be scrapped.

It is worth noting why it was necessary to bring in universal credit and to consider where we have come from. Under the last Government, we had a system that was confusing, bureaucratic and unfair, and ensured that people did not receive the benefits to which they were entitled. Indeed, that was factored into the budget of the DWP, which knew that the system was so complicated that it would not have to pay out the money that it would otherwise have had to pay out. Those arrangements also led to the worst aspect of the system, which was that it prevented people from working.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is telling us about the faults of the previous system. Single parents are particularly hard hit by universal credit: cuts in the work allowance mean that the average parent loses about £800 a year, and some lose up to £2,000 a year. Given that 91% of single parents are women, this system discriminates hugely against women. Does he agree that that is unfair and should be addressed?

Gareth Johnson: I do not agree. There have been these transitional protections that we need to have in place. I am not saying that every aspect of universal credit has been correctly implemented—I do not think anyone is claiming that—but I think it is right that we try to ensure that people are better off under this system and that it is a fairer system. Most important, as I have said, is that it should enable people to work.

Under the previous system, I lost count of the number of times people said to me, "I cannot afford to work." They used to say that they could not possibly get a job even though they would love to do so because they would lose their benefits as a consequence. That was as frustrating as it was wrong. It trapped people into staying on benefits and ensured that people got out of the habit of working. The best way out of poverty is through work and we need a benefits system that allows for that, and we did not have that under the previous Administration. What we saw was excessive tinkering, which added to the confusion surrounding benefits. Myriad different types of tax credits were introduced and abolished during that time; it was described at the time as being like a gardener going around pulling up plants to see if the roots were still there. That is how complicated the system was that we had to take over. We needed change and we had the courage to bring about that change. We should take the credit for having done so.

The strength of universal credit is that it simplifies things and encourages work. Benefits should mirror the working world. That is why it is right that most UC payments are monthly; most salaries are paid monthly. It should provide a way back into work and not provide a way of life.

One major test for UC is whether it is helping people get back into work. The answer to that is an emphatic yes. We have seen huge increases in employment. Youth unemployment is at its lowest rate ever and wages have exceeded inflation every month for the last seven months. Part of the reason for this is that we have a benefits system that facilitates work. We were told—I think it

was Ed Balls who said this—that our policies would result in unemployment going up by 1 million, but the contrary is the case: employment has gone up by 3 million as a consequence of our policies. No one is claiming that the system is perfect—I am certainly not—but it is a massive improvement on what we previously had, so is well worth keeping.

One of the reasons we have low unemployment in the UK while it is much higher in other countries, particularly on the continent, is that we have a benefits system that allows people to get back to work. Yet some people inexplicably say that that system should be scrapped.

I will cut my comments short now, as I am running out of time. Care and consideration are needed during the rest of the implementation of UC. It needs to be done and it needs to be adequately funded. I ask the Minister to be cautious in doing this. We must not be complacent about it, but we should not scrap UC, as we have been asked to do.

2.32 pm

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): The Government's 2010 White Paper said:

"The Government is committed to ensuring that no-one loses as a direct result of these reforms. We have ensured that no-one will experience a reduction in the benefit they receive as a result of the introduction of Universal Credit."

That is a complete contrast to the Secretary of State's admission to the Cabinet just two weeks ago, when she allegedly acknowledged that people could be £2,400 worse off. I may have missed it, but I have not heard a denial of that. This has happened because of the former Chancellor's—now editor or something, with a number of other jobs—£3 billion raid on the UC pot in the 2015 Budget. The Budget on 29 October gives the Government the opportunity to put this money back in and get things back on an even keel, and that is my first ask.

My second ask is that the Secretary of State considers the issue of rent arrears. St Leger Homes, which manages 21,000 homes for Doncaster Council, advises me that there are over 2,400 council tenants on UC in Doncaster. Over three quarters of them are in rent arrears. UC has added another £190 to the average person's rent arrears since it was rolled out in Doncaster in October 2017. Ministers can say that those people were already in arrears, but I do not think we should dig a hole and keep on digging; they must deal with the problem that UC has compounded this problem not only on the tenants, but on the social housing landlord, who relies on those rents to help to support repairs and, we hope, the building of new social homes.

St Leger Homes also told me that when it slightly changes the rent across the board, each and every household on the list has to inform the DWP; that is another issue that affects arrears. This then creates extra work for the landlords who have to confirm the changes. The DWP has created a "tolerance" limit, which means that if the rent changes by just a little the landlord does not need to confirm the tenant's rent change. That is welcome, but the system worked better before. During UC's "live service", landlords could upload a schedule of rent changes so that the DWP knew automatically whose rent was going up and when. Now that has gone. Why cannot the Department allow organisations such as St Leger to let it know of changes and allow a data

transfer so that technology can play its part, thus relieving individuals of the need to inform the DWP, with all the errors that can result?

My third ask is that the Government outline their next steps for universal support. On Monday, I asked the Minister to tell us what resources citizens advice bureaux across the country will receive and when. I received no reply. Doncaster Council's chief executive, Jo Miller, advises me that it had no warning of the changes made to universal support prior to a press release from the DWP. It is essential that Citizens Advice, working with others, knows exactly what the resources are now so that it can better plan to ensure that, whatever happens with the discussions in this House, people who are already on UC get the support they need if it continues to be rolled out. First and foremost, however, the Government must take action in the Budget and put the money back in that was cut.

2.36 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I want to focus on the principles behind UC and why it has been brought in, as that is the key to understanding how we can ensure UC works as it was supposed to. Present changes and issues with the roll-out and the detail of implementation are of course important, but they should not take attention away from the core principles of UC and how it transforms lives.

I was in the Chamber in March 2011 when my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) introduced the Welfare Reform Bill in one of the most passionate speeches on addressing poverty that this Chamber has heard. He said at the very beginning of his speech that day that the reform of welfare was needed because, despite the economic growth and job creation between 1992 and 2008, there was a group of working-age people that was effectively left behind.

I remember the situation back in 2010 when the coalition Government were formed: there were too many households who were not being supported into employment; there were complexities with the legacy benefits; there were cliff edges faced when people left benefits and went into employment; and there were cases of intergenerational poverty in this country, with children being raised in households where two or three generations were affected by periods of worklessness. And, of course, we had to do more to change that, and my right hon. Friend was right at that time to pursue a holistic approach to tackling poverty and helping people get back into work. UC was a response to a system where at the peak of the Labour boom there were 3 million people on out-of-work benefits, 1 million of whom did not work a day for many years under a Labour Government because they were caught in a welfare trap and written off. A great many were on incapacity benefit as well, and things had to change.

The principles of UC are clear. It is intended to simplify the benefits system, reduce complexity and support more people into employment and into higher paid employment. UC was needed to help to get people work-ready, and transitioning people on to UC helps to understand and identify the underlying financial difficulties they face.

We have heard from the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) about issues with withdrawal rates and taper changes and what happened in 2015

[Priti Patel]

and 2016. I was in the Department at the time, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green left the Government because of what happened when we fought back and presented the Treasury with distributional analysis showing the impact the cuts would have on households and individuals.

It is important that we now get this change right. I do not believe in scrapping UC at all, but we need the modifications to deliver the life-changing support and the opportunities that the benefit was designed to provide. Yes, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has gone through the process of testing, learning and rectifying the problems, but we must now go back and invest in the right way to modify the changes that happened. We must bring back the choice; Governments have choices and this Government now have the chance to support the principle of making work pay and support independence and dignity in work.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Priti Patel: No, I will not. I do not have time.

We must also ensure that we fully provide the ladder of opportunity to give a foothold to people and families who want to work and support them into work, as well as addressing the challenges in our welfare system. The task of this Government and the Treasury is well-versed, and I know that the Minister will not have to cover this point later. We must now ensure that we revert to the principles and purpose of universal credit, to bring back the independence, dignity and value of ensuring that work fully pays.

2.40 pm

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel) is absolutely right to say that change is urgently needed, and I hope that her Front-Bench colleagues will have heard that. Of all the many flaws in universal credit, the worst is the five-week delay between claiming and being entitled to benefit. Ministers can justify this—the Secretary of State had a go at doing so again yesterday—only in the case of people who have just left a monthly paid job and therefore have a month's salary in the bank. The reality is that a very large number of people do not have a month's salary in the bank when they make a claim for universal credit. Many are paid weekly or on zero-hours contracts; for all sorts of reasons, many are simply not in the position to have that much money in the bank. I spoke to a claimant on Merseyside at a time when the delay was even longer than it is now. She told me that the jobcentre had sent her away to live on water for six weeks. She reached the point at which she attempted to take her own life. Five weeks without support is not a realistic or acceptable feature of this benefit.

Chris Philp: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for raising that important case. Would his constituent not have been eligible to receive an advance payment, had she applied for one? They are now available at 100%.

Stephen Timms: She was not told about the availability of an advance payment. They are now being better publicised than when she made her claim, but the

problem with advance payments is that people are being plunged into debt right at the start of their claim. For many, it is impossible to get out of debt once the system has forced them on to that slope. The result is that they have to go to food banks. We know that food bank demand rockets when universal credit comes in, because people get behind with their rent and other debts mount. I say to Conservative Members—many of them are fully aware of this—that this is not the way to treat our fellow citizens. Universal credit must be changed to stop this happening.

Heidi Allen: I appreciate the right hon. Gentleman giving way, not least because I might run out of time and not be able to say all that I want to say in my speech, including suggesting that it might be a wiser idea to make the advance payment into a first payment. It could be a bit like when people who do not pay their last month's rent do not get their deposit back. We would look to take something back if anything was due, right at the end of the claim. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that we should turn the advance payment on its head so that it is no longer a loan that we need to take back?

Stephen Timms: The hon. Lady makes an interesting suggestion, and I hope that her Front-Bench colleagues will listen to it. We certainly need urgent change on this point.

Ministers have, perhaps understandably, developed a tin ear to the voices that they should have been listening to over the past eight years, as the warnings about what they were getting into were being sounded. They have not been listening to those warnings, but I hope that they are at least listening to the Residential Landlords Association. They might have heard Paul Cunningham, the chair of Great Yarmouth Landlords Association, on the radio last week, as I did. He said that the majority of landlords in Great Yarmouth were now unwilling to let property to universal credit claimants because they inevitably got into arrears with their rent. He said:

“It is a social experiment that's gone wrong”.

Of the Department for Work and Pensions, he said:

“They remain in denial about the system”.

His concluding point was that

“it doesn't make business sense to let a property to a tenant who has no idea of when their claim is going to be processed or how much money they are going to get, and who will invariably end up in arrears”.

That is the reality of the experience of private landlords, let alone the organisations representing claimants that have been making submissions to the Government.

Among the many representations that the Government have received about managed migration, they will have seen the report prepared by the Resolution Foundation, and I hope that they have looked at it carefully. A lot of the submissions expressed deep foreboding about where we are heading with the managed migration programme. The Resolution Foundation made the following recommendation, which I commend to Ministers:

“The managed migration should only begin when the DWP has shown service levels meet a standard agreed with external experts including SSAC”—

the Social Security Advisory Committee—

“and the Work and Pensions Committee. We suggest this should be that 90 per cent of new claims are paid in full and on time”.

The recommendation—an excellent one—is that managed migration should not commence until that level of service can be achieved, and I hope that the Minister will be able to respond to that when he winds up. I commend that idea to him.

It is clear that we are heading into very difficult territory if this goes ahead on the current basis, as is still likely. The Conservative party has been warned about what happens to parties when they go ahead with such projects, given the prospects for universal credit. There is now, however, a chance—there is a moment here—for Ministers to fix these problems. They could take the necessary action; the Chancellor could do so in the Budget on Monday week. I urge them to stop the roll-out until these problems are fixed and not to press ahead in the way that is being proposed. Universal credit was a perfectly sensible idea. Unfortunately, its implementation has been very badly handled. The problems went right back to the start, when the July 2010 Green Paper stated:

“The IT changes that would be necessary to deliver”—
universal credit—

“would not constitute a major IT project.”

How wrong that was, sadly.

2.46 pm

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): I am happy to follow the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms). I agree with much of what he has said and with his constructive suggestions for making this work. That is where I want to start my speech. I still believe that this is the right thing to do. Universal credit is the right sort of benefit system. It replaces a much more complicated system that people did not understand and found really hard to work with, but it is important that we get it right and do not start rolling it out for even greater numbers until we are sure that it will get the right amount of money to the right people at the right time. I agree with the right hon. Gentleman’s point about the Resolution Foundation’s recommendations, although I am a little surprised that it asked for only a 90% accuracy rate. That implies that we are happy to have 10% of people who roll over to universal credit getting the wrong amount of money on the wrong day. I would hope that we can put in place a much more reliable system than that.

I agree with the Government’s approach on test and learn. I can remember being on the Work and Pensions Committee when the full roll-out was originally planned for 2014, which drifted by a little while ago. I think we are now aiming for a nine-year roll-out. However, it was absolutely right that we did not press ahead and roll this out so fast that we ended up with hundreds of thousands of people taking on huge amounts of debt because they were being given the wrong amount of money. We saw that happening with tax credits and we do not want to repeat it. However, test and learn cannot just be a software thing. It must also be about the design of the system and the way it actually works. If it becomes plainly apparent, as we carry on the roll-out, that things are not right and that people are not getting the amount of money they are entitled to at the right time, let us fix it and remove the rough edges. In that way, we will end up with a far better system, and people will not be in debt when they do not need to be, with all the consequences that that would have.

I support what the Secretary of State has been asking for from the Chancellor. We saw some interesting ideas being leaked yesterday, and I think that most of us in this House would welcome most of them as a great improvement. Let us build on the reform that we put in place a year ago to allow people to keep an extra two weeks’ housing benefit. Let us at least add employment and support allowance to that, to ensure that people do not have a gap in their income right at the start. It is just not right to expect people to live for five weeks without any money if they do not have a redundancy pay cheque or a final pay cheque in the bank. Let us fix that and try to find a smoother transition. That would cost a significant amount, but in the great scheme of things, it would be a tiny fraction of the overall £160 billion a year welfare bill. It would not break the bank, and if that is what we have to do to get this right, let us do it.

Jamie Stone: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the indifferent broadband coverage in remote constituencies such as mine does not help the roll-out of UC and that we should try to tick that issue off before we go any further?

Nigel Mills: That is probably a debate for a different day. Sticking with universal credit and managed migration, as I said to the Employment Minister yesterday when he referred to moving people over, that is exactly what we ought to do, particularly for vulnerable people who may not get the process right. We have all their information. We have all the details we need. Let us move them seamlessly from the old benefit on to the new one. We should not expect them to do that for themselves—that just risks their missing out because they have not opened their post, they do not understand it, or they are too scared to do it. There is no need to add that stress to their lives. Moving them over will not cost anything at all; it is just a far better way of the Government using the system.

Finally, the motivation for UC was to make it absolutely clear that work would pay. That is what the staff in my jobcentres really value. It is a simple system. They can explain how it works and show people that they will always be better off in work. The problem that has arisen from the savings that the previous Chancellor introduced three and a bit years ago is that it is not entirely clear how we can demonstrate to some groups of people that they will always be better off in work—lone parents and second earners are the two cases most often cited—so let us put clarity back in the system. If we want this welfare change, which we all support, to work, the fundamental promise that people will always be better off in work must be made demonstrably clear to them. Let us put money back in and get the work incentives right. That way we will have a system that we can make work.

2.51 pm

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Ind): We are having this debate because of one man’s vision to radically reform the benefits system. Having lost the Conservative party leadership, the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) decided to focus on the challenges facing the poorest in our society. For that, he deserves credit, not derision. He saw for himself what many of us came into politics to address: the horrendous social injustice and inequality that scar too

[Mr Ivan Lewis]

many of our communities, the intergenerational disadvantage, the wasted talent and the lack of hope and dreams that hold back too many of our fellow citizens. The right hon. Gentleman decided that one of our top priorities needed to be the simplification and streamlining of people's benefits, which would support them more effectively and remove some of the disincentives to work—an objective that has been shared by many progressive reformers since the welfare state was created.

Where did it all go wrong? First, it is not possible to be a champion for social justice while presiding over a hostile environment for those who were the greatest victims of social injustice. Secondly, to successfully implement radical whole-system reform significant extra resources are always required up front, both to manage the organisational transition and to address unintended consequences. Those resources were never made available. Instead, budgets were cut.

Like many right hon. and hon. Members, I have seen for myself the human impact of the failings of universal credit, and the roll-out in Bury has been only limited so far. One constituent works for the local authority. She sometimes gets two wage payments in one assessment period, and the rigidity of the assessment period means that she does not get universal credit when that happens. That then affects the housing element that she may have received. She is in private accommodation, so the landlord will not tolerate any arrears, causing extreme financial pressures in the months when she has to pay rent. She is not able to budget in the same way as with tax credits and cannot access any other loans. Consequently, she is considering payday lenders.

Another constituent is single and lives with her six-year-old child in privately rented accommodation. She was transferred from income support to universal credit around the end of 2017. She suffers from dyslexia, anxiety and severe depression. When she was transferred on to universal credit, she was not given the option of claiming employment and support allowance. She was asked to attend a universal credit interview outside our area, which took two hours to reach by three buses and the same in return. When she got there, a piece of paper was pushed under nose, and she was asked to read and sign the document. The same woman was asked to attend a working well interview. She used the sat-nav on her mobile to find it, but unfortunately her phone died. She went home immediately, and her friend phoned the DWP, but she was still sanctioned.

Our society should always be judged by how we support the most vulnerable to have a decent quality of life and empower those who are able to exercise maximum power and control over their own lives. Universal credit is failing in both respects. The Government have behaved appallingly in denying the scale of the impact of their failed policies on our constituents. They must now take full responsibility and stop the distress and hardship that their incompetence has caused, so that thousands of others are not affected in this way in the future.

3.55 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I am pleased to be able to contribute to this debate, and it is a joy to follow the hon. Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis). My experience of the roll-out of universal credit in my

constituency bears no resemblance to the picture painted by Labour Members. Now, let me say that universal credit is not perfect, and there are still issues that we need to correct, but it has been a positive thing overall that is achieving the intended outcomes for those who are claiming it.

Reform of our benefits system was long overdue. I saw the impact in my constituency, which has some of the lowest-paid people in the country and where people were locked into a benefit system that abandoned them to being out of work and to not being able to earn more by working more hours. Basically, it provided a trap in which they lost their aspiration and their enthusiasm for work, because they saw so many people on unemployment benefits who were better off than those who were in work. Universal credit has begun to change that, and it is absolutely the right reform at this time.

The feedback from the DWP staff in my constituency, both at the Jobcentre Plus and the UC processing centre—it covers the whole south-west and now some London boroughs because the staff there have performed so well that they are being given other areas to process—is that UC is working well. The staff say that it is a simple system. They love it, and claimants like it. However, they also told me that one of the problems is all the scare-mongering, primarily from the Labour party. Claimants come in fearful and terrified of what UC is going to mean for them. Then, when staff sit down and work it through with them, they suddenly realise that UC is not like the terrible picture that is being painted of it and their experiences are actually positive.

As for evidence that that is happening, the Jobcentre Plus staff told me that people who move over to universal credit tell their friends how good it is after a few months, and they then have people coming into the Jobcentre Plus saying, “My friends have told me that UC is so good for them. When can I sign up for it? I want the positive experience that they have had.” That is what the jobcentre staff have told me.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): My hon. Friend is giving some powerful first-hand testimony of speaking to Jobcentre Plus staff. The work coaches at the Jobcentre Plus that serves my constituency say that UC is the right policy and that it is in fact helping them to do the job they want to do.

Steve Double: My hon. Friend is exactly right. That is what every single member of staff at the Jobcentre Plus is saying. They tell me that they love the new system, which is enabling them to help people to achieve the outcomes that we want everyone to achieve.

We need a balance here. Yes, not everything is perfect, but the Government have used the right method in rolling out UC by taking a phased approach, by evaluating, reviewing and learning, and by making changes where necessary to ensure that we get things right. That should be welcomed. We have seen in recent times how the Government made changes to the waiting times, to the advances and to other things to adjust the system to make it fit for purpose and ensure that it was achieving the outcomes that it was designed to achieve. I applaud the Government for taking that approach.

Many of us can remember the absolute shambles when tax credits were introduced with a big bang and all the problems at that time. This approach is right, and

I encourage the Government to carry on taking the same approach as they roll out UC. They should keep listening to the feedback that comes back from DWP staff and from Members and make adjustments as necessary. It is clear that there is further work to do. We still need to look at the taper rate and the work allowance to make sure that work does pay. We have to make sure that people are incentivised to work, and to take on extra hours, by making sure they can keep as much of the money as possible.

We also need to consider extending the time for repaying the advances so that repayment is not a burden. People currently have to repay within a year, and perhaps two years would be better. People should be allowed to take the advance without being put under so much financial pressure to repay.

I say to the Department for Work and Pensions and to the Treasury that this reform is very important. Let us make sure it works by ensuring there is enough money in the system to make it work. It would be wrong if universal credit did not achieve what it is intended to achieve because of a lack of money. Let us make sure it has the funds it needs to work and achieve the outcomes we all want to see.

3 pm

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): The Government's universal credit policy is an utter shambles and a disgrace. Even if the original vision was well intentioned, it is forcing families into poverty, homelessness and destitution. According to *The Times*, some households will be £200 a week worse off after transferring to universal credit. Half of lone parents and two thirds of working-age couples with children are likely to be £2,400 a year worse off.

The Government have used universal credit as a vehicle for cuts. Instead of helping to lift families out of poverty, it is increasing dependency on food banks, increasing homelessness and increasing indebtedness. The context of this policy is that 4.5 million children are already living in poverty in this country. With disability benefits being cut by £5 billion, child benefits being cut by £2.8 billion and housing benefits being cut by £2.3 billion, universal credit will add to people's suffering. This is not about transferring people from worklessness and unemployment into employment; it will increase in-work poverty.

The Government talk about ending austerity, but the reality is that this policy will add to people's suffering. The Government rapidly need to find the additional funding to make this policy achieve its original objective of creating an opportunity for people to make the transition into work and to be able to lift themselves out of poverty. That is not what is happening.

Gareth Johnson: I agree with the hon. Lady that universal credit needs to be adequately funded. Is she as surprised as I am, therefore, that the Labour party did not support the extra £1.5 billion given to universal credit in the last Budget?

Rushanara Ali: The hon. Gentleman should talk to the Chancellor about sorting out this policy, because, too often, his Government experiment on the British people without having a clue about what is happening in people's lives and dismiss the problems that our constituents face. That happened with national health

service reform. Where is the former Health Secretary, who introduced those policies that have devastated the health service? The same is happening with welfare reform. Ministers mete out incredibly devastating, damaging policies on the population, just as they are with Brexit, and then they leave. That is not good enough. Take responsibility and sort out this policy.

If universal credit were a workable policy that improved people's lives, the Minister might have support from other parties, but that is not where we are. People are being forced into poverty and destitution—that is the legacy of the former Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), who introduced this policy. Frankly, he went on a discovery exercise in opposition and found poverty in this country. He decided to come to this House to introduce universal credit, but the reality is that it will make matters worse.

Even those of us who gave the right hon. Gentleman the benefit of the doubt when he founded the so-called Centre for Social Justice now find that his intentions were utterly disgraceful. He presided over a policy that will devastate millions of people's lives, and Ministers should get a grip and make sure that those mistakes do not end up causing more suffering in our country, because that is his legacy. He should be here taking responsibility for what is happening in this country.

Over half the population of my constituency, including over half the children, live in poverty—the proportion has gone up significantly. Local government funding has gone down by 24% since this Government came to power. Furthermore, families with more than two children are facing cuts to their benefits. The two-child policy will devastate children's life chances. The policies introduced by this Government are an attempt to cut much needed funding. Although they might have been well intentioned, they are making a mess of a policy that might have commanded support on both sides of the House. The Government need to get a grip, sort out the policy and delay the roll-out until universal credit is absolutely watertight and protects people's lives, rather than damages them.

3.5 pm

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): My right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) is one of the most decent and compassionate men I have ever met, and the slurs we have just heard on his motivation are completely unacceptable and have no place in a calm and civilised debate. Some Labour Members, such as the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), have set an extremely fine example as to how these matters can be debated in a calm and proper way—I always listen carefully to what he has to say, because his speeches are always thoughtful and well delivered.

Let us remind ourselves of why universal credit was introduced in the first place. The previous system was broken and was not fit for purpose because there were in effect marginal taxation rates of over 90% in many cases, and there were cliff edges—at 16 hours of work, for example—that meant that people who worked more hours were worse off. People came to us, their Members of Parliament, and said, "We are not going to work any more hours, because there will be less money in our

[Chris Philp]

pocket afterwards.” That is clearly a completely unacceptable situation, which is why this reform, in principle, is so necessary.

We have heard today about individual errors in the system, which are obviously very regrettable and Ministers will want to correct them, but let us not forget that almost 6 million people are in receipt of these benefits—either the old ones or the new ones—and, when we are handing out 6 million payments a month, there are bound to be occasional individual errors. Let us not confuse those very regrettable individual errors with a more systemic issue.

Some systemic issues were identified during the roll-out of universal credit, and steps have been taken in the past six or nine months to address some of those issues.

Michael Tomlinson: My hon. Friend has mentioned two categories: systemic problems and individual problems. Surely people with individual problems should go to the Department or to their local Jobcentre Plus and say, “Please address this. Something has gone wrong.” In the case of systemic problems, we should adopt the Government’s approach of testing and learning to adapt and change the system.

Chris Philp: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, as always. Where there have been systemic issues, measures have been taken to address them. One example is that housing benefit now gets paid for another two weeks after the change to address some of the issues with rent arrears that Members have properly raised. Secondly, claimants can now get a 100% advance, which addresses the point raised by the right hon. Member for East Ham. The seven-day wait has also been eliminated.

The Minister will also want to think about fine-tuning the period when calculating eligibility. A person who receives their last salary payment, particularly if it is quite a large salary payment, towards the end of their last month in employment may not be eligible to receive a universal credit payment in the following month because their final salary payment counts towards the calculation. I have such a constituency case, and the dates need to be fine-tuned and studied a little more carefully. I would be happy to sit down with the Minister to go through the particulars of the case, which is quite technical and complicated, if it would assist him in his work.

Croydon South has the joint highest proportion of claimants who have been moved across to universal credit, at 43%. Only two or three other constituencies in the country have such a high rate, so we have quite a good base of evidence in my constituency. The SNP Front Bencher said that we should take with a pinch of salt what Conservative Members say—

Neil Gray: A lorry load of salt.

Chris Philp: He said we should take with a lorry load of salt what Conservative Members say about how UC operates in their constituencies. That was of course a slur on the integrity of Conservative Members, but I contacted my caseworker during this debate to ascertain the facts. In Croydon, about 4,000 people are currently in receipt of UC, because 43% have migrated; that is my estimate and so it may not be exactly right, but the figure is probably somewhere in the region of 4,000.

In the past six months there have been 21 cases where someone has contacted me as their constituency MP, some of which were to do with eligibility questions, such as where the person lives. I would say that 21 individual cases out of about 4,000 is not an excessive number of queries, but when they are raised I know that Ministers will look to deal with them.

Opposition Members have suggested that this is about cuts, but I respectfully remind them again that benefits paid to people who are disabled have gone up to £54 billion in total—that is a substantial real-terms increase. This is not about cuts, as more money is going into disability benefits now than at any time in history. I shall conclude by saying that a measure of compassion, and of Government success in policy and welfare, is not how much money we spend on aggregate, but how many people we get out of poverty and into prosperity, and that is done through work.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I am sorry, but there continue to be interventions and if we are to have any chance of getting everybody in, I am going to have to cut the time limit to three minutes, as of now.

3.11 pm

Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): I am going to try to whizz through my points in the short time available, Madam Deputy Speaker. Worryingly, no impact assessments on UC have been produced since 2011. UC has changed a lot since then and it is now a very different system. If it is a “test and learn” system, why have we not seen these assessments coming through? Where is the learning in that?

My local citizens advice bureau manager has sent me a message ahead of today’s debate, saying:

“Universal Credit’s big impact is on people’s mental health. We are seeing so many people who cannot deal with UC due to the fragility of their mental health. It’s making underlying mental health worse. We are aware of clients attempting suicide due to the anxiety of the whole thing.”

That is worrying, but it is also worrying that in response to my multiple parliamentary questions asking whether there are any statistics on the link between suicide attempts or suicide, and UC, I have been told that there is no data on that at all. I am very concerned about that, too.

I held a local roundtable to pull together different charities, organisations, people on UC and the Public and Commercial Services Union to talk about the issues. It recommended a delay on the repayment of advance payments—that was mentioned by a Conservative Member. We spoke about the digital aspect, which has been spoken about a lot. Yes, it can be an ambition to upskill people digitally, but what about those who cannot access digital, cannot get online or are unable to use it? Many people come to my office and to my local jobcentre and we help them to get on to the system, but the issue then is about maintaining their claim and getting notifications about meetings and things like that. I therefore urge a review of the digital aspect, too.

During today’s Prime Minister’s questions, I spoke about split payments and asked the Prime Minister what her thoughts were about them. I have raised that issue a few times and spoke about it in last week’s

Westminster Hall debate. When I have asked the Minister who is on the Front Bench today, the Prime Minister and the Minister who responded last week about this, I keep getting the response, “Oh, you can request a split payment.” That just does not take any consideration of what someone living in an abusive relationship might be going through, so I urge an urgent rethink on that.

3.14 pm

Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): The case for UC long predates this Government. Opposition Members will recall that Labour welfare Secretary James Purnell proposed something very similar in 2008, and the Institute for Fiscal Studies called for the same thing. Why was there that consensus? Why is this the right thing to do? It is because we had a system that had grown up in a piecemeal way over time, and that had led to perverse consequences. In particular, large numbers of people on housing benefit and tax credits were losing 90p in every extra pound that they earned. There were mad situations, such as the one trapping people on 16 hours a week because there was no incentive to earn more. I know some of those people and it is good that we are fixing that problem through UC.

One SNP Member disputed the idea that UC was improving work incentives, so let me tell him what the IFS says. It says:

“UC will still strengthen work incentives overall. Importantly, UC will have the welcome effect of strengthening work incentives for groups who face the weakest incentives now: the number of people who keep less than 30% of what they earn when they move into work will fall from 2.1 million to 0.7 million.”

So we are talking about a huge improvement; UC is breaking that welfare trap. The hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) said we should scrap UC, but, with respect, I do not think even the more sensible Members opposite believe that.

UC is one reason why we are seeing more people moving into work and we have record employment. It is why youth unemployment has been halved under this Government and 3.3 million more people have been helped into work.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Let me add a significant statistic: there are more than 800,000 vacancies in this country, so the opportunities to go even further in terms of employment are there before us—it is a great prize.

Neil O’Brien: High employment helps lots of different groups in our society, and so we have record rates of employment for ethnic minority people and for lone parents, we have 600,000 more disabled people working and employment for women is at a record high. As a constituency MP, it is wonderful for me to have 3,000 extra people in Harborough working than there were when we came into office.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I am sure my hon. Friend was about to mention that we also have record employment levels among another group—young people. We have record levels of youth employment now.

Neil O’Brien: My hon. Friend has taken the words out of my mouth; she has spiked my guns.

Of course we need to make sure we get this reform right, so I particularly welcome the move to restore the severe disability element within UC. As Ministers know, I have been in touch with them about that, and I hope we will pass the regulations to do it as soon as possible. I am glad the Department is spending an extra £1.5 billion ensuring that people can get the full amount paid up front, in order to make the system smoother. I am also glad it is solving some of the problems relating to the administration of the scheme, for example, by making it easier to get housing benefit paid directly to the landlord.

In some parts of this House, there seems to be a view that it is a measure of machismo to spend ever more on benefits, but we should reflect on what we inherited from Labour: nine out of 10 families, including Members of this House, were eligible for tax credits; people were getting more than £100,000 a year in housing benefit alone. That is why the welfare bill had increased by more than £3,000 per household. That is not a sensible way to run a country and it was not a good economic policy. It ended in not only national bankruptcy, but with a million extra people thrown on the dole under Labour. Labour Members should be ashamed of that record.

I am happy that we are now bringing in one of the highest minimum wages in the world. I am glad we are taking the lowest paid out of tax. That is the right approach, in order to lift people out of poverty. I am glad that members of our welfare team are listening to the important points made by colleagues such as my hon. Friends the Members for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) and for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen), who have continued to make the case for sensible reforms, in order to get right, rather than scrap for political reasons, an important reform that has powerful potential to improve the lives of people in our society.

3.18 pm

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): When the Prime Minister stood on the steps of Downing Street two years ago, she talked about fighting against the burning injustices of poverty. How hollow those words sound now to people who are “working around the clock”, doing their “best”, “struggling” through life—those were her words—and are on or will be transitioning to universal credit. Her words have turned to dust, with her promises sacrificed on the altar of austerity. Her Ministers sit here today clinging doggedly to a cruel and toxic policy that is pushing people into destitution, and which will be their legacy. Not content with devastating lives and communities through the bedroom tax, not content with a brutal sanctions regime that demoralises and degrades, not content with a work assessment regime that tells people with degenerative diseases they are fit to work and not content with a rise in child poverty, this Government are pushing on with a reform that has been proven—I stress, proven—to push people into debt and poverty since 2012. I know that Conservative Members have had enough of experts, but when they have the Trussell Trust, Citizens Advice, the National Audit Office, Mind, Shelter, local authorities, the Archbishop of Canterbury, more than 80 disability charities and their own former Prime Minister telling them that it is not working, surely they have to stop and think.

After universal credit goes live in Redcar and Cleveland on 28 November, families will receive their first lump-sum payment just a week before Christmas. That will pile

[Anna Turley]

pressure on to families who are trying to pay for their Christmas and all their household bills, too. According to figures from the House of Commons Library, full roll-out in my area, including legacy benefits, will bring nearly 11,000 households on to universal credit. Almost 6,000 of those households have children and an estimated 3,500 households include people with disabilities. Thousands of vulnerable people in my area are going to be moved on to a benefit that has been beset with payment delays and has seen food bank use skyrocket by more than 50% in areas of full roll-out. Yesterday, in response to my question, the Minister could not reassure me that my constituents would not be worse off. When even the Secretary of State herself admits that the reform will see families worse off by £200 a month, we know that universal credit is not fit for purpose and must be stopped.

We all know that this is about more than just simplifying the welfare system and making work pay. Those are aims that many Members from all parties would support, but the reality is that this reform is being used to bring in £3 billion of welfare cuts through the back door and, despite the protests from Government Members, it is affecting people who are already in work. Analysis from the Child Poverty Action Group shows that, far from making work pay, as many have tried to argue today, the cuts reduce the gains made from work. Parents who are already working full time on the increased minimum wage would have to work the equivalent of an extra month per year, and single parents two months, just to recoup the cost. Moreover, the transitional protection that is meant to ensure that families do not lose out will not actually be available to many of those who need it.

Universal credit is being used by the Conservative party to disguise massive cuts to welfare. Rather than making work pay, as Government Members claim they want, the new system will leave vulnerable people reliant on food banks and forced into personal debt.

3.21 pm

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I am pleased to speak in this vital debate, not only because when universal credit is rolled out it will affect millions of lives, but because two significant parliamentary events are coming soon: the Budget and the regulations on managed migration.

I have been a member of the Work and Pensions Committee since 2015 and I have seen the Government do the right thing time and again. We halted the planned cuts to tax credits in 2015, we reduced the taper rate from 65% to 63% in 2016, and last year we invested a further £1.5 billion to reduce the six-week waiting period to five weeks and provide two weeks of extra housing benefit run-on for people who move on to UC. We know that when presented with facts, the Government will act, so that is what I shall do today.

I wish to talk about how we can improve universal credit. Let me start with the existing system. The awarding of a national contract to Citizens Advice will transform the experience of claimants struggling to get on to the system for the first time, but it still will not fix the risk of debt faced by those who cannot wait five weeks for their first payment and who subsequently struggle on reduced payments when they are paying back their advance loan. If press rumours that the pay-back rate will be

reduced from 40% to 30% are true, that is welcome, but for me that does not go far enough. Does the fact that we are paying advances to 60% of claimants not tell us that people cannot wait for five weeks, so the system design is flawed? As we are paying out taxpayers' money at the start, let us give them better value for money by making that first payment the actual payment itself, not an advance loan. If our estimation was wrong, we can readjust slightly at the end of the month and claw back any slight overpayment at the end, when the claimant's life is more settled and their debts are under control. I believe that that would tackle the majority of debt and food bank-related cases that we hear about. Let's just do it.

As we have heard today multiple times, we need to make sure that universal credit can handle occasions when there are two pay cheques in a long month and ensure that that does not disproportionately affect the following month's benefit. We should support the Scottish Government trial to see whether split payments give greater support to sufferers of domestic violence, and we need to look again at how universal credit works for self-employed people.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): Totnes has a vibrant arts sector. My hon. Friend will know that many self-employed artists take longer to establish themselves as a business, and there may be great variation, month to month, in what they are paid. In the light of her detailed work, does my hon. Friend have any suggestions about how we can improve the situation for self-employed artists?

Heidi Allen: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: it is a fact that universal credit was not built for self-employed people, and it shows. The monthly assessments do not work and the minimum income floor needs to be looked at again because it typically takes more than a year for people's businesses to settle down.

To make the existing system really fly, I suspect that we need a boost to IT and admin man and womanpower behind the scenes, because let us make no mistake: universal credit is not yet fully automated. Claiming for childcare costs is a prime example of the manual work that is still being done. That brings me on to how we move legacy claimants across and the regulations that we have still to vote for—in November, I suspect. I am pleased that migration will start a lot later than originally planned, but I and many others still have concerns about the regulations. As a Government, we are choosing, for all the right reasons, to move people—that is people—across to a new system. I fail to see why that should be the complete and utter responsibility of those claimants. I have led on IT transformation projects in business and it would be unheard of for there not to be some kind of automated population of data from the old system to the new. We need to look really seriously into doing that, because it would save us hardship in the long run. Let us not forget that a third of migrated claimants are on ESA—the most vulnerable in society who have some kind of illness or disability—and we should look after them and not let them drop off the system. The population of data should be automatic and there should be no break in those people's payments at all.

Finally, when people arrive safe and sound on universal credit, the work allowances need to be what they should have been prior to 2015. How in this fair Great Britain

that we call home can we have two families in identical circumstances living next to each other, but one has been protected across through migration and their next-door neighbours are £2,500 worse off a year? That is not Great Britain.

3.26 pm

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): Last Friday, I hosted a successful jobs fair in conjunction with my local jobcentre. The event was a huge success, with more than 50 employers attending, together with more than 500 jobseekers. I was really pleased to be doing my bit to help to get people into work. I mention that because I always seek to do everything possible to support people into work, because that is the right thing to do. If the Government were genuinely trying to simplify the benefit system and achieve a seamless transition from welfare to work, I would welcome that. However, that is not the situation with which we are faced.

To date, attempts to roll out universal credit have been absolutely shambolic and the sheer incompetence has had a devastating effect on families and individuals who need benefits to live. In the short time available to me, I wish to demonstrate that the problems are not the untypical problems of individuals, but in-built system failures that need to be tackled. I am really concerned about the five-week waiting time. How on earth are families expected to manage five weeks with no income whatsoever? Many of these families have no support mechanisms and I fail to see how making families choose between food and heating is in any way incentivising work.

I am concerned about managed migration, particularly in respect of vulnerable people. We ought to be supporting vulnerable people, not punishing them by making it difficult to transfer from one benefit to the other. I am also worried that the amount that those migrating from legacy benefits will receive under universal credit will be a reduced amount. I hear that an initial transitional top-up will be available for the first payment, but what of the subsequent payments? By definition, these are already some of the poorest people.

I also wish to raise the issue of student loans, which are being classed as income in assessments of entitlement to universal credit. Student loans are, by definition, a loan repayable with interest. Under the legacy system, they did not count as income because they were not income. Then there are the mistakes that are made in administration where overpayments are made and claimants are left with huge debts for which they must take responsibility.

In conclusion, I support a benefits system that helps people into work, but I cannot support a system that sends children to school cold and hungry, or that is doing more to punish the poorest and most vulnerable households than ever it did to help anyone into work.

3.28 pm

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I am pleased to be called to speak in the debate and to be given yet another opportunity to voice my full-hearted support for the universal credit policy. I also warn against some of the voices that we have heard from the Opposition Benches today and from outside this Chamber who have called for universal credit to be

scrapped, not least the voice of the shadow Chancellor. We have heard today that that may now be the official policy of the Labour party. That is risky, taking us back to the days when Labour left office. We must never forget that, in 2010, the number of households in which no one worked almost doubled.

I have the privilege of being the chairman of the all-party group for youth employment. Each month, we look at the youth employment statistics—the number of people in work and out of work. We do that because the statistics are important but, of course, what is far more important is the lives of the young people that are transformed as they move into work and are given their first opportunity on the jobs ladder.

Mr Harper: My hon. Friend makes an important point. [*Interruption.*] If Opposition Members will be quiet, I can ask my short intervention. That will leave more time for them to speak. If they keep hectoring, it will take longer.

Will my hon. Friend confirm that, if we were to go back to the legacy system, what we would effectively be doing, given the withdrawal rates, is increasing the rate of tax on those young people going back into work?

Michael Tomlinson: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his intervention. I am sorry that he received the welcome that he did from Opposition Members because he makes a powerful point. Seeing young people's prospects turned around is one of the greatest privileges of being the chairman of the all-party group. Those prospects will be put at risk if we wind back the clock and return to the legacy system—a system that disincentivised young people and, in fact, people of all ages from getting back into work. There was a marginal equivalent tax rate in excess of 90% and the 16-hour rule effectively disincentivised people of all ages, including young people, from getting back into work.

My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) made a powerful point about the compassion of Members on the Conservative Benches. The hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) said that this policy was cruel. There is nothing cruel about encouraging those who can work to get into work, just as there is nothing compassionate about trapping people in benefits. This is a progressive policy. It should be welcomed on both sides of the Chamber.

Earlier, my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) said that he had gone to Jobcentre Plus and seen the difference that the policy was making for his constituents. My hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) made exactly the same point. When we go into our jobcentres, we see the opportunity and positivity from the work coaches, who see that they can now do the job that they wanted to do when they went into it. This policy should be supported.

We have heard from the Employment Minister—I want him to confirm this in his response—that this policy helps people to get into work faster than under the legacy system. It means that, when they are in work, they stay in work longer, they have the potential to earn more and their progression is greater. I would welcome the Minister repeating that in his closing remarks. I invite Members on both sides of the House to support universal credit and to oppose the motion.

3.33 pm

Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab): We are here today because this Government are intentionally concealing what they know to be the truth about universal credit. The concealment of impact studies and papers relating to the roll-out of universal credit is an injustice not just to the current recipients of UC, but to each and every future recipient in this country, of which there are thousands.

Those hundreds of thousands of people up and down the UK right now are nervously awaiting their turn for what must feel like a benefits executioner's block. People are being told time and again that it will not hurt and that the impact of the change will be swift and clean, but we all know that to be untrue. Benefits are being cut and cuts hurt. Universal credit in its current form is a cruel blade and such cuts have a terminal effect. I mean that quite literally, because the bungled roll-out of universal credit is causing severe hardship for many people, at a time when this Government say—to quote the Prime Minister—that “austerity is over”. We have learned three facts this afternoon: first, austerity is not over; secondly, the universal credit roll-out is failing; and thirdly, this Government are concealing the truth about universal credit's failings.

When the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions said at the recent Conservative party conference that reports of cuts to budgets were fake news, it is possible that she was a little confused. Perhaps she has not read the reports suggesting that cuts to universal credit will total £3.6 billion a year by 2020. Perhaps the reports that she has seen, but has so far refused to put before the House, say otherwise. We will not know until she does lay the reports before Parliament, as well as any analysis produced by her Department since 8 January 2018 on the effect of universal credit. That is what we are asking her to do today.

Universal credit was designed to lift people out of poverty. It started with laudable ambition in 2011, with the Government saying that 350,000 children would be taken out of poverty because universal credit would have higher take-up and wider entitlement than legacy benefits, so might they be willing to tell us today how many hundreds of thousands of children are currently better off for their families being on universal credit? They will not, because almost none are—far from it, in fact. As we have heard this afternoon, organisations such as the Child Poverty Action Group know that 4.5 million children in Britain are living in poverty in 2018.

Might the Government be willing to tell us how far they are from achieving their 2011 aim of lifting 600,000 working-age adults out of poverty through the roll-out of universal credit? They will not tell us because, instead of 600,000 people being better off, we have a system that has allowed rent arrears to climb, food bank referrals to spiral and thousands of adults to be plunged into despair, turning to friends, family and charity for help when they cannot pay the bills to keep them warm.

3.36 pm

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Yet again we are debating universal credit and yet again I feel as if we are in a parallel universe in this House. However, I am convinced that every single MP wants the very best for their constituents, which is why we all get passionate about this issue.

My constituency of Erewash has had full roll-out for some time now, and universal credit is working. Prior to universal credit being rolled out, much of my surgery time was taken up with sorting out tax credit issues. I am still sorting out some of these historical cases and it is a nightmare, but my surgeries have changed since full roll-out of universal credit. I am pleased to say that they are not full of universal credit cases. I am not going to deny that there are some, but the proportion of such cases in relation to other issues has completely changed compared with the situation before universal credit.

I pay tribute to the staff at my local jobcentres in Long Eaton and Ilkeston. It is because of their hard work and commitment to those who need their support that universal credit is working in Erewash. I am sure that the jobcentre staff and claimants alike would not want to return to the previous system, which was clunky and, more importantly, did not encourage people to return to work, as we have heard from quite a few Conservative Members this afternoon. My local jobcentre staff tell me that more people are getting into work and, more importantly, staying in work as a result of universal credit; they no longer have to sign on and sign off.

In the run-up to this debate, I have received numerous emails from constituents on the subject of universal credit, many of which are identical. Sadly, someone has misinformed them about many aspects of the system. One element of universal credit that has been adjusted since April is that of housing benefit. It is often the housing element that causes problems in Erewash. But now claimants already on housing benefit will continue to receive their award for the first two weeks of their universal credit claim. I thank the Government for making those changes. In addition, the Government have promised to make it easier for claimants to request that their housing element be paid directly to their landlord, so the Government are listening.

Universal credit is working in Erewash and, more importantly, more of my constituents are working too.

3.39 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): On behalf of all the constituents who have contacted me about a range of difficulties to do with their experience of the universal credit system, I reiterate the calls in this debate to halt the roll-out, fix the problems identified so far, and fully fund this policy so that universal credit claimants do not bear the brunt of the Government's cuts.

Following the Secretary of State's alleged remarks to the Cabinet that some families will be £200 per month worse off, which is a significant loss, she is now talking about a slower managed migration that will start later next year, and claims to be listening and learning along the way. Well, I do not want my constituents, particularly those with disabilities and mental health problems being moved on to ESA, to have to go through hardship so that the Government can learn from them; I want the Government to learn the lessons now.

This is clearly not a system that is ready for full migration. New claimants and people with changes to their circumstances—the roll-out started with them—should be the easier cases, but we have already seen long delays in processing and payment, driving people to food banks, with social landlords and private landlords reporting not only a dramatic increase in people going into rent arrears but bigger arrears. I urge the Minister to look at

the evidence on this from Community Housing Cymru, and specifically to look at the issue of the two-week run-on of housing benefit, which is not always working in my constituency cases.

As Mind has pointed out, there is huge anxiety out there among those who are going from ESA on to universal credit. Mind says that the Government safeguards for vulnerable people are not good enough. I say that on behalf of a constituent who is hugely worried about the process. Housebound, with no computer, they have to apply for universal credit and, without very close support, they are at risk of losing the benefit. No one should have their benefit stopped until their universal credit claim has been successfully submitted.

I ask the Minister to look at the specific issue of under 25-year-olds with children who are being paid at the under 25-year-olds' rate, not at the normal rate as under tax credits. That will increase child poverty.

I want to raise the issue of a single mother in my constituency who loves her permanent, part-time job in a school. She is being trained up, with the potential shortly to go full-time, but she is being told that she has to give that up and take on full-time temporary retail work in the run-up to Christmas, with no guarantee of work afterwards. Why is this in anyone's interest? Making someone in work worse off is not work progression.

I have huge respect for DWP staff out there having to deliver this. It is the policy that is flawed, and I know they are doing their best, despite the cuts, to help people. We should thank them. As a constituent said to me yesterday, there is nothing wrong with the idea of simplifying the benefits system, but instead it is being used as an exercise in saving money at a cost to those who can least afford it. It is time to halt it, fix it and put the funding in.

3.42 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): The full roll-out of universal credit in Lowestoft that started in May 2016 has not been straightforward. Almost from the outset, my office received a very large number of complaints, some of which have been addressed through working with the DWP, the council and Citizens Advice. However, it is clear that many people, often the most vulnerable in society, have been put under enormous pressure and have faced real challenges in getting by on a day-to-day basis.

One of the main challenges initially faced was rent arrears in the private rented sector. This has been addressed, to a large extent, by the changes that make it easier for landlords to receive direct payments. This, together with the additional funding introduced in last year's autumn Budget, has been helpful and has addressed many problems. The roll-out has presented a significant challenge to local DWP staff, who have had to acquire new skills to work with people in a completely different way from the way they worked in the past. They have risen to this challenge. It is vital, going forward, that the necessary support and training are available as the Government move on to the managed migration phase of the roll-out.

What has emerged from the roll-out is the vital importance of the DWP working with local authorities, Citizens Advice and other voluntary organisations. Over the past two years, the east Suffolk universal credit support partnership has evolved. This grouping is co-ordinated by Waveney District Council and is providing

vital support to universal credit customers. That includes budgeting and digital support, special disability advice and liaison with landlords. The creation of the partnership means that the area is better placed to handle the increase in demand that will emerge from the managed migration. It was, therefore, very disappointing that on 1 October Waveney District Council was advised that it would no longer be asked to provide universal support and from that date Citizens Advice would deliver that service. I have nothing but praise for Citizens Advice, but local support requirements should be decided locally and not through a top-down, one-size-fits-all approach.

The torrent of complaints that my office was receiving in 2016 and early 2017 has reduced, but it would be wrong to say that it is now down to a trickle. We probably receive three new complaints per week, most of which revolve around the migration from ESA to universal credit. Some of the complaints are resolved quickly, while others are not. The latter largely revolve around customers who are placed in serious financial difficulty as a result of the withdrawal of severe disability payments. That shortcoming needs to be addressed. With managed migration, the Government need to move very gradually, learning and adapting as they go along.

3.45 pm

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): Wigan became a pathfinder because it wanted to influence the design and delivery of universal credit, while being guaranteed that no individual would lose out, and it has identified problems. Full service roll-out began in April, and there has been a steady increase in claimants. We currently have 7,000 claimants, nearly 3,000 of whom are council tenants. Around 22,000 people are likely to eventually migrate to universal credit, most of them in work.

The challenges are many. Tenants on universal credit have a 97% likelihood of going into arrears, a 90% likelihood of breaching £200 in arrears and a 60% likelihood of breaching £600 in arrears. Much of that is due to the waiting period and, in many cases, delays. An eight-week delay is not unusual in Wigan, and that leads to an average £600 in arrears for a council tenant. The waiting period, as my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) said, is completely unreasonable. Some 16 million people nationally have less than £100 in savings. They can ask for an advance, but it is repaid at 40%. A Government agency does not have to do affordability checks, which even payday lenders have to do.

Food banks in Wigan have seen a massive increase in demand. Since the roll-out in April, the already high demand has increased by 50%. Some 112 people a month in Wigan ask for help from a range of council services with universal credit and complex benefit issues, and 92% of those people say they have no food or money due to delays in payment. If we couple the roll-out of universal credit with the slashing of local welfare schemes, we have a perfect storm.

Wigan has used the pathfinder trials to build up a network of support agencies, but it feels that the primary purpose of helping the DWP to design a system that is fit for purpose has not been achieved. There is no point in pathfinders and pilots unless lessons are learned. So what is the purpose of a pause? Will Ministers return to the pilots and learn the lessons? Will they listen to the agencies, which say that there are systemic problems?

[Yvonne Fovargue]

“We will simplify the benefits system”—I have heard that many times over the years, and no one could disagree that we should, but two decades as a CAB manager has taught me that people’s lives are complicated. The system has to be flexible and person-centred and allow for a vast range of circumstances. It has to be easy to access; there have to be enough resources—staff and computer systems—to allow it to operate from day one; and no vulnerable group should be worse off by the implementation. I am afraid that universal credit is failing on all three of those tests.

3.48 pm

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): I am grateful to have the opportunity to speak in the debate.

The real reason we are talking about universal credit and welfare reform is a desire to get more people into work. This is not because of some accountancy-driven exercise. It is because work is a fundamental social good that helps people to provide for themselves. [*Interruption.*] The hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) says that that is wrong. It is remarkable to take issue with the idea that work is a social good, and I assume she does not actually believe that.

Universal credit was designed to help people to move into and progress in work, and studies of it have repeatedly shown that it is capable of doing just that. That does not mean that it is without need of improvement. Indeed, I have been honoured to be part of the process of improving it. The work that I did with my colleagues on the Work and Pensions Committee in advance of the Budget in November last year led to a series of improvements that have greatly enhanced the way that universal credit serves the people on it. We have seen advance payments increased from a maximum of 50% to 100%, and the repayment period has been extended from six months to 12 months. The seven-day waiting period has been removed, and claimants already on housing benefit have continued to receive their award for the first two weeks of their universal credit claim.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): Universal credit is actually coming to Willenhall in my constituency today. What advice would my hon. Friend give to my constituents? Should they be scared by the scaremongering that they have heard from Opposition Members, or encouraged that they will be helped back into work?

Alex Burghart: My hon. Friend raises a very important point. I can say that universal credit was rolled out in my constituency a number of months ago, and it is working extremely well. We have had nothing but praise for it from the work coaches who administer it, and we have had very high satisfaction rates from people using it in Brentwood and Ongar.

As I say, there is always something to do to improve any system. That is why the test-and-learn approach adopted by this Government is absolutely right, and why the pace of the roll-out has been absolutely right. A very small number of people in my constituency felt they were not given enough information about the application process, so they did not fill in the forms in the right way. They fell foul of the system, and they found themselves not receiving benefits when they expected to and falling into debt. That is exactly the sort of support

that I hope Citizens Advice, under its new contract with the DWP, will be able to provide. It is another example of how the Government have responded to the system as it has rolled out and improved on it.

We have to remember that the benefit system being introduced now is a dynamic system, so comparing like with like is extremely difficult. If we have an old, legacy system that actively discourages people from taking on more work and we compare it with a system that helps people move into work and take on more work, a direct comparison, which is what a lot of studies have done, is absolutely inadequate.

In their negotiations with the Chancellor in advance of the Budget, Ministers should discuss with the Treasury the possibilities of reviewing the carry-over of debt from HMRC, restoring work allowances and extending further the advance repayment schedule. My hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) made a very good point about how we might be able to front-load those payments officially, because we do not want people falling into trouble as they enter the system.

Lastly, I make a plea again for the importance of universal support. This part of the system has the potential to help people overcome very complex problems and move into work, so benefiting themselves and their families.

3.52 pm

Ged Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): It is clear to me that there is no doubt this Government’s roll-out of universal credit has been a disaster. In my constituency, Rutherglen and Cambuslang food bank has reported a 50% year-on-year increase in demand at the food bank. In the past four months, there has been a 22% increase in demand compared with the previous year; universal credit full service started this time last year. I have spoken to the people who run the food bank, and they do not say, as the Government do, that there are multiple, complex factors for the increase in food bank use; they identify one key culprit: universal credit.

When I asked the Government whether they would consider independent research to investigate the growing use of food banks, they said they would review only existing evidence, not take it upon themselves to investigate further. They say that universal credit is about helping people to get back into work and stay in work, citing favourable employment figures, but so many working people who are claiming universal credit are still forced to rely on food banks. If someone is working but cannot afford to put food on the table, that is not a job; it is exploitation.

Instead of citing employment figures that hide the reality, why do the Government not start investigating and reporting the figures on food bank use? Why do the Government not give themselves the target of reversing that increasing reliance? That would be a true measure of success or failure. If they will not do that, the very least they should do is to listen to what we are calling for today. If it is such a good system, let us see the analysis of the impact on household income and debt.

Yesterday, the Employment Minister appeared not fully to understand my question about employees who get paid every four weeks, rather than per calendar month. This has been raised several times this afternoon. These people’s salaries are split across 13 payments in

the year, so many people will be paid twice in November. If they are universal credit claimants, that will register as one calendar month during which their earnings have been too high, so they will lose their award across Christmas and will have to reapply afterwards. This system is so good at supporting people into work that it cannot recognise a widely used payroll system.

The Government say that they have a test-and-learn approach, yet from what I can see they are not doing very much learning. Instead, they have sought to tinker around the edges, testing it on people's lives. I know that Government Members will have constituents who have been blighted by this system. I call on them to do the right thing and support our motion. If they will not do so for their constituents, perhaps they will do so for their party, because this has already been referred to by previous Conservative Prime Ministers as the next poll tax. Please listen to our concerns, ask for the analysis and support the motion.

3.55 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this important, if familiar, debate. I regret the way that it was framed by the Opposition spokesperson, because this should not be a hugely political issue. When unemployment and youth unemployment are at record lows and 4 million people have been taken out of income tax altogether, through the doubling of the tax-free allowance, it is not the time to question the principle of the work and welfare reforms that this Government have rightly introduced. No Opposition Member has tried to defend the situation that existed in 2010, when people were better off on benefits or working a maximum of 16 hours a week.

Let us focus, as many Members on both sides of the Chamber have, on whether the roll-out of universal credit is working effectively. The situation is different in different constituencies, so let me share the facts from mine. In Gloucester, we have 3,440 constituents on universal credit. About 150 have sought help from our citizens advice office, of whom about 100 have had difficulties with their applications—something that I hope the new contract between the DWP and Citizens Advice will help to resolve. I have had 17 constituents contact my office for help with universal credit, out of over 12,000 who have been in touch with my office over the past year. I am not saying that the roll-out is perfect, but I am putting it in context and perspective.

The hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) referred to the experts out there, but I do not accept that they know better than we do what is happening in our constituencies. I know what is going on in my constituency, as he will in his, better than the lobbying groups, one of which has produced a template that one of my constituents sent to me. It tells me that she is worried about what will happen when she moves on to universal credit. Her email, which comes from the lobbying group, says,

"I will face at least 5 weeks without any money, if I am lucky."

That is complete nonsense. If she is in real trouble, she will be advanced money within 24 hours.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a valid point. Conservative Members do listen and do care. We are also a very pragmatic bunch of people, so if there is evidence that more money or further changes are needed, we will support that.

Richard Graham: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That brings me to my next point. It is important that the Government continue to listen and to make the changes that were needed over the past three years, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) mentioned, particularly on the housing element, the speed with which some of our constituents get their first payment and reassuring private sector landlords of the value of having tenants on universal credit on their books.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): We all believe in universal credit, but we also realise that it deals with some of the people in society who are most challenged with their income. It is about ensuring that we get the money to them quickly and listen to what is happening. I believe that we are, but we need to carry on listening to what is happening.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Member who just spoke has only just come in. There is very limited time—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. We are not wasting time on spurious points of order, because I want to try to get as many people in as possible. I call Richard Graham.

Neil Parish: Madam Deputy Speaker, I have been here for over an hour.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman does not have a right of reply. He is here and that is the end of it.

Richard Graham: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I was trying to make two crucial points. First, scaremongering is being organised by certain lobbying groups who are sending emails to our constituents that, frankly, they should be ashamed of. I would like the Minister later on to confirm that this sentence is as untrue as the one I read out earlier:

"I've read that the Prime Minister has said that people will be protected when they transfer to Universal Credit".

That is correct as far as it goes, but it goes on to say:

"the draft rules the government have published show that won't happen if the first attempt to claim isn't successful."

I invite the Minister, when he sums up, to confirm that that is simply not true.

The most important point in this important exercise of rolling out universal credit successfully across the country is that the Government continue to look at what is working well and replicate it, and at what is not working so well and take the opportunity to improve it, so that, for example, constituents with learning disabilities get all the help they need with their applications.

The proposal from the shadow Chancellor, the man who would foment the overthrow of capitalism, that the solution is simply to get rid of universal credit and reverse us back into a world where people were better off on benefits than in work and had no incentive to work more than 16 hours a week would be a catastrophic decision that I do not believe Opposition Members agree with or would do if they thought it through carefully. I will not support the motion.

4.1 pm

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to contribute to this very important debate. It is interesting to follow the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham). I am sure 38 Degrees will want to run all their campaigns past him in future. Actually, I think the lines he read out are absolutely true. People are expected to go five weeks without money. I will be responding to those campaigns with sympathy and agreement.

Ministers have taken what was an agreed principle to simplify the benefits system and have lost the support of the House. We have heard Government Members willing to raise criticisms today, but it is a shame that they will not have the courage to support the motion on the Order Paper and to uncover the evidence that Ministers have but the House does not. I raise these issues today because of what I see on the streets of Liverpool and in my office.

I see this issue very much in the context of austerity. Universal credit, since the cuts of the former Chancellor, is now another vehicle for austerity. Those cuts are ploughed on top of 64% cuts to Liverpool's local authority. There are now reports that Liverpool has the second-highest levels of destitution in the whole UK. Our local authority has to spend £50 million on benefit support services and £3 million on benefit maximisation, and it has spent £1 million over the past two years topping up housing payments for already inadequate benefits to stop people being put on to the streets. That is the context in which universal credit is being implemented in my constituency.

In June, the National Audit Office found:

“Universal Credit is failing to achieve its aims, and there is currently no evidence that it ever will.”

This is not social security as we know it or as it should be. It is not a safety net for our most vulnerable constituents and it is certainly not a welfare state. It is a modern-day digital workhouse for people like my constituent Ann, in Everton, who went 10 weeks without any payment. When she was in distress, she was told to go to the local foodbank. When she could not work the online system, she was sanctioned for three months in a row.

For me, this is all about getting to the bottom of the issue facing our most vulnerable constituents. Nothing less than stopping the roll-out of universal credit to fix the problems will do.

4.4 pm

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): There are currently about 330 claimants of universal credit in East Renfrewshire. We moved to full service last month and there are about 5,200 people on legacy benefits who will be migrated to it in the coming months and years. There is no doubt that the phased roll-out has identified a number of issues which need to be addressed. My hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) set out very well why the Government were right to proceed cautiously through test and learn. I start by paying huge tribute to the work of the team at Barrhead jobcentre, whom the Secretary of State visited over the summer. They really are changing people's lives for the better, and we in this House cannot pay testament to the frontline staff in jobcentres enough.

The principles that underpin universal credit were well set out by my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) and it is very easy to see why they

have carried near-universal support. One of the reasons was that under the old system, as we have heard today, people who wanted more work would be penalised for doing so, which was a completely ridiculous situation.

One group who have not been mentioned today but who will benefit from universal credit are injured veterans. Under existing legacy benefits, those in receipt of such benefits, as well as payments through the war disablement pension or the armed forces compensation scheme, receive a statutory £10 disregard, but under UC, unearned income such as these benefits is completely ignored. There are 12,000 veterans across Scotland—120 are in East Renfrewshire—who receive compensation because of their injuries, and they will be better off under universal credit. That is something we should all welcome.

Other Members have set out the improvements that were made to universal credit last year, particularly in the Budget. Those have gone a long way to helping things. Coupled with the recent introduction of the two week run-on of housing benefit, this will help to safeguard those migrating from housing benefit to UC from rent arrears.

Despite these improvements, further progress is still required. In the lead-up to the Budget, the Government should now reinstate work allowances for single-parent families and second earners in families with children back to the level they were before the 2015 Budget, because the changes to those groups undermined the fundamental purpose of universal credit—to make work pay. This would provide targeted support to 9.6 million low-income families, like many in my constituency, and it would be the best way to ensure that UC is truly transformative, as it was always intended to be.

Ruth George: There never were any work allowances for second earners in couple households. Is the hon. Gentleman proposing that a new allowance should be introduced, which I am sure Opposition Members would absolutely support because of the high marginal tax rates on such families?

Paul Masterton: I was mainly talking about single-parent families, but I know of the work that the hon. Lady has done. We have both had discussions with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation—I think we sat around a table together when we were talking about some of its Budget asks—and I warmly welcome the work that it does and support a lot of its asks in advance of the Budget.

As MPs, we always see the worst of a system—nobody comes to our surgeries or pops into our offices to say how wonderful things are, how easy their application process was or how great it is—and those cases are frustrating and maddening, and we do our job to fix them. However, we also need to take account of the many, many people for whom this has worked. I am very pleased to be hosting a UC information event later this month, working with the citizens advice bureau, the jobcentre, my local credit unions and my local housing associations. I want people to know that they can come to me if they have a problem and that they can sit on the day and get help with their application. If they are having an issue, we will have lines set up directly to the DWP hotline and the HMRC hotline so that when people come—on Friday 26 October—to the Voluntary Action on Kelburn Street in Barrhead, they know that they have an MP whom they can come to for support if it is not working.

UC is a good benefit. It is the right thing to do. To scrap it and to go back to a system that traps people on welfare would be a mistake.

4.8 pm

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): I will be brief; I have three points to make. First, after listening to today's debate, I feel that we have been having the same debate every year that I have been in this House. From speaking to more experienced colleagues than me, I know that the debate about tax credits and whether they worked and how they should be changed is one that we keep having. I am happy to discuss the legacy systems, and what went right and what went wrong. We have been doing so for the past decade, but that is not the point.

What we are talking about today—this is my second point—is a fundamental dilemma in our economy. We have a three-way policy choice between employment, wages and poverty. We all want employment to go up and people to be in work, but we cannot expect wages on their own to cover the cost of life. That is what we are seeing at the moment. While wages have not gone up—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Gentleman on the Front Bench says that that is ridiculous. Well, he should listen and he should go back to the Beveridge report, because exactly that point was proved: if someone has children, if they are sick or disabled, and if they are old, their wages will not cover the cost of life. The welfare state is there to smooth people's income over their lives so that in periods of high cost they do not fall into poverty.

That brings me to the third part of this dilemma. If the state does not step in to make sure that the welfare state can do what it is supposed to do, work and wages alone will not stop poverty, and that is what is going on. I ask Ministers: how high does child poverty have to go before they step in? [*Interruption.*] That is not the case. The Government just changed the definition of poverty. Other Members have listed the organisations that have given ample evidence on poverty to Ministers. Unless the state steps in to fulfil Beveridge's vision and takes account of the cost of having children, we will always see people falling into poverty. That is a fundamental truth of how our economy works.

I leave the final words to my brilliant staff, Jay Glover, Debbie Caine and Rob Buckingham, who have seen food bank use in my constituency go from nothing to a situation now where it is rife. At the end of every month, there is a spike in demand for food bank vouchers, and they are left dealing with the mess that universal credit is creating. Unlike my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden), who is a good friend of mine, we in Wirral South never expected to see food bank usage rife in our area, which is more mixed than his, and yet here we are with this pain and stress every month, and this Government, I am afraid, are to blame.

4.11 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern), although I remind her that one of the key tenets of the Beveridge report is that the welfare system should not contain perverse disincentives to work, yet that is a problem in the legacy system we have had to deal with.

I want to focus on two key phrases we have heard a lot today: managed migration and the end of austerity. When I talk about managed migration, I refer not to the benefits system but to immigration into the UK. People outside, if they heard this debate, would think we were in a parallel universe. We are on the cusp of new immigration rules that will be much tougher on the unskilled. As hon. Friends have said, there are 800,000 vacancies, and we know we have a heavy dependency on migrant labour. [*Interruption.*] Hon. Members might want to reflect on this. In those circumstances, it is paramount that the welfare system does everything possible to encourage the British population into work, rather than putting barriers in their place, because we will need them more and more.

The system must encourage people on part-time hours to work longer hours and the unemployed to take work, and for those who are economically inactive, for whatever reason, it should provide that strong one-to-one support, which is at the core of universal credit, to ensure they can overcome the barriers and make a productive difference to this country, instead of our becoming ever more reliant on migrant labour. That is fundamental.

On the phrase "end of austerity", the Prime Minister timed it beautifully. In economic history, when we refer to austerity, we mean wages and people's available income, not public spending, which of course the Labour party is obsessed with. What statistics have we seen this very week? Wage growth is at its highest in almost a decade; as we heard today, inflation is falling; and unemployment is still at record lows. We on the Conservative Benches should be extremely proud of that record. I put it to everyone that we are doing the right thing.

The UK's big failing in economic history has been to have lower wages per head than similar economies, and we on the Conservative Benches are going to deal with it, and deal with it in the right way, not by increasing dependency and unsustainable benefit payments, but by giving people incentives to get into work and make the most of the talents they were born with so that they can stand on their own two feet, instead of relying on an ever-expanding state.

4.13 pm

Dame Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): Many speakers have highlighted the problems that universal credit is causing people on the ground day after day, yet the Government fail to recognise the reality and admit that universal credit is in serious trouble. I am extremely concerned at the prospect of the full roll-out of universal credit in Liverpool, Riverside. According to the House of Commons Library, 2,000 people in my constituency are in receipt of universal credit now, with 13,300 to go. What can they expect? The evidence suggests that they can expect "managed migration", which is a curious term in this context. It means that when universal credit is introduced, there is no automatic transfer for people who are receiving existing benefits. They must make new applications, and 30% of applications are not completed because people have problems applying online.

Landlords in Liverpool are already approaching me and telling me that they do not want to let their properties to people on universal credit because they are concerned about mounting arrears and failure to pay. People face the prospect of increasing debt, increasing use of food banks, and increasing stress. Stress has not been mentioned

[*Dame Louise Ellman*]

much this afternoon, but it is an extremely important issue, not just for people with existing mental health problems, but for people who are struggling to survive as more and more pressures are imposed on them. People will be worse off: according to the Resolution Foundation, 3.2 million working families will lose £48 a week on universal credit.

The Government must stop pretending that all is well. They must halt this roll-out. There must be full disclosure of what is really happening. The Government must act now.

4.16 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): As I have listened to the debate, it has struck me that it is important to remember that we are talking not just about a system, but about people.

I remember two people who strongly influenced my decision to go into politics. This was back in 2005, when the then Government had just introduced the working tax credit. I had taken some time off work, and was volunteering at the local pre-school. One of those two people worked there. She loved her job, and she was brilliant with the kids. Now she was in tears because her partner had left her, and she could not afford to work any more. She was better off on benefits.

The second person, like the first, was a mum with young kids. She was also in tears. Vast amounts had been overpaid to her under the tax credit system, and now the taxman was asking her to repay thousands of pounds. She was one of those individuals who were caught in that system under Labour, when literally billions of pounds were overpaid to vulnerable people who were then asked to give the money back.

It is right for us to look at the present system again, because it is too complicated. Currently, 700,000 people are not receiving the benefits to which they are entitled. We cannot have the chaos that was caused when Labour introduced its last changes. It is right for us to have a new system that does not trap people on welfare. It is right for us to have a simpler system that is easier to use, and it is right for it to be rolled out step by step to small groups of people at a time, so that there is no repeat of that chaos. It is also absolutely right for us to be honest with people. Benefits affect some of our most vulnerable, and we must not scare people who are about to see changes.

Some of the universal credit system has not been perfect, but changes have been made. The offer of advanced payouts and the scrapping of the seven-day waiting period mean that people can have cash in their pockets, and I am glad to learn that the two-week advance of housing benefit is also helping. Ministers have said repeatedly that they are open to suggestions as to how to make changes as we proceed, and they are about to introduce a swathe of improvements. Before we get to the mass migration, I want us to ensure that those with mental health conditions will be helped, and the Government said yesterday that that would happen.

Let us all stop playing political games. We need a safer system, and we need to make it work.

4.19 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Members might be familiar with an excellent book by Anthony King and Ivor Crewe called "The Blunders of our Governments".

It is a catalogue of expensive Government mistakes from the poll tax to the NHS reorganisation, and when a new edition appears I have no doubt that a whole chapter will be dedicated to the Government's botched implementation of UC.

The Resolution Foundation states that 3.2 million people will be at least £50 a week worse off. That will push millions from just about managing into utter misery. That is why the Government must release the official impact assessment showing how people's incomes would be affected by UC: no more secrecy, we must get to the truth.

Why are Ministers deaf to the people's pleas? Is it because these are the voices of the poor, the dispossessed, the excluded? Surely one of the lessons we learned from the tragedy of Grenfell, of which Ministers will be well aware, is that when working-class communities warn us of impending disaster, we must pay heed. When the people speak, this Parliament must listen and act.

Let me add to the litany of shame we have heard from hon. Members today with three examples from my own Slough constituency: three cases within a two-week period in September 2018. One concerns an adult with learning disabilities who was told she did not have the right to reside and was denied UC; she actually had a permanent residence certificate. Secondly, a mother with young children, fleeing domestic violence, was told she was ineligible for UC when she was in fact eligible. Thirdly, a carer of a daughter with serious mental illness has been denied UC under residence criteria. This constituent is reliant on the local food bank and other support from Slough Borough Council. She is still waiting to hear. The pattern seems to be that DWP assessors are simply unaware of the different ways an EEA national might be eligible for UC and are refusing cases without asking the right questions and fully investigating circumstances. When the Minister responds, perhaps he will address this specific point about eligibility criteria for EEA nationals, and whether he has confidence that the rules are being fairly applied.

Today Ministers can do the right thing by not shovelling more taxpayers' cash on the bonfire, by not hoping, like Wilkins Micawber, that something might turn up, and by not leaking and briefing, and dissembling and distracting, but by ending this nonsense now. They must release the impact assessment, halt the roll-out, and help those being hammered in Slough and elsewhere with immediate emergency payments, and avoid yet another cruel, costly and unnecessary Government blunder.

4.22 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi). This has been in large measure a very thoughtful debate. I enjoyed, and would wish to be associated with, the remarks of my hon. Friends the Members for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) and for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills), and the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) who made a particularly thoughtful and positive contribution, and my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton). However, a number of speeches have, frankly, just been scaremongering, and the last thing the most vulnerable people in our society need is scaremongering from their elected representatives.

We have responsibilities, and I feel the first responsibility I have as Member of Parliament for Stirling when people come, as they do, to my surgeries because of

issues to do with UC is provide them with reassurance. I want to thank publicly in this Chamber my caseworkers Rachel Nunn and Martin Earl, who do a fabulous job at giving that reassurance. I also want to pay tribute to them for the work they do in conjunction with Stirling District Citizens Advice, which has created and published a very useful plain English guide to benefits in general, but specifically UC. I also pay tribute to Start Up Stirling, our local food bank, which does amazingly good work, and Stirling Council housing, Forth Housing Association and Stirling Rural Housing Association. There are many other agencies as well, such as Stirling District Women's Aid. We have tried in Stirling to create a circle of concern for people who are vulnerable and need help, and it works.

Just a few weeks ago it was my great pleasure to welcome the Secretary of State to Stirling, and I wish to confirm, by my own witness, what has been said by others, which is that this ministerial team listens to the concerns of people. They are authentic, genuine and responsive, and I pay particular tribute to the Secretary of State. Because of her leadership, things are changing and improving, and I give credit where it is due.

Those of us on the Government Benches make no apology for committing ourselves to the principle that work should be at the heart of our benefit system. The way we will reduce and eradicate poverty is through the principle of work, and the way we will lead productive lives is by being able to direct ourselves towards productive work. As Conservatives, we make no apology for that principle. To think that it would be in any way moral to leave people trapped and dependent on a benefit system that provides disincentives for them to work is completely wrong, and I am grateful to be a proponent of universal credit.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I am trying to give as many people as possible the chance just to make a point. The time limit is therefore going down to two minutes. I see that Mr Toby Perkins is not standing, so I call Rosena Allin-Khan.

4.25 pm

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): Universal credit was rolled out in parts of Tooting a year ago, as it was in many other parts of the country, and the results have been devastating. That devastation is reflected not only in the number of weeks that people have waited for payments or the amount by which they will be worse off; the real devastation is in the damage that it is causing to people's lives. I am going to share some accounts with the House—I have deliberately changed the names involved—and then I want Ministers to tell me honestly that they are not committed to pausing the roll-out of universal credit.

The first case involves Jayne. She had a history of post-traumatic stress disorder and depression, but things were looking up for her and she had secured a job. Unfortunately, she was made redundant and so applied for universal credit. However, universal credit would not cover the cost of her renting a small bedroom in Tooting. She applied for a discretionary housing payment from the council, but was left with £4 a week to live on. Unable to eat properly and unable to travel to interviews,

her mental health issues spiralled. The second case involves Monica. Again, I have changed her name. She too had mental health issues and suffered from blood clots on her lungs. She could not afford her daily medication, and she attempted suicide.

In the 50 seconds I have remaining, I am going to ask Ministers to look at me and tell me whether they think that the people of Tooting and of this country deserve better. We are world leaders with a rich economy, yet people here are increasingly using food banks. Whether we like to admit it or not, all Members, on both sides of the Chamber, see people crying before us in our constituency surgeries and saying that they cannot feed their children. The roll-out of universal credit has been instrumental in increasing the number of people relying on food banks. Enough is enough. Today, those of us on the Opposition Benches implore our Government to listen, to take action and to halt the roll-out of universal credit.

4.27 pm

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): I am particularly pleased to see the Minister for financial inclusion, the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman), in the Chamber. He joined me in my constituency over the summer to meet a range of agencies involved in the day-to-day work with people claiming universal credit, which was rolled out there in the middle of last year. What was particularly striking was the evangelism of the jobcentre staff, particularly the work coaches, and the transformation in morale in the jobcentres. That is because the staff, particularly the work coaches, are now finding that they can make a real positive difference to people's lives by getting them into work.

I do not have time to give the House many case studies, but one involves a gentleman who had returned to this country after working abroad. At his first appointment with the jobcentre, staff identified the fact that his mental health was an issue and that his debt worries were leading to him no longer opening his post. As well as offering work coaching, they were able to ensure that he saw his GP to get his mental health issues addressed, and that he got debt advice and used strategies to deal with those problems. As a result of all that—although not as a result of his first interview—he is now in full-time employment. He has a new confidence and is working in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight), the Minister's Parliamentary Private Secretary.

We will all have seen the problems with some of the implementation and execution of universal credit, and it is good to see that that has, to an extent, been addressed since the roll-out began. I hope that the Government will use the time through to the roll-out to look at how universal credit can be improved further. To scrap it now would be a gross betrayal of those whose lives have been turned around.

4.29 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I do not have much time, so I will concentrate on the three myths about this system that the Tories are perpetuating again and again. The first is that we somehow want to go back to the system of legacy benefits, but that is patently nonsense.

[Alison Thewliss]

The National Audit Office says that we are now past the point of no return and cannot go back. Ellenor in my office is brilliant at helping my constituents navigate the complex system. She has the Child Poverty Action Group book, which is inches thick, and she navigates the system every day and gets people the money they are due. However, the system is incredibly complex, and we need to see universal credit fixed before people are hurt further by the system.

The second is that advance payments are somehow the solution to the problem. They are not. They simply make people rob themselves months in advance, but the Grinch who is stealing Glasgow's Christmas suggested yesterday that that is what people in Glasgow should do. I spoke to a local primary headteacher in Glasgow last week, and she knows the parents whom she deals with in her school. She knows that they will do absolutely everything they can this Christmas to ensure that they can put food on the table for their kids and that they will get presents, but the cost of that will be severe in January, February, March and all the way through next year. Those families will be in severe debt, and they will not be able to get out of it.

The final myth is that work always pays. Work does not always pay under this Government, it does not always pay under universal credit, and it will not pay for the woman who came to my advice surgery who currently has five children. If she moves on to universal credit, she will be out by £700 a month. There is no way on God's green earth that she will be able to make that up through work or through any other means. All that universal credit will do is put her family into poverty. The system needs to be fixed, and it needs to be stopped before Glasgow gets into serious trouble.

4.31 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Since time is short, I will stick to discussing one of the important principles of universal credit, which is that hard work should always be rewarded. Anyone who has the drive and the motivation to improve their lot for themselves and their family should always have the opportunity to do so. No matter where someone grew up, where they come from or what their parents do, they should always be able to aspire to a better future.

Opposition Members have levelled much criticism at the reforms, but the Government are right to roll the system out carefully and to make improvements as necessary. To keep the status quo would be far more harmful than the Opposition would care to admit, because the legacy system was bad for taxpayers and harmful for those on benefits. For that reason, I welcome universal credit, which will ensure that work always pays. No more will someone need to question whether increasing their hours will make them worse or better off. No longer will someone striving to put more money in their pocket face an effective tax rate of 90% on earnings. No more will generations of people face becoming stuck in a benefits trap, wanting to do more work but facing a financial hit if they do so. Although there may be some issues to iron out, I welcome the fact that the Secretary of State is working closely on them. I also welcome the fact that 1,000 more people are getting into work every single day under this Government.

4.33 pm

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): As we approach the end of this debate, the fact that such a huge number of my colleagues are still attempting to catch your eye, Madam Deputy Speaker, speaks more powerfully than any speech we will hear today about the full scale of the catastrophe that universal credit is visiting upon some of our most vulnerable constituents. The truth is that every single one of us will be getting emails from our constituents and, heartbreakingly, when we meet those constituents in our surgeries we see how appallingly badly these people have been treated and how far away many of them are from the world of work.

One of the things that upsets me most about universal credit is that a programme that was designed to get people into work is also making life a misery for people who are a long way from the world of work—those who are never seriously going to be available for work. The system treats those people most brutally. They are the very people we in this place should be defending, but they have done worst out of this system.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care got in trouble this weekend for claiming on television that he had not received a single letter from his constituents on universal credit, which I find hard to believe. He was disproved when one of his constituents wrote to the press. Is any Conservative Member willing to put their hand up and say that not a single constituent has got in touch to say that universal credit has made their life worse?

Steve Double *rose*—

Toby Perkins: I do not have time to take an intervention. Only one Conservative Member claims that not a single constituent has been in touch, so we can take it that every other Conservative Member knows the problems that the Opposition are elucidating. That is the most powerful condemnation of this disgraceful policy.

4.35 pm

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Previously we had a sophisticated social security system that targeted benefits at those in need. I appreciate that there were issues, but the problems of tapering could have been sorted out within the system.

Universal credit combines three massive computer systems—the Inland Revenue system, the jobcentre system and local council systems—and, inevitably, it will not work. We know the history of public sector computer systems going wrong at the Passport Office, with child benefits and within the national health service. Pushing three computer systems together simply will not work. The whole system is a way of cutting corners and cutting benefits for the most vulnerable.

Universal credit should be scrapped, because it simply will not work. In Swansea and elsewhere it has led to sleepless nights, empty stomachs and shivering families. It is leading to poverty and despair. I believe it is simply a Trojan horse for further cuts. There are already 4 million children in poverty, and another 1 million will be in poverty by 2020. The number of claimants in Swansea has increased by 50%, year on year, to nearly 2,000.

The idea that we have all these jobs, and the like, is not true. In fact, the Government have created part-time jobs or zero-hours jobs from full-time jobs. There are

400,000 fewer people earning over £20,000 than in 2010. The idea that everything is working is not true, and the most impoverished are taking brutal cuts to pay for the bankers' greed and irresponsibility.

Universal credit is completely wrong. It should be scrapped, and we should go back to a more sensible system.

4.37 pm

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Today's debate has made it clear to all that rolling out universal credit, even in a slightly different timeframe and in a slightly different manner, will be a disaster for the most vulnerable. It will be a disaster for the disabled—750,000 are forecast to lose out; a disaster for the self-employed—600,000 will lose out; and a disaster for 3.2 million tenants. Families and children will be forced further into debt, hunger and poverty as they lose up to £200 a month and £2,400 a year.

We have had more than 60 speakers in this passionate and generally well-tempered debate. There has been no scaremongering. These are real cases and real people in our communities. My hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Ged Killen) spoke about his experience of universal credit being rolled out in his constituency and of the rise in food bank use.

The right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) spoke about his rather positive experience of universal credit. While you were speaking, one of your constituents got in touch with me and referred to the 45% increase in food bank use in your constituency—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. In his constituency, not in my constituency.

Mike Amesbury: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for pointing out that the 45% increase in food bank use in the right hon. Gentleman's constituency is due to universal credit.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): May I ask my hon. Friend for help on behalf of Paul in my constituency? In September, his wife died, and he is in pieces. He cannot get her name removed from his UC application. He says that every time he logs on it is a knife through his heart. I have written, called and requested, but I cannot get her name removed from that claim. Will my hon. Friend help me? Will the Secretary of State help me to get that name removed?

Mike Amesbury: That is a dreadful and, obviously, very sensitive case. I am sure the Secretary of State and the Minister for Employment will take up that individual case, which demonstrates some of the failings of UC.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood) referred to the explosion in casework in her constituency as a result of the universal credit roll-out. The hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Gordon Henderson) referred to a lack of money among his constituents and debt problems associated with food banks. My hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) referred to the 34% increase in food bank use as UC was rolled out in her constituency. The hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) highlighted concerns about cuts to the in-work allowances, but of

course Conservative Members voted for those cuts. My hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) spoke about the chaos for her constituents, particularly with the administration of UC. The list goes on and on.

Ruth George: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mike Amesbury: I must make some progress.

In among this procedure—the passion and politics of today's debate—let us not forget that for millions of people universal credit is more than just a policy; it is a daily reality. That reality is insecurity. It is fear, hunger and, all too often, homelessness. Despite our political differences, I cannot believe that Members came into this House expecting to or wanting to back a policy that is causing such horrors to increase. I know that I did not and I can tell from the genuine contributions of so many Members in the House today that neither did they. So I say to the Secretary of State: she has heard the stories, she knows the risks of continuing along this road and she must recognise that, when even the architect of universal credit, the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), says that the system is £2 billion short and this is what is needed, it is time to think again and probably add a few billion more.

The universal credit journey has not just been a bumpy ride; it has been crash after crash. It is a journey that is rapidly running out of road, with a driver, Captain Chaos, who thinks that dropping down a gear at the last minute will prevent catastrophe. The only thing that can halt this is putting the brake on. We need to stop, radically reform and fix this policy before it is too late. Indeed, the policy may well already be beyond fixing. It is certainly already too late for many of the constituents in my patch and beyond. The Government and the Secretary of State have a choice: they can carry on as they are and preside over another poll tax, or they can listen to the unprecedented number of voices from across civil society telling them to stop and think again. Sir John Major believes that universal credit is “operationally messy, socially unfair and unforgiving”.

That assessment is shared by expert after expert, and by thousands who are affected by the policy. Delays and tweaks will not solve this. It is time to stop, fund and fix it.

4.44 pm

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): No one can say that universal credit does not get a decent outing in the House: we debated it at departmental oral questions on Monday; I responded to an urgent question on it yesterday; here we are discussing it again today; and tomorrow I shall appear before the Work and Pensions Committee. It is of course right that we debate, that we as a Department are held to account and that we listen and improve the system—that is what we are doing with universal credit. In her speech, the Secretary of State outlined all the measures we have taken and all the changes we have made over the past months. It has been about benefiting all our constituents who need support.

In this debate, we, and the Opposition in particular, should never lose sight of what it is that we all came into politics to do, which is to improve the lives of our

[Alok Sharma]

constituents. In the Department for Work and Pensions, it is about not only supporting those who need support but ultimately helping people into work. Of course, helping people into work is about helping people to earn a wage, but it is often also about much more than that. It is about restoring someone's self-confidence, giving them their pride back and fuelling that sense of fulfilment that comes from their being able to support themselves and their family. That is precisely what universal credit does. It is a system that supports the vulnerable, that is fair to taxpayers, that is sustainable and, ultimately, that makes work pay.

As a number of my colleagues pointed out, under universal credit, people get into work faster, stay in work longer and earn more. As the latest jobs figures showed yesterday, our policies are working. They are helping people into jobs.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Alok Sharma: I will not take interventions. I took around 50 interventions, in effect, from colleagues yesterday, so I hope the hon. Lady does not mind.

Unemployment is at a 43-year record low. Youth unemployment has more than halved since 2010. Wages are growing above inflation for the seventh month in a row. Britain is starting to get a well-deserved pay rise as we come out the other side of the terrible economic legacy that we inherited from the last Labour Government. This is a record that we on the Government Benches are proud of.

We heard some excellent speeches today; let me outline some of the comments that were made. We heard a really thoughtful speech from my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper), who pointed out the disaster of the introduction of tax credits. My hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Gordon Henderson) talked about the enthusiasm and commitment of the staff in his local jobcentres. My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) made a really passionate speech. I recently visited his local jobcentre with him and he absolutely cares. When he said that the legacy benefits system sapped ambition, he was absolutely right. My hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) pointed out the problems in the legacy benefits system. My right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel), a former Employment Minister, talked about Labour's welfare trap.

My hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) made a thoughtful speech and pointed out that at the end of the day this is about making sure that work pays. My hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) pointed out that he has constituents who have recommended universal credit to other constituents as something that absolutely works for them. My hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) talked about the legacy benefits system being broken.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien) talked about the fact that under universal credit the incentives to work are absolutely strengthened. My hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire

(Heidi Allen) pays a huge amount of attention to these issues and is incredibly engaged with them. She highlighted our excellent new partnership with Citizens Advice. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson) reminded us that people were trapped on the legacy benefits system. My hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) talked about tax credits.

I could go on. I am sorry that I have not been able to mention all the excellent speeches made by Conservative Members. When Opposition Members have individual issues, they should bring them to us. It is no good talking in generalities; bring forward those issues and we will address them.

The Secretary of State, in her opening remarks, outlined all the reports and the information that we as a Department have already published on universal credit. She made it clear that many independent organisations publish regular reports about universal credit, too. This is not a welfare reform lacking in scrutiny and transparency. However, this is not just about publishing information; it is also about interactive dialogue, which we are having.

We will continue to engage as we move forward for the next phase of universal credit, but playing politics with people's lives helps no one. We should be working together to support the most vulnerable. I urge the House to reject the motion.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 279, Noes 299.

Division No. 243]

[4.50 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane	Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Abrahams, Debbie	Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Ali, Rushanara	Carden, Dan
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena	Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Amesbury, Mike	Champion, Sarah
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Charalambous, Bambos
Ashworth, Jonathan	Cherry, Joanna
Austin, Ian	Coaker, Vernon
Bailey, Mr Adrian	Coffey, Ann
Bardell, Hannah	Cooper, Julie
Barron, rh Sir Kevin	Cooper, Rosie
Beckett, rh Margaret	Cooper, rh Yvette
Benn, rh Hilary	Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Berger, Luciana	Cowan, Ronnie
Betts, Mr Clive	Coyle, Neil
Black, Mhairi	Crausby, Sir David
Blackford, rh Ian	Crawley, Angela
Blackman, Kirsty	Creagh, Mary
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta	Creasy, Stella
Blomfield, Paul	Cruddas, Jon
Brabin, Tracy	Cryer, John
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Cummins, Judith
Brennan, Kevin	Cunningham, Alex
Brock, Deidre	Cunningham, Mr Jim
Brown, Alan	Daby, Janet
Brown, Lyn	Dakin, Nic
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas	Davey, rh Sir Edward
Bryant, Chris	David, Wayne
Buck, Ms Karen	Davies, Geraint
Burden, Richard	Day, Martyn
Burgon, Richard	De Cordova, Marsha
Butler, Dawn	De Piero, Gloria
Cable, rh Sir Vince	Dent Coad, Emma
Cadbury, Ruth	Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Cameron, Dr Lisa	Docherty-Hughes, Martin

Dodds, Anneliese
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Drew, Dr David
 Dromey, Jack
 Duffield, Rosie
 Eagle, Ms Angela
 Eagle, Maria
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Efford, Clive
 Elliott, Julie
 Ellman, Dame Louise
 Elmore, Chris
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Farrelly, Paul
 Farron, Tim
 Fellows, Marion
 Field, rh Frank
 Fitzpatrick, Jim
 Flint, rh Caroline
 Fovargue, Yvonne
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Frith, James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gaffney, Hugh
 Gapes, Mike
 Gardiner, Barry
 George, Ruth
 Gethins, Stephen
 Gibson, Patricia
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Glindon, Mary
 Godsiff, Mr Roger
 Goodman, Helen
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Peter
 Gray, Neil
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Haigh, Louise
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hanson, rh David
 Hardy, Emma
 Harman, rh Ms Harriet
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayman, Sue
 Healey, rh John
 Hendry, Drew
 Hepburn, Mr Stephen
 Hill, Mike
 Hillier, Meg
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hoey, Kate
 Hollern, Kate
 Hopkins, Kelvin
 Hosie, Stewart
 Howarth, rh Mr George
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Jardine, Christine
 Johnson, Diana
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Graham P.
 Jones, Helen
 Jones, Sarah

Jones, Susan Elan
 Kane, Mike
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Killen, Ged
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kyle, Peter
 Laird, Lesley
 Lake, Ben
 Lamb, rh Norman
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Chris
 Lee, Karen
 Leslie, Mr Chris
 Lewis, Clive
 Lewis, Mr Ivan
 Linden, David
 Lloyd, Stephen
 Lloyd, Tony
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lucas, Ian C.
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Marsden, Gordon
 Martin, Sandy
 Maskell, Rachael
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonagh, Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGinn, Conor
 McGovern, Alison
 McInnes, Liz
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahan, Jim
 McMorrin, Anna
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Moon, Mrs Madeleine
 Moran, Layla
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, Ian
 Nandy, Lisa
 Newlands, Gavin
 Norris, Alex
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Onasanya, Fiona
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Osamor, Kate
 Owen, Albert
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Teresa
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Pound, Stephen
 Powell, Lucy
 Rayner, Angela
 Reed, Mr Steve
 Rees, Christina

Reeves, Ellie
 Reeves, Rachel
 Reynolds, Emma
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Rodda, Matt
 Rowley, Danielle
 Ruane, Chris
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Ryan, rh Joan
 Saville Roberts, Liz
 Shah, Naz
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheppard, Tommy
 Sherriff, Paula
 Shuker, Mr Gavin
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Skinner, Mr Dennis
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smeeth, Ruth
 Smith, Angela
 Smith, Eleanor
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Laura
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Owen
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Spellar, rh John
 Starmer, rh Keir
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Stone, Jamie

Streeting, Wes
 Stringer, Graham
 Sweeney, Mr Paul
 Tami, Mark
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, Nick
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Turley, Anna
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Stephen
 Twist, Liz
 Umunna, Chuka
 Vaz, Valerie
 Walker, Thelma
 Watson, Tom
 West, Catherine
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitfield, Martin
 Whitford, Dr Philippa
 Williams, Hywel
 Williams, Dr Paul
 Williamson, Chris
 Wilson, Phil
 Wishart, Pete
 Woodcock, John
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Thangam Debonnaire and
Colleen Fletcher

NOES

Adams, Nigel
 Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aldous, Peter
 Allan, Lucy
 Allen, Heidi
 Amess, Sir David
 Andrew, Stuart
 Argar, Edward
 Atkins, Victoria
 Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
 Baker, Mr Steve
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, Stephen
 Baron, Mr John
 Bellingham, Sir Henry
 Benyon, rh Richard
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Berry, Jake
 Blackman, Bob
 Blunt, Crispin
 Boles, Nick
 Bone, Mr Peter
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, Ben
 Bradley, rh Karen
 Brady, Sir Graham
 Braverman, Suella
 Brereton, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Brokenshire, rh James
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buckland, Robert

Burghart, Alex
 Burns, Conor
 Burt, rh Alistair
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Cartlidge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Chalk, Alex
 Chishti, Rehman
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
 Clarke, Mr Simon
 Cleverly, James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, Dr Thérèse
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert
 Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crouch, Tracey
 Davies, Chris
 Davies, David T. C.
 Davies, Glyn
 Davies, Mims
 Davies, Philip
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Dinenage, Caroline
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Dodds, rh Nigel
 Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
 Donelan, Michelle
 Dorries, Ms Nadine

Double, Steve
 Dowden, Oliver
 Drax, Richard
 Duddridge, James
 Duguid, David
 Duncan, rh Sir Alan
 Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
 Dunne, Mr Philip
 Ellis, Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Charlie
 Eustice, George
 Evennett, rh Sir David
 Fabricant, Michael
 Fallon, rh Sir Michael
 Field, rh Mark
 Ford, Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, Lucy
 Freer, Mike
 Gale, Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 Gauke, rh Mr David
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
 Girvan, Paul
 Glen, John
 Goldsmith, Zac
 Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Luke
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Bill
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Gray, James
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Greening, rh Justine
 Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
 Griffiths, Andrew
 Gyimah, Mr Sam
 Hair, Kirstene
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, rh Mr Philip
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hancock, rh Matt
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harrington, Richard
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Simon
 Hayes, rh Mr John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heappey, James
 Heaton-Harris, Chris
 Heaton-Jones, Peter
 Henderson, Gordon
 Herbert, rh Nick
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hollingbery, George
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Howell, John
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hughes, Eddie

Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
 Hurd, rh Mr Nick
 Jack, Mr Alister
 James, Margot
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenrick, Robert
 Johnson, rh Boris
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnson, Joseph
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Keegan, Gillian
 Kennedy, Seema
 Kerr, Stephen
 Knight, Julian
 Kwarteng, Kwasi
 Lamont, John
 Lancaster, rh Mark
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Andrea
 Lee, Dr Phillip
 Leigh, Sir Edward
 Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Lidington, rh Mr David
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Maclean, Rachel
 Main, Mrs Anne
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, Kit
 Mann, Scott
 Masterton, Paul
 Maynard, Paul
 McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
 McVey, rh Ms Esther
 Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Miller, rh Mrs Maria
 Mills, Nigel
 Milton, rh Anne
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Moore, Damien
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morgan, rh Nicky
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morton, Wendy
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryl
 Murrison, Dr Andrew
 Neill, Robert
 Newton, Sarah
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Parish, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paterson, rh Mr Owen

Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Perry, rh Claire
 Philp, Chris
 Pincher, Christopher
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Prisk, Mr Mark
 Pritchard, Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Raab, rh Dominic
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Ross, Douglas
 Rowley, Lee
 Rudd, rh Amber
 Rutley, David
 Sandbach, Antoinette
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Mr Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, Alok
 Shelbrooke, Alec
 Simpson, David
 Simpson, rh Mr Keith
 Skidmore, Chris
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
 Soubry, rh Anna
 Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
 Spencer, Mark
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, John

Stewart, Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Stewart, Rory
 Streeter, Mr Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, Rishi
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Swire, rh Sir Hugo
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomson, Ross
 Throup, Maggie
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Tredinnick, David
 Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
 Vara, Mr Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Mr Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallace, rh Mr Ben
 Warburton, David
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Wiggin, Bill
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wollaston, Dr Sarah
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:

Amanda Milling and
 Craig Whittaker

Question accordingly negated.

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I gave notice of this point of order to your office this afternoon. It relates to three questions that I tabled on Thursday last week pertaining to the trial and sentencing in Preston Crown court of three fracking protesters who have been released by the Court of Appeal without custodial sentences today.

In those questions to the Attorney General, I asked about an investigation into compliance with the judicial code of conduct in relation to the judge's conduct in that case. Those questions were transferred by the Attorney General's Office to the Ministry of Justice without any explanation. This lunchtime, the Court of Appeal quashed the custodial sentences. The response that I got from the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. and learned Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Lucy Frazer), was along the lines that no Minister should comment on these areas. However, on looking at the list of ministerial responsibilities, it is quite clear that questions about public interest functions, including the reference of sentences to the Court of Appeal, are valid for the

Attorney General. On top of that, the judicial code of conduct, which the Attorney General can look at, talks particularly about family connections.

I seek your guidance Mr Speaker, on the basis on which the Attorney General transferred those questions to the Under-Secretary of State for Justice. She said in her response:

“It would not be appropriate for me or any other government minister to comment on cases which are, or have been, before the courts”,

but that was not the question that I asked. Incidentally, the gentleman who signed off the judicial guidance in the code of conduct is the Lord Chief Justice himself, who today said that the sentences passed by the judge at Preston Crown court were “manifestly excessive”.

Mr Speaker: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order, of which I had not myself received notice, but about the absence of which notice transmitted directly to me I make no complaint. I absolutely accept that he informed my office of this matter, but it may have been when I was elsewhere.

What do I have to say to the hon. Gentleman and for the wider benefit of the House? First, the transferability of questions from one Department to another is exclusively the preserve of the Government. That is not something in relation to which, however infuriating to an individual Member, an explanation is required to the Chair or even really the Member. It sounds as though some attempted explanation was given, but it has not satisfied the hon. Gentleman. It is, however, a power of a Department to shift an answer to another Department.

Secondly, by implication, the hon. Gentleman asks what recourse he has. The answer is that he can table further questions in an orderly manner, with the assistance of the Table Office, to press his case. That is the concept of what I call “persist, persist, persist,” which is not an entirely novel phenomenon in the House of Commons and with which the hon. Gentleman, from long experience and perspicacity, is well familiar.

Thirdly, although the hon. Gentleman cannot insist on the presence of a particular Minister—for example, to answer an urgent question, although I am not suggesting this would be such a case—if he thinks that it is relevant to the Attorney General, rather than to the Ministry of Justice, he can seek to raise this matter at questions to the Attorney General. The question whether he is then called to ask a question would of course fall to me, and he might find that he is successful. He must find out when there will next be questions to the Attorney General, and he should table a question. If he is fortunate in the ballot, he will be on to a very good thing. If he is not successful in the ballot, he should cast his beady eye over the successful questions and decide how he can relate his inquiry to one of the successful questions. He then leaps from his feet and hopes to catch my eye—

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): From his feet!

Mr Speaker: He leaps to his feet. I was not suggesting that he leaps from his feet, but that he leaps to his feet. I am always grateful for what might be called the prepositional advice of the hon. Member for Rhondda. [*Interruption.*] Well, the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden) asked for my advice, and I have given him a very detailed toolkit. The toolkit is available to him, and I hope he will use it.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I do not want to waste the hon. Gentleman too early, so let us save him up for a later point in our proceedings. I am going to hear a point of order from a knight.

Sir Mike Penning: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am leaping to my feet on behalf of colleagues from around the House and their constituents. There is a fine balance between the security of this place—making sure that the staff and everybody who visits this place are safe—and making it as open as possible for visitors so that the public can see this place. With that in mind, the security particularly at the Cromwell Road visitors entrance has been brought to my attention by my constituents and, on investigation, by others. Last night, a constituent of mine waited in the rain for an hour and a half to get into this place for a two-hour event on the Terrace for which they had been charged an awful lot of money, and they only had half an hour at the event. On investigation by myself, I can say this has been happening a lot. It is not just about one night; it is happening a lot.

Mr Speaker, I know that you will say to me, “Investigate with the Serjeant at Arms.” I have done that—I spoke to him at the side of his chair—and I know this needs to be investigated, and he cannot give me an answer now. However, we want this place to be open to the public, and we do not want people to feel that they are being ripped off if they are paying for rooms, which are now very expensive. I seek your advice about how I can raise this issue and have it investigated.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman has raised the issue, and I can understand and empathise with the enormous frustration, not to say irritation, that he and doubtless his constituent feels. His constituent probably feels genuinely let down in this situation, and I will speak to the Parliamentary Security Director about it. As the right hon. Gentleman says, there is a balance, and he speaks with a very considerable personal knowledge and experience of security matters, both from his past career and from his time serving as a Minister. I will discuss it with the Parliamentary Security Director, and I will come back to the right hon. Gentleman as quickly as I can.

On the big picture issue, nobody should have to wait an hour and a half to get into this place, and if that has happened an apology is due, and it should not continue to happen. As colleagues will know, I do not have operational control in this place. I do my best to promote good policy, but I do not have operational control. If this happens, it should not do so: it is not an acceptable state of affairs. I will try to get a satisfactory response for the right hon. Gentleman. I will come back to him when I have further and better particulars, and that will be soon.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. This is quite a long-standing problem. On Tuesday and Wednesday mornings, visitors regularly wait for an hour or more at the Portcullis House entrance—often elderly visitors, in the heat. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel

[Andrew Selous]

Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) is absolutely right that need to address the issue. The way we are treating visitors to this place is unacceptable.

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for what he has said. I do not know for certain whether there are capacity constraints, but if there are, to put it in simple terms, insufficient people available to do the screening and a greater resource is required, I am very happy to see a greater resource. I think the track record shows that I have been very happy to see increases in expenditure in the House. We take note of Government spending but are not obliged to mirror Government spending—the House can spend money as the House thinks fit, within its estimate, and seek a revised estimate if necessary. This must not be driven by resources; the priority is to do what is right by the public and to find the resource to ensure that we can do that. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will understand—he is a very reasonable person—that I cannot give a fuller answer than that now, but I will take both points away. I hope that both he and the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) will feel that they have been heard and understood.

Mr Sweeney: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek your advice on a concern that arose in the preceding debate. Whereas in my constituency when the full roll-out happens the number of people on universal credit will rise from 1,000 to 15,515, other Members hinted that in their constituencies that number would rise only to something like 5,000, so clearly massive differentials in casework will emerge. As Chair of the Speaker's Committee for the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority, could you indicate what the House could do to ensure that Members and their staff are adequately resourced to deal with that differential in casework, which will be significantly stressful, as full migration happens?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has made an important point of some power. It warrants a better response than I am confident I can give off the top of my head. If I may say so to the hon. Gentleman, I will reflect on his point and come back to him.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. The Minister for Employment very kindly offered his services to every single Member of Parliament, to pick up their universal credit cases, which I guess would be a considerable number. Could you advise on not only the pressures faced by constituency staff, but how we can seek a statement on the pressures faced by the already beleaguered staff in the Department for Work and Pensions who are dealing with universal credit?

Mr Speaker: I was not here at the time, so I did not hear that exchange. The Minister was obviously in a very generous mood and wanted to offer satisfaction.

As for how that is resourced, it is a matter for the Department. I can take some responsibility for the resourcing of the House of Commons—and I do take some responsibility for that, including by supporting and initiating projects, either capital or revenue-based, that have cost considerable sums of money—but although the hon. Gentleman is keen to invest me with additional powers, I am afraid that my powers do not extend to increasing or reducing the budget of the Department for Work and Pensions. That is well beyond the ambition and scope of Mr Speaker. The hon. Gentleman's point has been heard. I think that to some extent he is drawing on his experience not only as a Member of Parliament, but as a trade union negotiator. I do not think that a trade union negotiation can be entirely conducted across the Floor of the House, and certainly not via the Speaker.

Chris Bryant: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I do not know whether you have been to Portcullis House recently, but there is a new exhibition on various medals that have been held by a Member of Parliament, a former Member of Parliament and a couple of brave people who were Officers of the House during the second world war. The exhibition makes reference to Sir Arnold Wilson, the then Member for Hitchin, who died in the second world war. To be fair to him, he was brave: he fought in the RAF and he was killed in action against the Germans. However, throughout the 1930s, he was a very pronounced fascist. He regularly spoke in this Chamber in favour of Mussolini and he did intelligence work for the Nazi party of Germany. I personally think that if we are going to show his medals, we should show the full story of how he came to fight in the war, rather than try to obscure his fascist past. Would it not be more appropriate for us to do so? If we want to learn our history properly, we can only do so if we learn all of it, not just parts of it.

Mr Speaker: I do not object to anything the hon. Gentleman has just said. That is news to me, but then I have learnt a lot of things for the first time from him, so this is a continuation of a long-established pattern. I have read his books. I am not sure that they are bestsellers, but I did feel, after reading his two-volume book on the history of Parliament, that I was not only entertained but better educated and an improved person as a result. I would be quite happy for the fuller story to be told. If he wants to pen a suitably brief and succinct encapsulation along the lines of what he has just said to me, there is no reason why it should not be added to the exhibition. On a serious note, I am in favour of transparency. If we are to report the record of a particular person in a laudatory sense, but in a way that perhaps distorts part of the picture or omits important detail, let us include important detail. The hon. Gentleman has sitting near him an illustrious historian, so between them they ought to be able to come up with a succinct version that tells the full story.

Social Care Funding

[Relevant documents: First Joint Report of the Health and Social Care and Housing, Communities and Local Government Committees, Long term funding of adult social care, HC 768; Eighth Report of the Communities and Local Government Committee, Session 2016-17, Adult social care: a pre-Budget report HC 47; and Ninth Report of the Communities and Local Government Committee, Session 2016-17, Adult social care, HC 1103.]

5.22 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House notes that eight years of Government cuts to council budgets have resulted in a social care funding crisis; further notes that 1.4 million older people have unmet social care needs; notes that Government grant funding for local services is set to be cut by a further £1.3 billion in 2019-20, further exacerbating the crisis; recognises with concern the increasing funding gap for social care; further recognises that proposals from the Government to invest £240 million will not close that gap; and calls on the Government to close the funding gap for social care this year and for the rest of the Parliament.

In October 2016, the Prime Minister told this House that her Government would provide a long-term sustainable system for social care that gives people reassurance. Then the Conservative manifesto said:

“Where others have failed to lead, we will act.”

But the Government have failed utterly to act and people in need of care have paid the price of that inaction. It is approaching a year since the Government promised they would deliver a Green Paper, yet it is still nowhere to be seen months after the planned publication date originally scheduled for summer. Since then, we have seen a further £1 billion cut from social care because of the cuts the Government have made to the budgets of the councils that deliver it, with disastrous consequences for the social care system.

The Prime Minister has not heeded her own warnings about failing to act. During last year’s election campaign, she said that

“the social care system will collapse unless we do something about it. We could try and pretend the problem isn’t there and hope it will go away, but it won’t. It will grow each year.”

That is exactly what has happened. The problem has not gone away and it has grown in the past year.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that in addition to the immediate injection of £2.5 billion funding for social care, with 20% of the poorest local authority areas losing nearly £280 million in the past year compared with 20% of the most affluent local authorities gaining £55 million, we also need to address the issue in relation to the deprivation grant funding allocation?

Barbara Keeley: We do need to address that. Things have come to a pretty serious pass.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Following on from that point, one issue I have raised on a number of occasions in this House is the lack of local authority funding for social workers. We end up with a situation where people cannot be released from hospital—we used to call it bed-blocking. Does my hon. Friend agree that this is causing major problems both for local authorities and the patients concerned?

Barbara Keeley: Indeed. My hon. Friend makes a really good point. I noticed that the number of delayed transfers of care due to care packages has started to rise, even though it is not fully winter—*[Interruption.]* Yes, they have, over the last couple of months. The Care Quality Commission has said that in some parts of the country the social care system has now reached the tipping point that of warned of two years ago.

The response from the Secretary of State was to announce that £240 million would be given to councils to deliver packages of home care to people this winter. That is nowhere near what is needed. The social care funding gap is already over £1 billion this year and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) said, it will reach £2.5 billion by 2020 unless the Government intervene.

By my calculations, the Government’s offer will provide only three months’ of care packages for 70,000 people, so when the Secretary of State gets to his feet, will he tell us what will happen to people who need publicly funded home care when the money runs out? What plans do the Government have to provide care beyond the winter?

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): For some people, it is not possible to wait for money to be available. A third of people who are diagnosed with motor neurone disease will die within one year and over half will die within two years. A delay of a matter of weeks can alter someone’s pathway towards death. Does my hon. Friend agree that there is no time to delay?

Barbara Keeley: I very much agree. In recent months, I have met carers of people with MND and one becomes aware of how much time presses on them.

Our motion deals with social care funding, but this debate is really about people, such as the people my hon. Friend just referred to. It is about how society treats older and younger adults, how we should enable them to live independently and with dignity, and how this Government are badly letting them down. I will look today at the damage caused by Government inaction—damage to vulnerable people who rely on social care to live with dignity, damage to the lives of unpaid family carers who have had to step in to care for their friends and relatives, and damage to 1.4 million hard-working care staff, many of whom are so badly paid and so overworked that they cannot deliver the care that people need.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I am not sure whether the hon. Lady knows that in Oxford this is now starting to affect the local NHS. The John Radcliffe Hospital had to suspend non-urgent operations on two separate occasions in March because 170 beds were being bed-blocked. Does she not agree that it is time to see the promised Green Paper on social care, before this winter?

Barbara Keeley: Indeed. As I said, it is now coming up to a year since that was promised and it is about time that we started to see some plans. However, we have to bear in mind that a Green Paper is only the first stage of change—and a very early stage at that, really.

I want to pay tribute to the care staff I just mentioned. There has been a lot of talk recently about low-paid staff and how they will fare in terms of migration policies.

[Barbara Keeley]

Being low-paid does not mean that caring roles are low-skilled. Caring staff are highly skilled. They are a credit to this country, and without their dedication the problems facing social care would be immeasurably worse. Unfortunately, their efforts cannot paper over the cracks that have emerged because of this Government's hammer blows to council budgets. I will come on to talk about the impacts that social care cuts have on people.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): The hon. Lady talked about the Green Paper and how we will fund this in the long term. Obviously, we all have to contribute to that. I was interested that in the last debate she said her party was looking at such things as a wealth tax. I wonder whether she has developed her thoughts on how we should pay for this and whether it will be considering a wealth tax.

Barbara Keeley: We have indeed been doing more work on this, but we laid out in our manifesto—the hon. Gentleman's party did not—what our future plans for social care funding were. We said what the three options for funding social care were and that it would either be one of those three options, or perhaps a combination of all three—I think that the party that is being left behind here is his.

The impact of social care cuts means that less care is now available for older and younger adults alike. Four hundred thousand fewer older people got publicly funded care in 2015 than in 2010, and 1.4 million older people now have unmet social care needs. Put simply, that is over 1 million people who are not getting help with washing, dressing, going to the toilet, making meals or taking medication.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): The hon. Lady mentions the plans in the Labour party's manifesto, but since then the Health Committee and the Communities and Local Government Committee have produced a joint report on the future funding of adult social care that unanimously recommends adoption of the German-style social insurance system. Will Labour consider those recommendations? Is she minded to support that cross-party recommendation?

Barbara Keeley: The hon. Gentleman asked me the same question six months ago, on our last Opposition day debate on this subject, and I will give him the answer I gave him then: he should really be trying to influence his own party. I thank those Committees for the work they did, as the Prime Minister did today. Labour has got as far as producing a White Paper—not a Green Paper. We have a 2010 White Paper, and I have a copy with me. I recommend that Conservative Members who keep asking about this look at the extensive proposals in that White Paper, which followed a Green Paper and an extensive consultation. The party being left behind is the Conservative party.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): For the information of the House, will the hon. Lady answer the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake)? Does she support the measures recommended by the Select Committees—yes or no?

Barbara Keeley: It is really up to the Secretary of State, whose party has not produced any proposals, to answer that. On the point about cross-party working, it is the Conservative party that has no proposals. The only proposals it has come out with are the damaging ones that have now been abandoned.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): My hon. Friend is doing a very good job of reminding the Government that they are the ones in power and the ones with the decision-making powers. If they support the Select Committees' report, they should bring forward their Green Paper and adopt them all in full. They have the opportunity to do that.

I want to ask my hon. Friend about unmet need and the growing gap between social care funding and continuing healthcare funding. I am increasingly seeing severely disabled individuals in my constituency with very high levels of need being bounced from pillar to post between continuing healthcare funding and social care funding, neither of which is meeting their needs. What does she suggest the Government do to bridge that gap?

Barbara Keeley: I suggest that the Government start with the cash injection that our social care system needs. The Labour party promised a £1 billion injection upfront to ease us out of the crisis and £8 billion across this Parliament. I suggest that that would be a starting point and that the Conservative party then tell us how it will fund social care in future.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Barbara Keeley: No, I will not give way; we have very limited time.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) just said, the effects of reduced access to care are very keenly felt, especially by older people, but I want to highlight what happens to young adults with learning disabilities and autism when there is too little funding to support them in the community. A recent BBC "File on 4" programme on transforming care highlighted the impact on young people with autism or a learning disability of being kept in assessment and treatment units for long periods.

The nature of these settings is chilling. A young woman with autism and extreme anxiety called Bethany, aged 17, is being kept in seclusion in St Andrew's Hospital, Northamptonshire, in a cell-like room and fed through a hatch in a metal door, at which even her father must kneel to speak with her when he visits. She is being detained and held in seclusion despite an assessment that the current hospital setting cannot meet her needs and a recommendation that she be moved to a community residential setting with high support. As "File on 4" pointed out, however, moving a young person such as Bethany to a community setting would involve her local council paying £100,000 to £200,000 a year from the adult social care budget, instead of leaving the NHS to pay what is a much higher bill—in this case, £676,000 a year, or £13,000 a week.

The lack of funding is clearly a factor here. Bethany's dad was told by the Walsall Council officer responsible for her placement that her care had already cost the council £1.2 million. To be frank, he said, "Walsall could do with a breather." Bethany is being treated shamefully.

It is hard to imagine someone making a similar comment about the cost of treatment for a young person with cancer.

Bethany's case highlights a growing problem which is part of the crisis in adult social care. Underfunding social care places people with a learning disability or autism at risk of being left for long periods in institutional care settings. Now that I have raised this case, the Secretary of State must look at the state of funding, which leads to perverse incentives for private hospitals like St Andrew's to charge the NHS for keeping vulnerable young people with autism or learning disabilities in expensive and unsuitable placements because the local council does not have the resources to fund a community placement.

The journalist Ian Birrell recently wrote about Bethany's being kept in those appalling conditions, in seclusion in a tiny cell. He asked, "Have we moved far from Bedlam?" The answer is, I am afraid, that we have not. The transforming care programme is making hardly any progress. The most recent data, published in May this year, show that 2,400 people—people like Bethany, with a learning disability or autism—are still in in-patient units, and that is an increase from an earlier figure. Many people in such units are subject to over-medication, inappropriate restraint and seclusion. They can be far from home, and they can be kept there for a very long time. The average stay is more than five years.

As the National Audit Office found, such placements are extremely expensive. In 2012-13, the NHS spent £557 million on people with a learning disability in mental health hospitals. Will the Secretary of State tell us why the Government are still funding the institutionalisation of so many people with learning disabilities, or autism, at great cost, seven years after the scandal of Winterbourne View, after which they promised to cut those placements by half?

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): The very troubling case that the hon. Lady has described illustrates why we, as a House, must get this right. Does she accept that there has been political failure to resolve the issue of how we fund social care, and will she commit herself to taking a constructive, cross-party approach to getting it right?

Barbara Keeley: The hon. Lady has asked me that question a number of times, and I always find it difficult to answer. She will know that my party really tried, but when we produced that White Paper in 2010—when we had a way forward and a set of funding proposals—all that we heard was "death tax". In last year's Budget, the Chancellor raised the issue of the "death tax" again: he said that it was not an option. I wonder how the hon. Lady thinks that Labour Members can talk to a party whose Chancellor has ruled out one of the options right at the start, before anyone sits down and discusses anything. I think that that is impossible. I value the hon. Lady's role as Chair of the Health Committee, of which I used to be a member. Perhaps she will write to the Chancellor, and ask him to stop doing that.

Dr Wollaston: As the hon. Lady will know, this is a pattern that has pinged backwards and forwards with successive Administrations. I repeat that we must get it right. We cannot continue these cycles of political failure. We will only solve the problem—particularly in a hung Parliament—with a constructive, cross-party approach.

Barbara Keeley: I am constantly astonished when Conservative Members talk about a cross-party approach. It is up to their party to come up with some proposals. When it has some proposals, there will be something to talk about. All that we have seen the Conservatives do is to abandon all the proposals that they have previously had. We legislated, in the Care Act 2014, for a cap on care costs and a lifting of the ceiling—the asset threshold—but the Conservatives have abandoned that now. They had a set of policies at the time of the election last year, but they have abandoned that. The hon. Lady needs to speak to her own Secretary of State, and I hope that she can have a constructive conversation with the Chancellor as well.

The Government's cuts have not just reduced access to care in the ways that I have outlined; they have reduced care quality. Cuts mean that there is less good-quality care, which causes great indignity to both older and younger adults. The Care Quality Commission tells us that one in five care services—about 4,000 facilities—requires improvement or is inadequate. In too many care facilities quality is hanging by a thread largely because of the good will and dedication of care staff, but there are times when even their efforts cannot prevent standards falling. In a recent case in Tameside a care home rated inadequate was eventually forced to close for financial reasons. Care home staff were not only not being paid themselves, but they had paid out £5,000 for the food for care home residents, and an agency was owed £37,000 to pay care staff. An earlier CQC report had noted that that care provider had been made bankrupt. During the time before this home was closed, care quality was scandalously low. In 2017 the CQC found that one resident had been left in bed for five months without a bath or shower. It beggars belief that the Government think that care home managers in such situations should be given responsibility in the process for assessing a cared-for person's mental capacity under the proposed mental capacity legislation currently in the other place, but that is what the Bill currently says—even care home managers in that failing home would be given a part in the process of assessing mental capacity—and it seems that the Government will not shift from that. I join others in the other place and urge the Secretary of State to pause the passage of the Mental Capacity (Amendment) Bill and listen to the concerns being raised about his proposals, because that is not a role that should be dumped on care home managers in the way the Bill is trying to do.

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): The Kirklees Solidarity Economy Network in my constituency is working to establish a community-based care co-operative. The model it is developing seeks to demonstrate that a better way is possible by putting people before profit, valuing, rewarding and respecting careworkers, and ensuring that the people receiving care and the workers providing that care have a real say in how the service is run. Does my hon. Friend agree that we could all look to that model in the future?

Barbara Keeley: I very much do and thank my hon. Friend for making that point. There is a great place for co-operatives and mutuals and other such organisations. Organisations like Shared Lives are producing outstanding care in some parts of the country, and we must look at all those models.

[Barbara Keeley]

I want to talk about hard-pressed family carers, because the situation of less care and lower quality care means that family carers are under pressure as never before to step in and provide care. The strain of caring has seen almost three quarters of carers suffer mental ill health and nearly two thirds suffer physical health problems, according to Carers UK. But too few carers can access respite from caring; they are at breaking point.

Problems with poor care quality and a lack of support were highlighted earlier this year in a report by Age UK entitled, “Why call it care when nobody cares?” At the launch of that report, both I and the Care Minister heard from carers like Joyce. At 73, Joyce cares full-time for her husband David who has had a stroke and a massive brain haemorrhage. Joyce has to do everything for David to make sure he is

“clean and comfortable at all times”.

That involves regularly lifting him in and out of his bed or chair to wash him, or take him to the toilet, throughout the day and night. She said:

“It is extremely hard to get good respite care where we live in Cheshire. Our local care home is no longer an option due to being cut as a provider by the local council. I had to fight tooth and nail for the care David currently gets in a day centre—but it just isn’t enough.

I don’t know how I’ll continue to cope without more support and regular respite breaks. Our care was cut in March, the third time that we have had respite care pulled. I am so angry and frustrated, I am so worried at what is facing us at the moment I hardly dare think about it.”

What carers like Joyce need is comprehensive support and carers breaks to allow them to look after themselves as well as the person they care for. What they have received from the Government is the damp squib of a “carers action plan” in place of a proper national strategy.

Labour has already pledged to deliver a national carers strategy as we did with our second national strategy in 2009. That national carers strategy pledged £150 million of funding for respite care breaks for carers. That funding has now disappeared into a black hole in the better care fund, leaving carers like Joyce to fight “tooth and nail” to get any respite at all.

Kevin Hollinrake *rose—*

Barbara Keeley: I must make progress.

For care staff, the combination of cuts to social care funding and increasing demand for care has created the perfect storm of pressures, affecting the quality of care. Care staff themselves are reporting seeing a major decline in standards of care over the past couple of years.

Kim, one member of care staff, told her trade union, Unison, that she

“found it increasingly difficult to provide a good standard of care because of staff shortages and the greater need of clients. Often visits to clients have to be rushed, making medication mistakes by staff more commonplace and no social time for clients.”

Another care home staff member from Lancashire said that

“a lot of the time it feels like we are operating a ‘people warehouse’ and just offering the basics of feeding and personal care.”

I find those comments deeply troubling. They show the direct human impact that the underfunding of social care is having. Staff are rushing from one appointment to another, with no time to talk. They are being seen as “heartless robots as opposed to a lifeline service”.

That is how one care home staff member described her job. Care staff are some of the most dedicated and highly skilled workers in this country, but these pressures, added to their pitifully low pay and their poor terms and conditions, are driving people from a sector where they have never been needed as much as they are now.

The care sector is teetering on the edge of a cliff. Without an urgent response from the Government, it could topple altogether. Ministers in this place talk glibly about making hard choices, but the truth is that this Government have chosen to pursue austerity on the backs of older people and vulnerable adults, who rely on social care. If austerity is now over, as the Prime Minister has claimed, the Government must put in the funding that social care needs to bring it back from the brink.

At last year’s election, Labour outlined a plan to invest an additional £8 billion in the social care system. We want to lift the quality of care and to lift access to care and support for carers before moving on to build our new national care service, as outlined in our White Paper. The Prime Minister said last year that the Government would act. They must now commit to a sustainable long-term funding plan. I urge hon. Members to vote for our motion tonight, to ensure that the Government honour the Prime Minister’s promise, because the people who need care, their family carers, and the care staff who care for them deserve better than this.

5.46 pm

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): Each and every one of us in this House recognises and values those who care, from care workers to nurses to the millions of unpaid carers who look after loved ones. I think the whole House can unite behind the statement that how we care for the most vulnerable is a mark of our civility as a society. Across our country, in our NHS and in our care homes, so many people dedicate their lives to caring for others. I want to address the pressures we face in our social care system in the short term, as well as the long-term reforms we must take to ensure that our social care system is sustainable and fit for the future.

Right at the start, I want to address the individual case of Bethany, which the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) rightly raised. On seeing the reports of the case in the media, I immediately asked for an investigation inside the Department, along with NHS England and the Care Quality Commission. This is clearly a distressing case—it was initially brought to my attention by Ian Birrell—and we will get to the bottom of it. More broadly, the number of in-patients is now down to 2,375, a fall of 17% from March 2015, including 600 who had previously been in hospital for five years or more. So there has been some progress, but there is clearly more to do and the hon. Lady was right to raise the issue.

Barbara Keeley: I gave the House a statistic of 2,600. Bethany’s dad, who is campaigning on her behalf, wants to see her in a proper community placement, but there are thousands of Bethanys. This is a serious matter. We had a debate here on transforming care a few months ago, but very little has happened since.

Matt Hancock: As I said, progress has been made. There has been a reduction of 17% in the number of in-patients—down from 2,875 in March 2015 to 2,375

on the latest figures—but I would fully acknowledge that there is more to do and I am determined to see that happen.

Our population is ageing. More people are living longer and, as a society, we must address the challenge that that creates for social care. To put that into context, over the next 25 years, the number of people aged 75 and over is set to double and the number of people aged 85 will rise by more still. Of course, this is good news. It is down in part to the hard work of our NHS. Cancer survival rates are at a record high and strokes are down by a third, but with such successes come new challenges. For instance, we are seeing a rise in dementia and in age-related conditions, with 70% of people in residential care homes now suffering with dementia.

Debbie Abrahams: Will the Secretary of State agree to support a dedicated dementia fund, as proposed by the Alzheimer's Society, to recognise the inequity given the additional care costs that such people would be paying?

Matt Hancock: I have seen that proposal from the Alzheimer's Society and we are looking at it now. At the same time, we are working on both the Green Paper for the future of social care, which will come before the end of the year, and the long-term plan for the future of the NHS. The interaction between the two is important.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Does the Secretary of State accept that there is actually a lot of support on the Government Benches, the Opposition Benches and, indeed, across the country for the Joint Select Committee's proposals. The concept is that, if everyone who can afford it pays something, that means that no one has to lose everything, and that is not only worth while, but urgent.

Matt Hancock: I will come on to the proposed funding reforms. My hon. Friend is right that there is support for reform across the House, but there is support for different types of reform in different parts of the House. I respect the shadow Opposition spokeswoman, but it would help if she could bring more clarity to the Opposition's position, updating the proposal that they put forward in 2010, which I will come on to in some detail. That will help if they want to genuinely contribute to this debate.

Of course, social care is not only a challenge of old age. The number of people of working age with care needs is also growing. Many of us in this House will know the pain and difficulty of helping a loved one who needs constant care or faces dementia. Such pressures bring long-term challenges, and we must ensure that both the NHS and our social care system can respond to the challenges we face.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): There is an acute nursing shortage in this country. According to the CQC, nursing homes may need to re-register as residential homes, possibly due to the difficulty in recruiting enough nurses, which would have disastrous consequences for some of the country's most vulnerable old people. With the looming prospect that Brexit will further restrict our ability to recruit nurses from Europe with the necessary skills and talent, does the Secretary of State agree that he needs to do everything he can to ensure that the nursing home sector does not collapse?

Matt Hancock: There are more nurses on our wards than in 2010, but it is important that we have more in the future, and a whole run of work is going on to ensure that we can get more nurses right across the NHS and the social care system, including community nurses. As we put £20 billion extra into the NHS, we are going to need more nurses as a result. The nursing associate route is now available in social care, and there is a policy programme to try to ensure that we answer the exact question that the hon. Lady rightly identifies.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): In the light of what my right hon. Friend just said about the long-term nature of the challenges, may I put to him the question that the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee put to the Opposition spokeswoman? Does my right hon. Friend agree that the only way to get a decent long-term solution for all the people who will need social care is by doing so on a cross-party basis with a wide degree of consensus?

Matt Hancock: I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend's work in this area. He is incredibly thoughtful and has been prepared to ask some of the difficult questions and give his answers to them. I agree that this is something that we should take forward on a cross-party basis wherever possible. I will come on to the long-term funding in a moment, but I just want to address directly the question of short-term funding.

I query the Labour party's motion because 80% of local authority funding was reliant on the central Government grant in 2010, and that is no longer the case. Looking only at the central Government grant is an inaccurate way of assessing the question. For instance, we introduced the social care precept directly to address some of these costs. It would be far better if this debate took place in the context of the available budget for social care, which is increasing by 8% in real terms over the four years from 2015-16 to 2019-20. The debate should be based on facts rather than partial facts, and that is how I will seek to proceed.

Quality is important, too, and 83% of adult social care settings are now rated good or outstanding by the CQC. The figure has risen from 79% in just the last year, and it is the highest since measurement started in 2014, but I want to see it rise further still.

The links between the social care system and the NHS are important, too. No one should stay in hospital longer than necessary.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): My right hon. Friend is right to highlight the link between healthcare and social care. If we are to care properly for people with the long-term conditions he has outlined, we need to have a more joined up and integrated system. It is hard to deliver that when we have a taxpayer-funded NHS and a social care system in which many people now have to pay for their own care. In looking for a cross-party solution, which he is open to, will he consider that we may need to look at a taxpayer-funded solution for funding social care so that we can deliver the transformative integrated care we want for older people?

Matt Hancock: Part of the social care system is, of course, tax payer-funded, but I also value the contributions that people make to social care. They are an important

[*Matt Hancock*]

part of keeping the system strong. We dismiss those contributions at our peril, but I agree with my hon. Friend that we need to make sure we get more funding and better integration between the healthcare and social care systems. We can do that with different funding sources, as long as we have better organisation on the ground.

We must make sure we have the appropriate amount of care available so that people can leave hospital at the right time; people should not have to stay in hospital longer than necessary, as it reduces their dignity and quality of life and leads to poorer health outcomes, as well as putting unnecessary pressure on the NHS.

Since February 2017, more than 1,900 beds have been freed up in hospitals by reducing NHS and social care delays, yet we know that the winter months bring increasing pressure on adult social care services, which can have a knock-on impact on hospitals. On top of the rising social care budget, we are providing an additional £240 million for adult social care capacity this winter, which will help councils to get patients home quicker and free up hospital beds for more urgent and acute cases.

Today I have published the allocation for every local authority in England, and the Barnett formula will apply to allocations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Individual allocations include, for example, £1.3 million in Salford and £1.5 million in Leicester.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): My constituents and my local council are thankful for the funding increase of £870,356, which will help the adult social care situation in Solihull. We have a lot of people over the age of 65, including 40% of the Silhill ward alone.

Matt Hancock: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's work in making the case for more support for adult social care in Solihull, and to support the NHS in Solihull through that. I hope the funding we have announced today will help in Solihull, and the people of Solihull should know they have an excellent champion who has helped them to get that funding.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): To address delayed discharges, it is crucial that we have transitional care and extra care in place. Will the Secretary of State look at York's proposal for building facilities on an adjacent site to make that happen?

Matt Hancock: That is an interesting proposal, and I have seen others similar to it. We are looking at the link with housing as part of the Green Paper, and I have been discussing that with the Department concerned. The point the hon. Lady raises is important. I note that £731,800 has been allocated today to improved adult social care in York, to take the pressure off the NHS in York this winter. I hope that she will acknowledge that fact.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): In Scotland, like in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, we have seen unbearable cuts to councils, which have made the problems of funding social care get worse. Does the Secretary of State agree that the Tories

and the Scottish National party have to get a grip of the situation and give the councils more resources? They have given out figures for the Barnett formula. What is Scotland actually getting?

Matt Hancock: Through the Barnett formula, we have made available funding for Scotland today, which in England we are spending on adult social care. I very much hope the SNP Government in Holyrood will make sure they do the right thing by this funding and ensure that it goes to helping people get out of hospital when they medically can leave hospital but need care once they get out. I think we are agreed between us that the SNP Government in Holyrood should spend this money wisely.

Melanie Onn: I am keen to learn how much extra my constituency is getting, given that the Secretary of State is doing a roll call of all that. I also wish to ask him about the comments he made about the streams of funding for social care and healthcare. Is he proposing that funding would be ring-fenced? There is a concern that when we try to integrate the two, urgent healthcare will always come before social care.

Matt Hancock: That need not necessarily be the case. It was slightly disappointing that the hon. Lady, who is normally a great champion of cross-party working, did not welcome the £780,000 extra for Grimsby, but you can't win them all. The people of Grimsby need to know that we are there to support them and to support their local NHS.

I now turn to the long-term funding pressures. The lifetime care costs of a 65-year-old today are about £45,000 on average, but those total average costs that people face are not distributed evenly. Some people face no care costs at all, whereas the care costs for someone with dementia who lives into their 90s can run into hundreds of thousands of pounds. As a society, that is the challenge we face, yet right now there is no way to predict or insure this potential financial burden. We are committed to ensuring that everyone has access to the care and support they need. However, as has always been the case, that must be based on the principle of shared responsibility. With sensible planning, people should not have to fear the risk of losing everything. The adult social care Green Paper, which will be published later this year, will bring forward a range of ideas to address the long-term challenge. We want to learn from what has been proven to work, with one example being the auto-enrolment pension reforms, which have been taken forward on a cross-party basis over a decade. The rate of opting out has been remarkably low, and this has put in place the foundations for the strengthening of our pensions system over time. The Green Paper will propose a range of options and ideas, learning from both the UK and from around the world.

Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con): The Secretary of State has said that he wants this debate to be based on fact, not partial fact, so may I have his assurance that research behind the Green Paper has taken full account of overseas options, which provide insurance models and choice, taking us well beyond these simplistic more tax solutions to address this complex problem?

Matt Hancock: Yes; I enjoyed reading that report on my summer holidays and thought the research that underpinned it was very interesting. Of course, the taxpayer does contribute to the system, but we cannot rely only on the taxpayer to support the growing cost. Some people propose the answer that the taxpayer should simply fund everything, but I do not think that that is a valid solution.

Alongside the reforms to the funding, we need to transform our care system, so we will look into how the Government can support innovation and encourage new models of care provision. That will include looking at the role of housing and how we can replicate the very best models that combine a home with quality of care. For instance, I love the examples of combining care provision for the young and the old. I pay tribute to the doctors behind the “Old People’s Home for 4 Year Olds” project, which is good viewing on Channel 4. We also need to better support people through well-designed aids and adaptations, and we must ensure better support for carers, too.

Kevin Hollinrake: The Secretary of State is making some good points, but may I press him on the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (Andrew Lewer) about the social insurance recommendation in the Select Committee report? The shadow Minister refused to confirm whether she would consider the findings in that report; will the Secretary of State agree at least to consider the proposals and recommendations that were delivered on a unanimous cross-party basis?

Matt Hancock: Yes, absolutely. I am considering them. In fact, I shall go further and say that I am attracted to the insurance and contribution model. There are many different potential details in how such a model can be delivered, but I am very much taking that Select Committee report into consideration as we draft the Green Paper.

Alongside ensuring that the funding is in place, we need to make sure that we support carers. In June, we published the carers action plan, a two-year package of support for carers to ensure that they are properly recognised, helped and valued in a way that supports their health and wellbeing. The Green Paper will go further and propose how society can strengthen support for carers as a vital part of a sustainable health and social care system.

The guiding principles behind the Green Paper will be sevenfold: first, improving the quality and safety of care; secondly, integrated care, with the NHS and social care systems operating as one; thirdly, giving the highest possible control to those receiving support; fourthly, better practical support for families and carers; fifthly, a sustainable funding model supported by a diverse, vibrant and stable market; sixthly, greater security for those born with care needs or who develop those needs in later life; and seventhly, a valued NHS and social care workforce. Those will be the principles behind the Green Paper, and I hope that we can build cross-party support for it.

As a society, we need to rise to the unprecedented social care challenge that our generation faces. For the sake of future generations, we must act now to build a better and more sustainable social care system, in the short term and the long term, that ensures that people

are properly valued: a system both for those in need of care and for their carers, a system that supports carers—not only those who work in care homes but those who care for loved ones at home—and with the goal of building a sustainable health and social care system of which we can all be proud.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I wish to manage expectations in this debate. By my calculation, I estimate that when we come to Back Benchers, there will probably be less than half an hour, so I will have to impose an immediate four-minute limit. Colleagues would be very popular if they kept to less than that, because others would be able to get in. Of course, that does not apply to the Scottish National party spokesperson, whom I am about to call. If colleagues want others to get in, I urge them to take even less than four minutes.

6.9 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Here we are discussing this issue again when we discussed it just before the summer recess. That shows not only its importance but the fact that we are not making progress. We were promised the Green Paper last year. Then it was late last year, then early this year, then autumn 2018. I gently point out that it is now autumn 2018.

The five year forward view talked about managing demand in the NHS if there was an absolute game changer of an increase in public health to try to reduce the demand at the front door of the NHS, an increase in funding and provision of social care to stop funding haemorrhaging out the back door of the NHS. Unfortunately, what we have seen over the past five years is ongoing cuts to social care. I am sure that the £240 million for the winter from the Secretary of State is very welcome, but it is not nearly enough, and we will just keep on having this debate unless we can move forward and have a serious debate around the Green Paper.

As was mentioned earlier, Age UK estimates that more than 1.2 million people are not getting the care that they require. Need has increased by almost 50% since 2010, and yet there has been a decrease of 26% in England of local authority funded places. One third of people needing care are totally dependent on their family. It is estimated that 6.8 million people—that is one in 10 of the UK population—are involved in caring for a loved one, either full-time, part-time, or topping up care. Age UK also estimates that one third—700,000 people—receive no care whatever.

Despite an almost 9% cut in their budget, the Scottish Government spend £163 per head more on health than the UK Government—the Minister might actually want to listen to that, having made snide remarks about the Scottish Government—and £157 per head more on social care. Scotland is the only country in the UK that provides free personal care, and we have sustained that since 2002. That has led to less than one third of the increase in A&E attendances and emergency admissions in Scotland over the past five years compared with England. The system is really expensive and it is challenging, but it reduces delayed discharges and it reduces emergency admissions, and the estimate is that it is still cost-effective. I suggest that the Government might want to look at that in the Green Paper.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): In my constituency, the Barchester Alexandra Court Care Home has closed, with 53 residents losing their places. That was because Glasgow City Council's funding has been cut by 10%, yet the discretionary spend for Scottish companies has been cut by only 5%. Surely that is a disproportionate cut in social care in Scotland. Although the objectives are laudable, we have seen continued pressure on social care in Scotland as in the rest of the UK.

Dr Whitford: There is no question but that there is pressure. There is no question but that all the systems face the pressures of increased demand, workforce and money, but if the hon. Gentleman would like us to match funding down here, then we will remove £881 million from our health budget and, obviously, that £157 a head from our care budget. We spend more per head of population in Scotland—considerably more. *[Interruption.]* That is one of the mantras that is always heard down here, but may I point out that, for a Barnett consequential of 9.3%, the Scottish Government have to manage one third of the UK landmass—that is roads, rail, GP practices, hospitals and schools.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Dr Whitford: No, I am sorry, I will not give way. Members want to make speeches, but if they intervene on me, there will not be any.

In Scotland, we have been working for the past five years on integrating health and social care. I can say that it is an awful lot harder than the job that we did of integrating primary and secondary care, simply because one side is tax-funded and the other involves multiple private companies and is means-tested. We are already working on that. Our integrated joint boards manage one half of our health budget along with local authority funding. It is about shifting money from hospital into primary care, mental health, community care and social care.

There are three particular groups who need social care. The frail elderly mentioned by the Secretary of State, the number of whom will escalate massively in the coming 20 years, need support and comfort, and most of them would like to be at home. The home care hours in Scotland have doubled over the past seven years, which allows people with more complex needs to be cared for at home, so as not to end up in a care home or to land acutely in hospital.

As was mentioned by the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon), who is no longer in her place, end of life is a critical issue; it is a point at which time is of the essence. Since 2015, all Scottish local authorities have provided free personal care to people defined as having a terminal condition—facing the end of life—even when they are under 65. The Government should look into such a measure, as it provides dignity.

Working age disability accounts for a huge chunk of social care funding. These people want to be mobile and to be allowed to participate in society, and it is important that that is what they do—that they are not just stuck away somewhere, as might have been the case many years ago. From April, under Frank's law, which was named after the footballer Frank Kopel, under-65s with degenerative conditions, not just disability, will be able to receive free personal care. That includes people

with early dementia and multiple sclerosis. We ask that the DWP does not then rob these families of that money by cutting other disability allowances.

I mentioned the workforce, which is an enormous challenge in the health service and one with which every local authority, integrated joint board, company and care home is struggling. Despite the workforce in Scotland increasing by 11% over the last three years, it is becoming harder to recruit. Brexit only makes that harder because a significant proportion of social care staff are from Europe.

We need to make social care a career—to be decent to carers by paying them the real living wage, not the pretend one, and by paying them for all the hours they work, even at night. It is important to treat people with dignity if we want them to treat our loved ones with dignity. Carers should have job satisfaction from having time to care. Having 15 minutes to flit in and out does not provide job satisfaction, and it does not provide satisfaction or continuity for the patient or the carer. There needs to be a career structure. Caring should be looked upon like nursing, with training, investment and a way of staying in that career. It should not just be some job that people do until they get a job on the checkout at Tesco because that pays better.

We have talked about being able to discuss the Green Paper, but unfortunately there is no sign of it. It is meant to offer an opportunity to rethink care. The Nuffield Trust suggests looking at the Japanese system or the German system, which has already been mentioned. It is noticeable that levers have been built into the Japanese system so that demand can be controlled, and that means that eligibility may well change. On the plus side, the system in Japan is a holistic one and it looks at the global wellbeing of the older population—so if we do look at these other systems, we should look at them in their entirety.

The German system is based on social insurance. Well, does that not ring a bell? We used to have national health insurance, but then the “health” was dropped. Maybe we should think about whether national insurance should really stop when people retire. Perhaps we might set a level above anyone who is living only on the state pension, because there are pensioners who are very well off and who suddenly stop paying national insurance exactly at the point when their health, care and social needs start to increase. We need to look at all these options, but it is crucial that there are no sudden changes—that we do not have a WASPI situation, whereby the goalposts suddenly move with only a couple of years' notice, and that we do not have a measure like the one in the Conservative manifesto last year that was then labelled the dementia tax.

We need to discuss this issue as adults, to look around the world and to look at the demands ahead. Older people and people with disability across the UK need to be able to live a life of decent quality, with dignity.

6.18 pm

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): There are just 15,000 centenarians in the UK today, but the population aged 90 and over is growing rapidly. One in six people alive today—more than 10 million—will reach triple figures and get a letter from Her Majesty the Queen. Social care is at the heart of a system that must ensure that

everyone can live a long and fulfilling life, and that is both an opportunity and a challenge. I welcome the Government's action in this area, which is reflected by the Care Quality Commission's conclusion in its annual state of care report that 82% of adult social care services are good or outstanding.

I commend the hard work of carers, professionals and management who work tirelessly every day to make sure that our loved ones receive the best possible care. That is certainly the case in my region. Across Hampshire, 26 of 28 care homes provided by Hampshire County Council are rated good or outstanding by the CQC. That includes, in my constituency, Malmesbury Lawn care home in Leigh Park. But we need to continue this success, and funding is an important aspect of that. I welcome the fact that the Government have given local authorities an extra £2 billion over the next three years to meet these challenges. I also welcome today's announcement by the Secretary of State of the extra £240 million to help adult social care get through this winter. Hampshire will receive over £4.7 million, and that is extremely welcome.

However, it is clear that money is not the only issue that needs to be debated and is not the only solution to the challenge of a growing and ageing population. Only by embracing technology, as the fourth industrial revolution accelerates, can we keep more people out of care homes and in their own homes. Some local authorities are already moving forward at pace with ambitious plans to make sure that new technology plays a role in revolutionising social care. In my own region, Hampshire County Council has been at the forefront of the new wave of assistive care technology. That includes alarms worn by patients that can detect falls and epileptic fits, and even have GPS capability in case a dementia sufferer wanders from their care home. Around the county, 8,600 people benefit from supported by assistive technology.

The roll-out of such technology has saved the council about £7 million in domiciliary care and care home costs, so there is a financial benefit to it. Hampshire has also become the first authority to work with Amazon in trialling a new customised version of its Echo device to support people to live independently in their own homes, which should be one of the goals of the social care system. I commend the council's Liz Fairhurst, the cabinet lead for this area. It is right that she has been shortlisted for the Local Government Association's councillor achievement awards for this year. She has been a fantastic leader of adult social care services across Hampshire, and other county councils are following its lead.

The use of technology in adult social care is exciting and necessary. However, as I said in my Centre for Policy Studies paper published in May this year, we can make full use of all these technologies only if we end the culture of fax machines, pagers and paper in the NHS. Just as the NHS must go fully digital over the next 10 years, care homes, the care sector and local authorities must also be digital-first. That is the key to making sure that we can make the most of technology to help alleviate the challenges of adult social care in the years ahead. As the baby boomer generation ages, we have a new generation of tech-savvy pensioners who will be going through our care system for the first time. They will be a generation comfortable with new technology and willing to embrace digital care.

I understand that the pressures on the care system are not just financial, and that technology is not a silver bullet, but by deploying technology we can unlock savings, alleviate funding pressures, keep more residents in their homes, and deliver a better service. I hope that these aspirations will be reflected in the Secretary of State's Green Paper when it comes out in the weeks ahead.

6.22 pm

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): This year is the 70th anniversary of the NHS. It is also the 70th anniversary of our social care system, but that has received far too little attention to date. It is not getting any of the national celebrations—the birthday cakes and cards—and certainly none of the £20 billion birthday present that the NHS received from the Prime Minister.

Yet social care is more important than ever before. A quarter of older people now need help with daily living—getting up, washed, dressed and fed. More adults with physical and learning disabilities need substantial packages of support. There are 1 million paid care workers and 6.5 million unpaid carers. Yet despite the fact that this touches so many people's lives and that there is an increasing demand, we have no sense from the Government of the reality of the situation. There has been a 10% cut in real terms in social care spending, with 400,000 fewer people getting any kind of help and support. A third of carers have to give up their job or reduce their hours to look after their loved ones, and a quarter of the paid care workforce leaves every single year. There is nothing from Government Front Benchers—no sense of the urgency of the challenge we are facing.

We cannot solve this problem without substantial extra funding. The Health Foundation says that we need £6 billion just to maintain the current inadequate system. It is not good enough.

Over the last 20 years, we have had 12 Green and White Papers and five independent commissions, but we have not solved this problem, and we need to understand why. Most people think that they are not going to end up needing this support. When they end up needing it, they do not realise that many of them will have to pay. They think the current system is unfair, but when radical proposals have been put forward for how to fund the system, they believe that those are unfair too.

This issue has been a political football. Labour was accused of imposing a death tax, and the Tories were accused of imposing a dementia tax—but it is not the politicians who suffer; it is the people who use the services and their carers. We cannot go on like this any longer.

I believe that one of the reasons this issue has not been solved is that much of it is about low-paid women who work in people's homes and care homes invisibly. Caring is not valued, and we have to change that.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech and she is an expert in this area. She is right; the language we have heard today is all about the challenges and the costs. This is an infrastructure issue, and it needs to be treated as such. Because women lead this workforce, it is not considered an infrastructure issue, and if we did that and changed the language around this, we would have a completely different debate. Does she agree?

Liz Kendall: I absolutely agree. If a third of parents had to give up work or reduce their hours because they could not get childcare, it would be a national scandal. We need to make social care as much a part of our economic infrastructure as childcare, and we have to wake up to that.

The reality is that we face a choice: either we leave individuals to pay for care, through no fault of their own, with only the wealthy able to afford to put aside extra money—the idea that a “care ISA” will solve the huge challenge of social care is, quite frankly, ridiculous—or we pool the costs and share the risks for a fairer and more equitable and efficient system. My view is that we have to look at the contribution of wealthier older people, not just the working-age population who are already struggling with so much of the cost of daily living.

Alongside extra money, we need real reform. We have to change and improve the way we offer care and support, to give people more choice, say and control and to ensure that care is personalised and flexible around the needs of individuals and families, not just one size fits all. We have to shift the focus towards prevention, early intervention and promoting genuine wellbeing. We have to put people who use care and have lived experience at the heart of the system, in terms of both policy and delivery. That is what has to be in the Green Paper. I cannot believe we are still without it. The Government need to get a move on and take action.

6.27 pm

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall).

Two years ago, Greater Manchester became the first region in the country to have devolved control over its health and social care services, with a significant budget of £6 billion. My constituency sits in the Stockport Council area, which is one of the 10 local authorities in the combined local authority. Greater Manchester is home to almost 3 million people, with a thriving economy bigger than that of Northern Ireland or Wales, yet life expectancy ranks among the lowest in the country, and figures vary significantly across the 10 boroughs of the region. There are differences even at ward level. For instance, in Bramhall South and Woodford in my constituency, men and women live 12.4 years longer than someone living only 5 miles across the borough in Brinnington and Central.

The rising number of older people across the country means that there will be a greater need for health and social care support in both the short and long term, and we have to approach this in different ways. In his speech last week, the Mayor of Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham, indicated that a unique opportunity for the region is

“to integrate health with everything—early years, education, community safety, housing and employment.”

Successive Governments have long argued for that, and only recently are this Government the ones that are tackling it.

To provide effective support and truly implement integrated services, we must enable care to move out of hospitals and into communities, closer to where patients want to be—in their own home. The hospital transfer pathway, more colloquially named the red bag initiative, is already proving to be an effective tool in that regard, and care homes in my constituency have been chosen to

pilot its effectiveness. The red bag holds standardised information about a patient’s general health and existing medical conditions. Most importantly, it clearly identifies the patient as a care home resident. This means it is possible for the patient to be discharged sooner; the care home is able to support the resident, and the knock-on effect is to ease the pressure on hospital services and to free up beds.

At this point, may I welcome the £1.28 million that will be given to Stockport Council in social care winter funding? Since the devolution settlement two years ago, Stockport has striven to create a more person-centred health and social care system. An extra £41 million is being spent on GP practices by 2021 to make it easier to see medical professionals at convenient times.

Nationally, GPs spend at least a fifth of their time on non-medical issues. In Greater Manchester, we have identified the need to address health through other means—specifically, social prescribing. It is a relatively new innovation in the health service. It is a means of enabling GPs and other frontline staff to refer people to services in their community, instead of offering only medicalised solutions. These services range from gardening to walking or arts and leisure. As a direct result of social prescribing, evidence suggests that there have been 28% fewer GP consultations and 24% fewer A&E attendances. Research also indicates that 90% of health problems are affected by the patient’s wellbeing. Social prescribing has been described as “absolutely fabulous” by one patient, who has said that

“my whole perspective of life has been changed!”

Through Stockport Together’s programme, the borough has developed a collective local approach to improving health and care outcomes aligned with the overall Greater Manchester strategy. I appreciate that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to addressing social care, but by partnership working and working together, we can address this issue and deliver the social care that people want and deserve.

6.31 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Nothing brings home the reality of the problems we face in social care like the experience of our constituents. A month ago, I was contacted by the son of a constituent. His mother, who has Alzheimer’s, had a care package in place that was working well and she was being kept at home. However, she also has heart problems and, sadly, she was admitted to hospital, via A&E, some weeks ago in July. He told me that she is now well enough to leave hospital, but her care package cannot be reinstated. She certainly could not go home without support, and he was becoming increasingly frustrated at the lack of a care plan. He feared that the longer she stayed in hospital, the worse her overall health would become. He found that totally unacceptable, and I have to say I did too, and I immediately took up her case with the local authority. Officers looked into this case and found that, yes, despite the best efforts of the social work team, it had not been possible to find a provider to fulfil my constituent’s needs. Other people are also waiting for a care package, as providers cannot be found quickly. Like her son, I find this an appalling situation.

I tell this real-life story not to tug at the heartstrings, but because it reveals a few of the problems we have with the current social care system. My constituent has

high needs due to her physical and psychological conditions. She was fortunate—pre-hospital admission—to have an established care package that worked for her and helped her to live independently. We know that there are many people across England who have unmet needs. They are unmet because the funding is not there to give them the help they need and that local authorities would wish to give them. This cannot be right.

The case reveals very clearly another problem in our social care system—the fragility of the home care market in many parts of the country. What a state we are in when we cannot find people willing to provide help to those who need it; when providers are unable to run a business employing people who will do that job; and when the price local authorities are able to pay is set at too low a level to provide any service at all. I want to make it clear that I want to see our social care services directly provided by local authorities to restore such control.

The case also reveals another problem with our social care system: that of not treating our social care workforce with dignity, respect and, yes, providing them with decent pay and conditions. These staff look after the most intimate needs of our most vulnerable people, and the least we can do is give them a level of pay that recognises the skills they need. To do that, we need a plan for social care. We need more money to provide the care that people need to remain independent and to help people at an earlier stage. We know that earlier intervention works and reduces pressure on the NHS.

As we approach the Budget, I call on the Minister to ensure that local authorities have the funds they need to provide that care. An extra £240 million will not put things right—and yes, I know how much it is in Gateshead; I have looked it up. It is just another piece of string trying to hold together our pressurised social care system. I also call on the Minister to talk to local authorities and our trade unions about establishing a pay system that recognises the importance of working in social care and the skills involved. In short, we need a thoroughly thought-out and resourced national workforce strategy for social care.

Owing to time constraints, I cannot talk about residential care, but we need to resolve the sleeping situation. I am aware that there is an appeal, but those staff deserve to be considered and paid properly.

6.35 pm

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist), who made a very good speech. It is a shame that we have such a short time to debate this, because it is one of the key issues of our lifetimes and will impact all of us in many different ways—it is impacting my life. I am absolutely blessed with the most wonderful in-laws, and I am saying that not just because I am having dinner with my wife in an hour, but because, frankly, they are absolutely golden people. We are dealing with issues of social care as a family, often from far away. The challenges, which are multifarious, varied and deep, affect every part of our life in ways that cannot be understood until one is in that situation.

We are part of the sandwich generation, and my town is at the frontline in that respect. We have an ageing population. I was told by a member of my staff that we have an older population than Eastbourne—I am not

sure what that is supposed to imply, but we do. According to Solihull Council, by 2036 one in four of our population will be over 65 and fully 5% will be over 85.

Time and again I encounter on the doorstep what Age UK has dubbed the “silent crisis”—people quietly trying to look after elderly loved ones behind closed doors. They often do so just out of pure love and decency, and often they have care issues themselves. My experience, from knocking on some 30,000 doors across my constituency and from my family, has driven home how essential it is that Members on both sides of the House, despite dogma and party politicking, try to come to a long-term solution. We have to work together to find the bold solutions needed to put social care on a stable, sustainable footing. That is why I welcome the report from both Select Committees. Many of its recommendations make a lot of sense. It is essential that we accept that this problem cannot be met with a patch-and-mend approach, yet providers and local authorities need support to ensure that the level and quality of social care provision match need in the short and medium term. However, unless these measures are accompanied by a serious root-and-branch strategic review of how we fund and deliver social care services—one that recognises that many of the problems currently facing the sector are not down merely to insufficient funds—they will provide, at best, only a temporary reprieve.

That is the challenge we all face. We will have to debate this for many years to come, but we have to get there. We owe it to our kids; we owe it to our parents.

6.38 pm

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): I want to make a brief contribution, picking up on the excellent contribution by my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall). The Minister said earlier that he sent money out to various local authorities, which is welcome, but frankly it is a sticking plaster. It would have been great if he had come and said, “I have heard the outrage and frustration across the country about the number of people who have to stay in hospital because there is no social care for them, people who have inadequate care and people who cannot get the care they deserve, and I am bringing a Green Paper to Parliament today. I will ensure that it is looked at and dealt with as a matter of urgency, and then I will bring a White Paper. We will actually grasp the nettle and sort this out.” The hon. Member for Solihull (Julian Knight), unless I misheard him, rightly agreed. Unless we get a hold of this issue, this debate will happen again in six months, a year, two years and three years.

The Secretary of State challenged my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) on parties working together. If he has read our manifesto, he will have seen that, before it says how we are going to spend the money, it says that we commit to working on a cross-party basis to sort this out—it says it in the manifesto. But people have to mean what they say. It is no good all of us in the Chamber saying that we agree if, the first time a shadow spokesperson or a Minister gets up and says something, people decry it. That will not work and we will, in the end, let the people of this country down.

That is what I wanted to say, Madam Deputy Speaker. People are raging about this; Parliament should be raging. The Secretary of State and Ministers—they are

[Vernon Coaker]

Ministers of the Crown—have it within their power to get it sorted. That is what this debate and this Parliament is saying to the ministerial team today: let's get this sorted. The people out there deserve it.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. To try to get as many people in as possible I am imposing a three-minute time limit. If people can take less than that, that will obviously help.

6.41 pm

James Cartledge (South Suffolk) (Con): In light of that, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will be as quick as I can. I will make two quick points.

One point that has to be made—I am sorry—is that in every debate on this issue, those on the Labour Front Bench bang on about cuts to local authority spending in the 2010 Parliament, which we accept, and which have been followed up, since 2015, with higher spending. But what did the Labour manifesto promise in 2010? This is absolutely critical. It promised to:

“protect frontline spending on childcare, schools, the NHS and policing”.

It did not promise to protect local government spending. It went on to say:

“We will drive forward our programme to strip out all waste... We recognise that investing more in priority areas will mean cutting back in others.”

Labour would have cut local government spending, the same as we did. And what did it say about how it would pay for its reforms to social care? It said that they would be paid for

“through savings and efficiencies in the health budget and in local government.”

There is no parallel universe in which where would have been billions more to spend on local government under Labour.

On a far more positive and constructive note, I have one key point on long-term spending that I would like to make to my hon. Friend the Minister. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), who has made the point many times about the German system. He has said that we should have more of an insurance-based system for those in the working population. The key issue relates to those who are retired and have assets. My request would simply be for there to be a choice. For example, there should be a choice between relying on your assets if you wish to take that risk, or paying some kind of lump sum or similar insurance fee, which could even be taken from your estate, so that you would be covered. You either share the risk or take the risk. I think that that is a very fair principle. I am not going to say any more than that or take any interventions, because of the time and because I know that others wish to speak. We need to have choice in the system for those with assets.

6.43 pm

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): I thank the shadow Secretary of State for mentioning my constituent Joyce, who has literally become the face of hundreds of

thousands, maybe more, who are in a similar situation, by featuring on the front cover of Age UK's aptly named report, “Why Call it Care, When Nobody Cares?”.

Why are people like Joyce being so badly let down? In my opinion, the answer ultimately lies in the marketisation of adult social care. It has been characterised by stealth over four decades, initially as a limited initiative to improve choice and create a competitive mixed economy, and then to the virtual elimination of public sector provision. There has been growing tension between the need for private companies to sustain a profitable business and the needs of vulnerable people for care and support. Local authorities have had an almost impossible task with ever-stretched budgets and they have been reduced to the role of commissioning authorities. What does this result in? Money matters; people's care does not.

Due to a lack of access to the care system for members of the public, people who pay for their own care, often at very high prices through their homes, their life savings and their pensions, subsidise both state-funded residents and the state. Despite that, the care market in England is highly unstable because of the significant cuts to local government budgets and the growing role of private companies operating business chains based on high risk financial models. We have already seen failures of care homes in my constituency. No serious thought has been given to how to deal with this prospect and the policies that have been introduced are too insubstantial to make any real difference.

I also wish to touch on the sleep-in crisis, on which I, like many others, campaigned for justice. In July 2018, the Court of Appeal delivered a ruling that was a hammer blow for thousands of careworkers who work sleep-in shifts. The Court denied these workers the hourly minimum pay that is the very least that they deserve. In the aftermath of that ruling, Unison—and I—made a commitment to those careworkers and everyone affected that we would keep fighting for what is right. Everyone who understands the work of careworkers knows that sleep-in shifts are working time, so they must be paid that way. If someone is not allowed to leave their place of work, are obliged to be away from their home and family, and are up and down all night caring for those in real need, they are at work and should be paid for it.

The problems in social care are clear, and Labour Members believe that now is the time for action rather than further reviews and more consultations. We will build the national care service that this country deserves: a needs-based compassionate service that provides dignity in later life and promotes independent living for working-age adults with disabilities; that is based on people and not profit; and that, like the NHS, is seen as a wealth creator and not a burden.

6.46 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): A former US President once said that there are no easy solutions, but there are simple solutions. What we need to solve this problem is a simple, scalable and sustainable solution.

Ideally, when people look for a solution, they try not to invent a new one but to find one that somebody has already used for that problem. That is exactly what the Joint Select Committee inquiry did. It looked at the German system. We looked at it twice, in our earlier report and in the joint report between the Health and

Social Care Committee and the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee. We looked at it cross-party and unanimously came to the conclusion that this was the right solution for us. It is a social insurance, not a tax.

The hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) mentioned that national insurance would be a suitable vehicle. National insurance went the same way as every other hypothecated tax—it was spread around general taxation. That is not the right way; it must be separated from government.

This solution is simple and scalable. It is not easy, but it is simple and cross-party, and I very much hope that both the Opposition and the Government will support it.

6.47 pm

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): I pay tribute to the work not just of the social care workers in my constituency, but of the ambulance service, with whom I recently spent a day on a shift. Over about 10 hours, we saw a mere four jobs, thanks to the geography of Lincolnshire. Three of the four jobs dealt with the consequences of people needing a different social care package from that which the current system is able to provide them with. We need to see the White Paper, but when we look at the reform of the current system, we need to work with the ambulance service and the police, and crucially to bear in mind that this is not simply a problem of ageing. One of the three jobs I mentioned that were about social care support involved a mental health issue. In the current set-up, we are not dealing with the respite care and social care needs of people with mental health problems as well as we are dealing with physical problems. I appeal to the Minister to pay tribute in her closing remarks to those workers—I am sure that she will—and to look at this system in the round.

6.48 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I will be very quick, given that the Front Benchers are waiting to speak. This is a key debate for Torbay, and I particularly highlight the experience in Torbay of integrated health and social care. Pooling budgets between the council and the local NHS is making a difference. It is a model that needs to be looked at and adopted across the country. Hopefully, given that this is such an issue for my constituency, I will have more than 30 seconds to contribute to a future debate, but at least we have had some time for this issue today.

6.49 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I begin by thanking hon. and right hon. Members for their contributions from across the House. It is the convention to mention Members by their contributions. I apologise that, because of the time restrictions that have been put in place, that is not possible.

I pay tribute to all who work in our social care services, whether they work in the NHS or our councils or are paid or unpaid carers. We have been here before. I have a sense of déjà vu. It was in April that we called for immediate action from the Government to address the crisis in social care, yet here we are, months later, and no progress has been made. Since then, we have had a new

Health Secretary and a new Communities Secretary, but still no new ideas and still no Green Paper. There is only so much longer this sector can wait.

Given the lack of support from the Government, and in the face of year-on-year cuts, local government has been forced to step up. With the Cabinet too busy squabbling among themselves and in the absence of any Government action, the Local Government Association has published its Green Paper on social care. It is worth the Government considering some of the responses that the consultation received. According to the District Councils Network, the

“adult social care crisis is the single largest problem facing local government services and their financial sustainability”.

Karin Smyth: The Green Paper commends Bristol City Council for its Well Aware project. Will my hon. Friend join me in congratulating Bristol on that online and telephone advice and guidance service, which has proven so popular, and will he or the Minister visit to see how it works in practice?

Andrew Gwynne: Absolutely. I am always happy to visit my hon. Friend’s city of Bristol and to see the great work it is doing in very difficult circumstances—Labour local government leading the way and making a difference where it matters.

The LGA estimates that adult social care services face a £3.5 billion funding gap by 2025—just to maintain existing standards of care—but councils in England receive 1.8 million new requests for adult social care a year, the equivalent of almost 5,000 extra cases a day. It is a national scandal. The Government should feel ashamed that 1.4 million older people are now not getting the necessary help to carry out essential tasks, such as washing themselves and dressing. That is 20% more people without care than only two years ago. One of the people experiencing adult social care said of their provision:

“I haven’t washed for over two months. My bedroom floor has only been vacuumed once in three years. My sheets have not been changed in about six months and my pajamas haven’t been changed this year. My care workers don’t have time for cleaning, washing or changing me”.

Those words were taken from a report by the Care and Support Alliance into the state of care in the UK, and it makes for heartbreaking reading, but we have yet to see a Minister even acknowledge that a crisis in local government funding even exists. “We introduced the social care levy,” said the Secretary of State. No, they enabled councils to raise more council tax in a limited way, but a 1% increase in his council’s council tax raises a very different amount from a 1% increase in my area. That only widens the inequalities and the unfairness.

The Secretary of State’s big announcement at the Conservative party conference of an extra £240 million of emergency funding for adult social care should not be celebrated; it should be a source of shame. The Conservative leader of West Sussex Council summed up the response to the announcement:

“I am not skipping round—I am really cross about it. It’s half a crumb. It’s not even a crumb.”

Earlier this year, the former Secretary of State for Health made a candid admission to the British Association of Social Workers, when he accepted his share of responsibility for the lack of progress since the Tories entered government in 2010. The crisis is a result of this

[Andrew Gwynne]

Government's policies. Our Prime Minister has given up and our councils are at breaking point, but the Government remain committed to their programme of cuts, taking £1.3 billion extra funding out of local government next year. Let that sink in for a moment. It is now being reported that nearly 50% of council heads are seriously worried about impending bankruptcy in their councils, which should send shivers down the spines of members of the Government. One of the chief executives surveyed by *the Local Government Chronicle* said:

"The next three years are secure if we can manage the demand in adults and children's services...a complete lack of policy means that even with a well-run council and relatively strong local economy we are likely to start to significantly struggle in 2021/22."

That is the reality, and that is why I commend our motion to the House.

6.55 pm

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinanage): In the very limited time that is left to me, I will begin by thanking all the Members who have contributed to the debate. Unfortunately, I shall not have time to name them all, but I want to address some of the points that they have made. I want to reaffirm our commitment to the social care system and to ensuring that it is fit to face the challenges of the future. I also want to look ahead to the Green Paper. Most of all, however, and most importantly, I want to pay tribute to the amazing hard work and dedication of the people—both those in the social care workforce and informal carers—who play such a vital role.

A number of Members, including the hon. Members for Leicester West (Liz Kendall) and for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), made points with which I agreed about the importance of cross-party working and not using this issue as a party political football, but I disagreed with the claim made by them and others that we are complacent. We are absolutely not complacent. We absolutely recognise the need to act. It is because of the Government's prudent actions that overall funding for social care in 2019 will be 8% higher in real terms than it was in 2015. But we also know that there are short-term pressures on local government in particular. That is why we have given councils access to up to £9.64 billion more dedicated funding for social care over the three years up to 2019-20.

Today the Secretary of State reiterated his recent announcement that the Government would provide £240 million for additional adult social care capacity this year, but that is far from our only contribution to the sector. Since 2017-18, we have been able to allow councils to raise their council tax by up to 3% per year, specifically to help them to respond to the pressures facing adult social care. Those additional resources will help councils to commission care services that are sustainable and diverse, and offer sufficient high-quality care. We have seen a real difference in services across the country. We have also discussed winter resilience and allocated £145 million to NHS trusts to upgrade wards and procure beds.

As we have made clear today, the funds that we have already put into the system have stabilised the market and enabled councils to respond to the short-term pressures they are facing, but we are aware of the future challenges

faced by the care system, and our Green Paper will also present proposals designed to make our social care system much more sustainable in the long term.

The motion refers to cuts amounting to £1.3 billion. That is wrong. It is entirely misleading to refer only to the revenue support grant when councils have access to council tax, business rate retention, the social care precept, and other funding to deliver their local services. It is right that more of our money that is spent locally is raised locally. In 2010, councils were 80% dependent on Government grants; by 2020, they will be largely funded by council tax and other local revenues. We have been backing councils in England with £200 billion for the delivery of local services in their communities between 2015 and 2020. This year's settlement includes a £1.3 billion increase in the money available to councils over the next two years, which means that they will have more money to enable them to deliver for their local communities.

The motion claims that 1.4 million older people have unmet needs. By passing the Care Act 2014, the Government established a national threshold that defines the care needs that local authorities must meet—and they can exceed it if they wish. That eliminates the postcode lottery of eligibility across England.

The Secretary of State has announced that the workforce is one of his top three priorities, and he is keen for us to find ways to support staff better and make it easier for them to work in the NHS and social care. To improve engagement, we have launched an online platform, "Talk Health and Care", to give support workers an opportunity to interact with the Government. We are also launching a recruitment campaign this autumn to raise the image and profile of the care sector. We continue to work with our delivery partner, Skills for Care, to provide a range of resources to attract, train and retain the brightest staff.

The Government are absolutely committed to a social care system that delivers high-quality care for all, and we hope that the Green Paper on care and support that we will publish later in the year will be a catalyst for debate.

Mr Nicholas Brown (Newcastle upon Tyne East) (Lab) *claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).*

Question put forthwith, That the Question be now put.

Question agreed to.

Main Question accordingly put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House notes that eight years of Government cuts to council budgets have resulted in a social care funding crisis; further notes that 1.4 million older people have unmet social care needs; notes that Government grant funding for local services is set to be cut by a further £1.3 billion in 2019-20, further exacerbating the crisis; recognises with concern the increasing funding gap for social care; further recognises that proposals from the Government to invest £240 million will not close that gap; and calls on the Government to close the funding gap for social care this year and for the rest of the Parliament.

6.59 pm

Barbara Keeley: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Yet again the Government sit on their hands and refuse to vote on a key social care motion. We have heard in this debate some moving cases of people whose lives are being damaged by the crisis in social care, but no solutions from the new Secretary of State for Health and Social Care. We do not need more warm words

which we have just heard from the Care Minister and other Ministers. We need action to close the funding gap. If the Government disagree with our motion, they should have the guts to vote on it, and shame on them for not doing so.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): The hon. Lady has put her point of view on the record. As I am sure she knows, there have been undertakings by the Government that in response to situations like this there will be a report back to the House at a future date, and I am sure those on the Treasury Bench will have heard the points made.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 3 and 4 together.

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

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

That the draft Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (Adult Education Functions) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 23 July, be approved.

That the draft Tees Valley Combined Authority (Adult Education Functions) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 23 July, be approved.—(*Amanda Milling*.)

Question agreed to.

PETITION

Public Land for Public Good: Bootham Park

7.1 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I rise to present a petition on behalf of my constituents and others further afield concerning the repurposing of the site of Bootham Park Hospital, York—public land for public good.

I thank the exactly 2,000 residents who have signed the petition, and the 6,386 residents who signed it online—a total of 8,386 residents. I am delighted that all public services—local authority, NHS and police—and all political parties support the proposal to repurpose the site for healthcare and a public park, rather than the development of a luxury hotel and luxury apartments.

The petition states:

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to accept the proposals put forward by York Teaching Hospital in co-operation with City of York Council

to continue providing healthcare for the people of York and to provide affordable and social housing for key-workers who are NHS staff.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that the publicly owned estates of Bootham Park Hospital should be retained within the health sector using One Public Estate programme for developing integrated health and social care services; further that a sale of the land to the highest bidder will not deliver the social value that is so desperately needed; and further considering the land is adjacent to the acute hospital and is available to reconfigure services to deliver cost effective and modern health care, with a new transitional care unit, urgent care and extra care facilities, with accommodation for the third sector and to retain the public grounds as a new public park for York.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to accept the proposals put forward by York Teaching Hospital in co-operation with City of York Council to continue providing healthcare for the people of York and to provide affordable and social housing for key-workers who are NHS staff.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002269]

7.3 pm

The Minister for Security and Economic Crime (Mr Ben Wallace): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Last Thursday, the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) asked an urgent question on foreign fighters and the death penalty. During the questions, I was asked whether there had been any previous occasions when the UK Government had shared evidence without seeking or securing death penalty assurances from a foreign Government. In my reply I stated that on two occasions previously such exchanges had taken place under successive Governments. However, I wrongly asserted that the hon. Gentleman himself was a member of the Government at the time of one of these. He was a member of the governing party in the early 2000s, when the occasion happened, but he was not in the Labour Government. For this I apologise to the House and to the hon. Gentleman, and I hope this point of order will serve to correct the record.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the Minister for giving me notice of his point of order. I understand he has also informed the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) of his intention to come to the House to correct the record, and I am sure it will be appreciated that he has done so at the earliest opportunity.

Drug Trafficking: County Lines

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Amanda Milling.)

7.4 pm

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): I am really pleased to have been able to secure the Adjournment debate this evening on the crucial matter known as county lines. This long-distance drug running is bringing misery to towns such as Barrow and coastal and rural areas right across the country, as well as to the big cities where the drug gangs operate, where thousands of young people are being coerced into what is effectively—and what is being prosecuted as—modern-day slavery in order to run drugs from the big cities to areas such as mine.

To be clear, there have always been issues of drug dealers getting into other areas, but the scale of the problem is now unprecedented. The Government's own figures, which I will ask the Minister to confirm, suggest that the problem is spiralling out of control, with an exponential rise in the number of these dedicated mobile phone lines in towns such as mine. People use them to order drugs, which are then couriered by young people, often against their will and under the threat of violence. Communities such as mine are finding themselves awash with drugs, to a level that they have not seen before, and seeing the kind of drug-related violence that has previously marred big cities but has thankfully kept away from towns such as my own.

The *Daily Mail* reported an excellent investigation on its front page today, and some of the figures were truly astounding. It found that county lines were bringing in around £7 million to drug gangs every single day, which equates to £2.5 billion a year. The new national county lines co-ordination centre, which I am sure the Minister will want to say more about, has revealed that each mobile phone line is making about £5,000 a day. British Transport police said recently that it arrested 476 drug couriers using the railways, of whom more than 100 were classed as frequent train travellers.

The effect of county lines on these young people is predictably devastating. The children's charity Safer London believes that 4,000 children are involved in the capital alone. A National Crime Agency report last year showed that nearly every police force area in England and Wales had been affected to some degree. Of the 44 forces, 35 mentioned knife crime linked to county lines and 32 mentioned gun crime. Academic evidence shows that county lines drug-selling gangs are generally much more violent than the local dealers who previously controlled the market.

Last month, I was able to bring together Members of Parliament, senior police officers from across the country, the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service and his opposite number, my hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), as well as charities from across the country, to talk about this issue. The representative from the National Crime Agency suggested that, according to the latest estimate, there had been 1,000 county lines in operation last month. That figure suggests an increase of more than a third on the 720 that were reported last year. However, the *Daily Mail* reports today that that same organisation now estimates the

number to be 1,500, which would be a nearly 100% increase in one year. I would be grateful if the Minister could clarify those figures.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for bringing forward this important debate. York has also had a real challenge with county lines. Does he share my concern that North Yorkshire police is going to withdraw its special operation on county lines? Surely all police authorities should be investing in special operations to deal with this issue.

John Woodcock: That does indeed sound concerning, and I can understand why my hon. Friend wonders why that is happening, particularly at a time when police forces are focusing on how they can put more resources into this and achieve more co-ordination. This issue goes beyond the traditionally drawn boundaries between police forces, and therefore requires a greater level of intelligence sharing, co-operation and co-ordination than was used to tackle traditional drug operations in past decades. The message from the seminar was that, yes, greater police powers and more investment in the police are necessary, but also that we cannot simply arrest our way out of this situation. Agencies need to come together, and health, safeguarding and education need to play a role.

Turning to what is happening in Barrow, which is what spurred me to call for this debate and do this work on county lines, 12 people suffered drug-related deaths between December 2016 and April this year—a four-month period. To put that in perspective, there were 66 drug-related deaths per 1 million people nationwide last year, yet Barrow saw 12 such deaths in four months in a town of only 67,000 people. The community is rising to the challenge, which is focused on an estate called Egerton Court, where four of those 12 deaths occurred. By the end of the year, a multi-agency hub will be operating out of Egerton Court to try to remove the stigma, change the culture and show drug dealers that that they can no longer ply their pernicious trade with impunity in the area.

However, so much more needs to be done. I want to hear from the Minister about the Government's latest thinking. I have two proposals that I hope they will consider seriously, and the first relates to the public transport network. In previous years in Barrow and elsewhere, drug dealers would arrive by car and get their produce in using that method. Now, however, younger people are being used, and most of them are reliant on the public transport network because they are too young to drive, so coach drivers, cabbies and train guards can be the eyes and ears of the police service. The Government recognised that with the publicity campaign they launched earlier this year, so I would like to hear about how that is going and how widespread it is.

Posters are not enough on their own, though. I hope that the Minister will agree to speak urgently to his colleagues at the Department for Transport, who are pressing ahead with changes to franchises on so many train lines that pretty much require train operators to remove guards from trains. It is the guards who can detect and pick up on signs when something does not look right. Many of these young people stick out like a sore thumb because they are travelling alone and look vulnerable, so public transport staff can play a vital role in alerting the police.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman acknowledged that we cannot arrest our way out of this problem, but I am a little worried that he wants to bring train guards into this war on drugs. Has he considered the option of regulating and controlling this marketplace, which would take all the power away from criminal gangs?

John Woodcock: The hon. Gentleman is a long-time advocate of the legalisation of drugs, but I do not think that that is the route to go down, given the horror that drug use causes, never mind the criminal activity around it. That would not get much support in Barrow.

Properly training public transport staff in what to look for can be a positive thing. I hope that the Home Office will consider investing in training, intervening to stop guards being taken off trains and, importantly, offering rewards to people who are prepared to speak up, tip off the police and stop this trade along the major public transport arteries on which it relies.

Secondly, the Government need to do more to crack down on landlords and property owners who effectively turn a blind eye to this trade, and who get rich off drug money by not asking questions and not looking too closely at what is happening in their property. At the moment, a long-standing provision in the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 makes it an offence for someone to allow their property to be used in that way, but there has to be absolute proof that they had specific knowledge. That allows too many landlords and, potentially, owners of holiday lets, hotels and caravan parks not to ask questions and to make money by allowing these people into our communities to do incredible damage.

Will the Minister consider changing the burden of proof so that a landlord is required to act, and can be prosecuted if they do not act, where there is reasonable suspicion that their property is being used for cuckooing, with drug dealers coming in to deal from the property temporarily? That is another huge part of the problem, and the vast majority of police forces say that it is happening in their area.

I will leave it there because my right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) wants to speak, and I am happy for her to do so. I look forward to the Minister's response.

7.16 pm

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) for securing this debate and for the helpful and useful seminar he pulled together last month.

I asked to speak in this debate because I secured a similar debate in Westminster Hall in January, and I am pleased that there is now a debate in this Chamber. In the past year alone we have seen an 85% increase in violent crime in Enfield, which sounds unbelievable. My hon. Friend is right that such county lines criminal activity is increasing week on week. It is an amazing business model, and the children who are involved in it are both victims and perpetrators. The National Crime Agency has warned about this for the past three years in their reports to Government, and the Government are very late in coming to this issue.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is making a powerful point. Child criminal exploitation is on the rise, and it is putting

huge demands on our police services. Some 19,000 children were off-rolled in our schools last year, and the Government do not know where 10,000 of them are. Does she think the Government should be investigating the causal link between those two things?

Joan Ryan: Absolutely. This is a hunting ground for those seeking to recruit and groom children into this criminal activity—this business model.

I will not take much time, because we want to hear from the Minister. The serious violence strategy and the national county lines co-ordination centre are welcome steps in the right direction, but they are late and are not enough.

There are some fantastic projects in my area, including the Godwin Lawson Foundation, which goes into schools to educate young people and to support teachers. The North Enfield food bank and Jubilee centre has early intervention programmes and mentoring schemes. Those things work, but organisations do not have the capacity to scale up, which is what they need to do. A multi-agency approach is needed.

We have seen £161 million slashed from our local council budget alone, we will see £1 million taken out of our local public health funding by 2020, and we know that the Government have cut £22 million from the capital's youth services, which makes it almost impossible to scale up the things that work. We need much more action, but action can only happen if it is resourced. This is a scandal and we need to protect these children, who are vulnerable and are leaving Enfield with every orifice stuffed with class A drugs to sell in areas such as my hon. Friend's constituency. We know that these people are applying the same county lines model in their home area. They are not just leaving London boroughs to do this; they are doing it in London boroughs and outside. That accounts for this rapid growth. Please, Minister, we need more resources to deal with this.

7.20 pm

The Minister for Security and Economic Crime (Mr Ben Wallace): First, let me congratulate the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock), a near neighbour, as I do not live that far from his constituency, on raising an important issue. Not only has the right hon. Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) held a previous debate on it, but I spoke in the good and important Westminster Hall debate held by the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown). What strikes me about county lines is that sometimes the debate goes from the ground up—from the vulnerability of the young people up—and sometimes it is about the organised criminals at the top coming down. That is the challenge we face with county lines.

County lines gang activity and the associated violence, drug dealing and exploitation has a devastating impact on young people, vulnerable adults and local communities. That includes the impact on the hon. Gentleman's constituency. As has been reported, last week brought the sentencing of two south London men, drill rapper Daniel Olaloko and Peter Adebayo, who ran a county line from London all the way to Barrow—that is 300 miles. Other areas in Cumbria are also affected: Connor Halliwell and Kieran Howe were sentenced in September for county lines drug dealing in Kendal; and there is an ongoing trial of a 16-year-old London schoolboy for dealing in Carlisle.

[Mr Ben Wallace]

The plus side of those convictions is that some of those people were the leaders of organised crime groups in London, and it was not just low-level individuals who were taken out. One reason we have seen a shift of London organised crime groups to Barrow—the hon. Gentleman will be interested in this—is the work that was done regionally, through the organised crime unit, to take out some of the Merseyside gangs that were blighting north Lancashire and Barrow. The gap left by their displacement has been filled with London organised crime groups. With the technology that they use, they can be quick to exploit gaps and vulnerably.

Let me try to answer the point made by the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) about North Yorkshire police. All the work we have done on tackling county lines shows that some of the best ways to respond to the organised crime group is through the region, rather than just through the home force. The home force can play a role at spotting exploitation and cuckooing, but if we are to cut the head of the snake in the organised crime groups, it is often best done through the organised crime unit. I am sure that if she were to engage with her regional organised crime unit, the people there would be able to show her some of the work going on across the whole of Yorkshire. I do not think that it would be a case of the police not doing it; I suspect they have moved it into a regional or even a national response as a way to tackle some of the challenges and ensure they have the specialties needed to take on some of the secure communications these people use.

John Woodcock: If the current co-ordination efforts do not prove sufficient, is the Minister alive to the possibility of designating a lead force, in the manner that the Met works on counter-terror for the whole country?

Mr Wallace: I know that the hon. Gentleman has called for that. The national county lines co-ordination centre is about trying to fill that space. It is not just a couple of desks; it is more than 40 officers and staff, centred, pulling together not only the intelligence, but some of the investigations and response. They are making sure the investigations are in the right place, so that where we pick up someone who is low-level, we can trace across to an organised crime group that is already under investigation by the Met, for example. That is one of the main aims of this co-ordinated approach—the county lines co-ordination centre. I have arranged for some hon. Members to get a briefing by the National Crime Agency on that, and I am happy to facilitate that for the hon. Gentleman if he would like.

Time is tight, so I will not be able to deal with all the points, but I will write to the hon. Gentleman about some of the figures. We recognise the figures that he used. We assess around 1,500 lines in service as of July. The improvements from the national county lines co-ordination centre's work with the National Crime Agency and the National Police Chiefs Council has started to have an impact already. Last week, the centre co-ordinated the first in a series of regular intensifications of activity targeting county lines. In one week alone, there were more than 200 arrests; 58 vulnerable people, including a number of children, were identified and safeguarded; deadly weapons, including hunting knives,

a firearm with ammunition, an axe, a meat cleaver and a samurai sword, were seized; tens of thousands of pounds of suspected criminal cash were seized; and significant quantities of heroin, crack cocaine and other illegal drugs were seized. That is in one week, which shows the benefit of that co-ordination. Whether it is a single force or, I would venture, a co-ordination centre, that shows what can be done when we focus and bring our efforts to bear.

We need to be clever about how we prosecute these individuals. In some cases, we prosecute them under the Modern Slavery Act 2015 for in effect trafficking the children up and down the country. On 4 October, Zakaria Mohammed was sentenced to 14 years for human trafficking offences, but he was leading a county lines drug cartel operation. That was an important way to deal with it.

Ronnie Cowan: The Minister is outlining success stories—big arrests, big sentences and big drug seizures—yet the problems continue to get worse. Is it not perhaps time to consider other tactics?

Mr Wallace: The problems are getting worse, and this business model is a fantastic business model, as the right hon. Member for Enfield North said, partly because of the turbo boost that communications give these people. Secure communication and end-to-end encryption mean that people can order with total impunity, because it is very hard for us to get into the telephones to see what they are doing. They can use modern technology to resupply and communicate, and to launder the money at the same time. I do not agree that the approach should be to legalise drugs. In my experience, criminals are interested in the margins, not the product. If we legalise one drug, they will push fentanyl tomorrow; if we legalise fentanyl, it will be another. They want the margin: in my experience, it is the money that drives them, which is why we have to do more work.

The right hon. Member for Enfield North correctly talked about prevention. We need to harden the environment. The hon. Member for Barrow and Furness is always full of good ideas, and he will have seen in our latest counter-terrorism Bill that I have absorbed some of them. I think that is a polite way to say that I have nicked them. I certainly believe that he is right about somehow making sure that people take responsibility. We cannot arrest our way out of this problem, so we have to burden-share. We have to educate the public. We have to educate taxi drivers in Barrow. Both modern slavery and county lines often hide in plain sight. It is amazing how many people in effect work in slavery on our high streets and no one does anything about it or thinks about it. Someone might have had their nails done but never said to themselves that most of the women working in the nail bar were probably—more often than not—victims of human trafficking. That is why we have to try to encourage part of the wider community—the hon. Gentleman may say we should legislate—because they have a role to play.

When I saw a Merseyside county lines group get taken apart, it was brilliant to see the way the Merseyside local authority worked alongside the local police. When it came to dismantling the group, the people who needed care got care and the people who needed to be prosecuted—some of them were young; they are not all

vulnerable—were prosecuted. One challenge we have is that not all the 15 or 16-year-olds are exploited; some of them are pretty hard and dangerous. At the same time, we took some assets, and in the end the Merseyside police, in public, pulled down the gates of the organised crime group's house, to show that permissive society was not going to tolerate that behaviour. That group's operations went all the way into Lancashire, so it was a good success.

I absolutely hear what the right hon. Member for Enfield North said about the need for better prevention, community provision and diversion for these young people. I have a list as long as my arm that I think I sent to some Members in the context of the previous debate on this subject. We have the anti-knife crime community fund. The Home Secretary has announced a £22 million early intervention youth fund and a £200 million youth endowment fund. There is an £11 million modern slavery innovation fund, which is all about trying to deal with that in the communities and how we can wrap around it.

We also support and fund local authorities that are engaged in mapping county lines. I definitely urge hon. Members to encourage their local authority to seek to do that, and the Home Office and the police will support them in delivering such action—with our funding rather than theirs. In that way, local authorities can get an understanding of what is going on in their very community. It is a phenomenon. Although I understand the pressure on the police—I am not deaf to the challenges around that and to the fact that more will need to be done—the biggest single contribution from what I have observed has been mobile communications, encryption and money laundering in a way that is so different from the past. Those lines can be run from the very top of an organised crime group in Colombia. The group can order, resupply and get delivery so that drugs arrive on the doorsteps of our communities.

We all have a role to play—a really strong role—to make sure that schools do not go down the exclusion route, because that puts many of those young people out on the streets to be preyed upon. We have to do a lot of work around the permissive society. What we find is that there are a few areas—they are significant and solid—where these crime routes are coming. There are communities that are permitting the organised crime routes to become strong enough to send people into our communities. Work on permissive societies is something that we all have to address.

Organised crime might involve someone buying an illegal pack of cigarettes behind a bar. They might say that it does not really matter—a bit of a knock-off at the local bar—but people do not realise that that pack of cigarettes is moved by people who move women on a Monday and children on a Tuesday, and flog drugs on a Thursday. Someone might say, “Wink, wink, I got this a bit cheap down the local bar,” but that person is fuelling and helping organised crime. We all have a role to play. We must tackle permissive societies, harden the environment, get everyone knowledgeable about what is out there to stop young people being exploited and help our local authorities to deal with those cases. It will be a growing issue. Co-ordination, planning and investment will be key. I from my end and the organised crime end will help to support such action through the serious organised crime strategy, which is due to be launched very soon, and I know that the Minister responsible for crime reduction is keen to tackle this from the bottom up. We will make sure that we work across the Government and across parties to try to achieve that.

Question put and agreed to.

7.31 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 17 October 2018

[STEWART HOSIE *in the Chair*]

Local Government Reform: Greater London

9.30 am

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): Before we start, you can see that we are not oversubscribed. I would like the summing up to start in an hour's time. Say everything you need to say, but please do not feel that you need to take all the time if it is not appropriate. I call Andrew Rosindell to move the motion.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered local government reform in Greater London.

Thank you very much, Mr Hosie, and good morning to all. I am grateful for this opportunity to open what I hope will be a wide-ranging debate on the structure and responsibilities of local government across London and the need to embrace the need for fundamental reform that will better serve the people of this great capital of our nation in the decades to come. I wish to begin a conversation involving both sides of the House with the constituents that we represent.

Our United Kingdom capital of London comprises an amazing patchwork of counties, cities, boroughs, royal boroughs, towns, communities, villages, hamlets and estates. I say "London" because that is the name of our national capital—in truth, in 2018, the lines of where London begins and ends are rather blurred. There is in fact much confusion between London as the capital of the United Kingdom, where Parliament and Government sit; London as Greater London, which was how our predecessors decided to construct the shape and boundaries of the city in the 1960s; and London as a wider region that includes what many people still call the home counties.

It is time to reassess whether Greater London, as created in 1964 with the formation of London boroughs, or the particular form of London government that was created in 1998 with a Mayor and Assembly, are fit for purpose in the years to come. We have reached a point where serious reform is needed. I hope all Members agree that we should not dismiss change as too difficult to tackle. We have a duty to look at how we can evolve London government to better suit the needs of Londoners and the wider region around our capital. Let us not be afraid to reconfigure how London government works and to embrace reform and renewal—in doing so, let us return power to local communities, where it belongs, and restore local identities that are rooted in English history but are now in danger of being lost.

As colleagues will know only too well, I am deeply proud of being the Member of Parliament for my wonderful home town of Romford, a traditional Essex market town that has existed since medieval times. Since 1964, it has fallen under the remit of the London borough of Havering, the borough on the most eastern side of what is now called Greater London. Let me tell the House that, despite more than 50 years of being a

so-called London borough, Romford, and Havering generally, is still very much part of Essex. Whatever local government structures and boundaries are imposed by Whitehall, the true identity of local people has never been lost and never will be. People in my borough are Essex through and through, and they are proud of their heritage—indeed, becoming a London borough did not mean that Romford and Havering stopped being part of Essex.

Essex is a real place that has evolved over many centuries. It is a historic county with its own identity and distinct culture, combined with religious, social, sporting and business networks. Our postal address is "Romford, Essex". We cheer for the Essex county cricket team. Our local regiment is the Essex Regiment, which has been awarded the freedom of Havering. Our Church of England parishes fall within the diocese of Chelmsford. Our identity is defined by geography, not by local government structures, which change regularly, depending on Government policy at the time and ever-moving electoral boundaries. A change in the administration of local services in the 1960s did not end our town or borough's connection with the county of Essex. Today we fall under a London-wide authority, but my constituents continue to cherish their Essex identity. Good for them—I feel exactly the same.

This is not unique to Essex or any other part of Greater London—people from Kent, Surrey, Hertfordshire and indeed Middlesex also value their county identities. London boroughs may no longer fall under the remit of county councils, but we are still very much part of what are known as the traditional or proper counties of England. These are real places with historical, geographical and social identities that have existed throughout the ages and that should be fully recognised as integral to the identities of our towns and boroughs today, irrespective of local government structures at any given point. These structures have come and gone in London over the years, with the London County Council, the Greater London Council, the Greater London Authority, and now the Mayor of London—just as Havering was once under the Essex County Council, followed by the GLC and then the GLA. I hope hon. Members agree that none of those changes should be allowed to erode true local identities.

I raise that issue because it forms the basis of my next argument. Local government in London should be just that: local. It should be as localised as possible, so that local people are able to control what happens in their communities and towns or on their doorstep. Remote and centralised regional government that fails to understand local identities and that rules from the centre, forgetting about the needs of the wider areas of the London region, is never going to be popular. Just like the GLC before it, I fear that the GLA is heading in the same direction. The Greater London Authority and Mayor of London are failing to serve all areas within Greater London effectively. It is clear that the project has expanded too far, grown too powerful, and has become too interfering, too centralised, too bureaucratic, too costly and utterly remote from the needs of the real people, particularly in areas such as Romford and other parts of outer London.

Since the creation of a directly elected Mayor and an Assembly in 2000 provided for a so-called strong mayor model, there has been a clear contrast between the powers of the Mayor and those of the Assembly. The

[*Andrew Rosindell*]

subsequent Greater London Authority Act 2007 accorded the Mayor even greater powers in respect of functions, spanning across planning, housing, large developments, skills and training. While it is true that the Assembly's powers were also strengthened in 2007, the provisions were too little and too late to provide a proper check on the mayoralty. A comparative analysis of our friends across the pond in New York and of other cities such as Tokyo and Berlin show that their councils enjoy actual powers of scrutiny, which ours in London do not.

It is time to reform the whole structure of local government. I shall set out what the Government and we in the House should consider as a basis for reform. First, the powers of the Mayor should be strictly limited to what borough councils cannot do effectively for themselves. The so-called London plan should be dumped completely, and the power to decide how best to plan and develop our communities and boroughs should rest with the people who are elected to do that job. The Government can help by allowing the development of new towns beyond London, but councils must also play their part in ensuring we build the homes that are needed. Let us give boroughs back the power and trust them to make true local decisions in their local communities.

Why do we need a second tier for planning, when what is required is a more effective means to make local decisions in the interest of local communities, with a faster turnaround, so we can build the homes we need across the region? I accept that there is a need for co-ordination across the entire London region on things such as transport and major infrastructure projects, but the Mayor should be a facilitator or an organiser who brings together local authorities and public bodies to make things happen. Funding for projects should go directly to the boroughs, bypassing the bureaucracy at City Hall.

Secondly, policing should go back to being truly local. Each borough should have its own borough commander, and the tri-borough system should be ended or reformed. The leader of each council or their deputy should have the political responsibility for policing within that borough. Powers currently centralised in City Hall should come back to the town hall. I believe that leaders of boroughs are better placed to respond to the needs of their communities and to work with a dedicated police force, which knows and understands its patch better than anyone else.

Thirdly, the London Assembly should be replaced with something like a council of London, comprised of elected council leaders from the region. I say "the region", because this goes way beyond the now outdated boundaries of the 1960s model of Greater London. Transport affects the people of a much wider area—I would call it "the UK capital region". The slimmed-down, London-wide authority should primarily focus on transport, which clearly must be considered regionally as it goes way beyond the London boroughs. The M25 extends way beyond Greater London, and motorways, A roads and an expanding road network lead into London. The London Underground stretches from Amersham to Epping, neither of which falls within the Greater London boundaries, yet they have underground stations. Trains bring in commuters from across the south-east and other parts of the region. Airports stretch from London

Heathrow to London Southend, and include London Luton, London Stansted and London Gatwick, most of which are not in Greater London. There needs to be a serious rethink of transport in the entire region, and that is what I believe should be the focus of the newly restructured authority for the London region. It is no longer relevant to think of transport just in the context of Greater London. That outdated model needs to go.

The new council of democratically elected leaders would have real authority to speak up for their areas, and they would cost a lot less than the current Assembly. They would understand what is required locally because they would be elected locally and would have an incentive to make things work for their boroughs. With a much stronger hand, they would also be empowered to scrutinise the Mayor—or the first leader, as I would rename the role—to ensure that everything they do is for the purpose of facilitating services rather than becoming an alternative centre of political power away from local communities.

We must also respect and appreciate the distinctiveness of London's areas. It is ludicrous that the Mayor of London has such an expansive and supreme authority over a vast swathe of southern England. The City of Westminster, with all its grandeur, has very little in common with boroughs such as Havering, Hillingdon, Bromley or Enfield. Across our region are districts with totally different needs, but as power has become more centralised, local needs have become more neglected. It is time for reform.

The unfair allocation of funds is also a major issue in boroughs such as mine—the London Borough of Havering has been scandalously impacted by inadequate funding settlements over the decades due to flaws in the current formula and funding system. The Minister may not be aware that Havering is the lowest-funded east London borough per head of population. Some London boroughs receive more than twice as much per head. How can that be right? That is despite Havering's having the highest proportion of elderly people across London, many of whom are deeply reliant on social care provision. That dire funding shortfall has forced my council drastically to reduce spending or increase council tax just to stay afloat, yet we send £400 a year per head of population to City Hall. The result is that council tax on a £4.5 million property in Westminster is substantially less than it is on a £365,000 property in Havering. How can that be right? That huge disparity must be addressed. It punishes lifelong residents of the borough and leaves many pensioners—it particularly affects elderly people—struggling to get by.

Devolving power back to local councils is exactly what a Conservative Government should be aiming to do. Why should councils not have the ability to come together to take on the management of public services in the area for which they are responsible? If Havering Council wishes to take over the management of the NHS, why should it not be given the opportunity to do so? If it prepared a business case, worked out the finances and submitted a bid to the Government, and if—and only if—the bid stacked up, why should it not be able to manage health services in the borough?

It is unlikely that one council could do that alone, but a group of councils could. For instance, if Havering formed a group with Barking and Dagenham and Redbridge, with Brentwood and Epping—the boroughs on the Essex side of my constituency—or with whatever

other grouping came together, and put in a bid for an integrated service to operate the NHS, an adult college or some other public body, would that not be the obvious way to devolve power back to our local communities? That would give real democratic control over large areas of the state and allow many different models to be developed. Let us think out of the box and embrace such new ideas. I believe we must empower local boroughs in London to take back control—they know what their local communities need best—and end the never-ending centralisation of power in City Hall or Whitehall.

London, as the UK's capital, needs clearly defined boundaries. The City of London has always been the heart of our capital for trade and finance, with the City of Westminster as the centre of Parliament and Government, but our capital is wider than that. It includes some or all other central areas—boroughs such as Kensington and Chelsea, and parts of Camden, Lambeth, Southwark, Islington, Greenwich, Tower Hamlets and so on. That is the central capital area. It is simply not right to say that the entirety of Greater London is the capital of the UK—that is a big confusion. Very few people living in towns such as Romford, Sutton, Enfield, Bexley, Croydon or Ruislip consider themselves to be living in the capital. Greater London is not the capital; the central area is the capital. It is time we properly defined where the capital actually starts and ends. It should be the central area that I have described. It should include the central areas where special measures for policing, security, transport and development are required to suit the needs of a global city. Beyond that, different priorities are needed for the wider London region beyond the actual capital. I urge the Government to take powers away from City Hall and restore them for towns and boroughs beyond the central London area.

Finally, I believe that it is also time to review the boundaries and names of London boroughs. So many anomalies divide communities because old boundaries have not been reviewed for decades. They are no longer relevant and it is time they were reviewed to suit local communities. To give examples from my own area, Rush Green, where I was born, is divided between Havering and Barking and Dagenham—it is a ludicrous boundary that runs down a road and divides a community. Those areas are all part of Romford, but we stick to these old boundaries from years ago that are no longer relevant. Another example is Chadwell Heath, another part of Romford that is not in my borough but divided between the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham and the London Borough of Redbridge. I know hon. Members representing constituencies across London can come up with lots of examples of similar situations in which pointless divisions exist. Those should be resolved with local consultation to ensure that boroughs fit local communities and meet the needs of local people.

I believe that restoring local identities as well as renaming boroughs where local people wish to do so should be on the reform agenda. Shepway District Council in Kent was quite sensibly renamed as Folkestone and Hythe District Council, dumping the pointless, artificial name that had no resonance with people. A borough such as Havering—that is the nice name of a small country village in my constituency, but a name that does not represent the communities of that London

borough—could be renamed the London Borough of Romford and Hornchurch, which is more representative of the borough's two major towns. We should have a general review of names that match local towns' identities to those of local people, so that they can feel pride in their boroughs.

I can talk about other boroughs but I am hesitant to do so because MPs representing those boroughs are not here. The London Borough of Waltham Forest has a completely artificial name—a bit of Walthamstow and a bit of Epping Forest—while the area of Redbridge is actually Ilford, and Hounslow is Chiswick and Brentford. We need to go back to sensible names so that people identify with the communities that they live in. Those 1960s names need to be reviewed and it would be incredibly popular if the Government led a review and gave local people the chance to decide their boundaries and restore traditional names. Who knows, Minister? Perhaps names like Hampstead, Paddington, Stoke Newington, Wembley or Finsbury could be restored. Replacing the names of boroughs that do not resonate with the history and identity of their communities would be extremely popular.

I have floated many new ideas for a reform of London government, some of which I hope hon. Members and the Minister will consider seriously. Whatever our views, let us begin a debate on and work towards the change that will bring about better government across the whole of the London region, the capital of our United Kingdom, and, I believe, the greatest city on earth.

9.53 am

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Hosie. I have debated matters of English local government in this room on several occasions, and I remark now, as I remarked then, that I quite often feel as though I have gatecrashed someone else's party. On this occasion, I feel as though people have got the wrong date for the party; I have never been to a debate in this Chamber that has been so sparsely attended, and it feels really weird to be called to reply to the debate when only the mover of the motion, the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell), has spoken. I am grateful to him for giving me the opportunity to make some remarks.

Although I may not have been invited to the party, I sense that the music is very similar to that which we hear north of the border. Some of people's concerns and desires for reform of local government administration in London and, indeed, throughout England are motivated by feelings very similar to those that drove the cause for Scottish devolution and that are now driving the cause for Scottish independence. They are feelings of remoteness, of not being in charge of the place in which you live, and of not having a shared sense of identity with others who live in that place. I am therefore sympathetic to such debates, and I would say that they are actually all part of one grand debate about how we reform the antiquated structure that is the United Kingdom, in order to create governance on these islands that is more fit for the 21st century.

That said, there is a world of difference between the devolution of legislative authority to a nation within a political union, and the decentralisation of administration within the largest country of that political union, which is England. I want to speak as an observer in the debate.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will take this opportunity to express the Scottish Government's view on the devolution of powers that are currently held in Holyrood to towns and cities of Scotland. I am sure the people there would like to take control of their lives and have proper devolution from Holyrood to other areas of Scotland—

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): Order.

Jake Berry: Within the context of Greater London, of course.

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): Please stay within the context of the debate, which is rather narrow.

Tommy Sheppard: The Minister's intervention was perhaps tangential, but I do not mind replying to it. Of course, I cannot speak on behalf of the Scottish Government, but from what I observe, over the last 11 years they have driven the idea of putting power in the hands of local communities, through their work in the highlands and islands of Scotland; through their work to relax controls on local authorities; and, in particular, through their work on the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 and the community land fund, which gives local communities the ability to get together, without reference to their local authority, and take over derelict parts of land or buildings to bring them into community use. There is lots of good stuff going on in Scotland.

I will not prolong matters, because this is not the most subscribed debate that I have taken part in, but let me make three brief observations for the record. The first is that I believe, just as I believe that governance of Scotland should be a matter for the people who live there, that the governance of London should be a matter for those who live there—that principle needs to be established. I remember the dangers of doing things without popular consent. I was a London councillor in Hackney from 1986-1993—I represented the Defoe ward in Stoke Newington—and even then, in the mid-1980s, there was a genuine sense of grievance among many people about the fact that the borough of Stoke Newington had been abolished 20 years before. They identified much more with that area, as the hon. Member for Romford said, than with the new borough council that was created in 1964.

I understand the need for local identity, and I think it is vital that, as the debate continues, attempts are made to engage with the people of London about the various options that are available for the governance of this great city. I know not what the plans of the Mayor, the GLA, or the London boroughs are, but I hope and would welcome any initiatives that look towards engaging the public through a "People's Assembly" or through a commission that will look at particular structures for the future.

Secondly, we ought to define the principles on which reform should take place as well as the criteria and the objectives that we are trying to achieve. Central to that must be the notion of equality and fairness across this great city. To that end, I think we ought to address the elephant in the room that no one has yet talked about: the City of London Corporation, which operates almost

like a reverse-Bantustan in the City and commands a great and disproportionate amount of power and wealth in the capital. Any reform that does not look at how that can be distributed more fairly across the city is probably not worth undertaking.

My final point, which refers to some of the points made by the hon. Member for Romford, is that in these debates—I think that this is true in Scotland, England, and throughout every advanced democracy—it is important to make a distinction between democratic political control by communities and the administration of services. Too often, we get the two confused. That means, for example, that we end up saying, "It's impossible to run a certain service on too local a level, and therefore we won't bother letting local people have control of that", or, "We won't bother decentralising and setting up structures that allow people to govern a local area, because they cannot control or manage a service on that basis; it's completely uneconomic."

In a model whereby an agency provides a service in a public interest framework across a wider area, however—the police are an apt example—but within which local communities and local councils are able to act as the client for that service and to say what they want from the agency, there is a way of giving people democratic control over what is happening in their area without them having to be the managers of the individual service. The same is true for pretty much any major service. In fact, the same is now true for a lot of back-room services, such as information technology or administration, which would probably be much better organised on a larger scale to service a wide range of authorities beneath them that command and direct what needs to be done.

If we do that, we begin to open new possibilities for new, much more localised and decentralised structures that relate to local communities. Such structures would allow people to get much more involved than they are, and at the same time to retain services in a public interest framework and in public ownership. If we were to do that—London might be the place to start—we could play catch-up with much of the rest of Europe, where we can find much more democratic local decision making and, crucially, much greater levels of participation in local affairs and elections than we have in this country. At the end of the day, that is the thing that we all need to address: no matter where we are in the United Kingdom, it is rare for the majority of people to take part in an election for their local council. That is surely something that we need to change.

I am glad that this debate is getting things started—I hope—and next time perhaps we can attract a few more people, in particular Members of Parliament from the capital city, to engage in it. We can take matters forward at that point.

10.2 am

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): This is a really interesting debate, which is broader than London. It could be argued that if we develop a real settlement that pushes power down to communities, that ought to benefit every community in England. That will be the spirit in which I approach my response to some of the points that have been made.

A lot of the devolution debate and discussion, certainly over the past five or six years, has been about trying to get power from Westminster down to the next level, wherever that might be; in London, it is the capital, but elsewhere it will be metro areas or even some county deals in which counties have come together. That has been necessary because we are still a very centralised country, and too much power is contained not in this place—people who work here who believe that they are powerful are seriously deluded—but in Whitehall, where it still sits. We want to wrestle as much power as possible from civil servants, who are disconnected from the communities that are affected by the decisions that they make, and give that power back to local people.

That has to be at the most appropriate level, because the organisation of services is complex. Some are absolutely rooted in a localised geography, but in other cases it will make far more sense for a service to be decided and delivered at a different level—whether it is a district, a metropolitan or London borough, London itself, or a regional grouping—but it has to be right for that circumstance and for the decision that is being devolved down. The assumption should always be local.

If any power is devolved, a test should be in place to ask the question: where is it best to place this new power that is being devolved? For example, in places where we see devolution of the adult education budget, there has not really been a conversation about whether a combined authority or even a Greater London arrangement is the best place for that budget to sit, versus a local authority. That is odd, because that debate is taking place in other areas—such as Greater Manchester, which has the most advanced health devolution settlement in England; that settlement is devolved to the 10 local authorities, not to the combined authority or to the Mayor.

This move that we are taking as a nation is interesting, but it is not neat, it is not pretty and it is massively confusing for a lot of people. That does not mean that it is not necessary. We need to prove concept and prove that devolution can be made to work. We need to prove that to people who do not believe that devolution can work, and who believe that to get fairness and equity across the country, we should organise from the capital so that everyone gets the same. They are the people we need to convince.

Andrew Rosindell: The hon. Gentleman is making a lot of good points, and we agree on many things. Does he accept that an area such as mine, right on the edge of Greater London, is totally different from places such as Westminster, Kensington and Chelsea, or Islington? More powers should be given back to us in our area so that we can work with the Essex councils; that is where we are. Does he agree that centralising everything in London is not the way forward? A central area is obviously needed as our capital, but the wider London region has different needs and priorities. That should be much more decentralised.

Jim McMahon: I agree with that point. If the assumption is devolution, the bar to sending something up to a higher level should be high. There should be a proper and rigorous test in place. A danger in the development of new structures or institutions of local government in city regions—perhaps this is more of a danger outside London than in it—is that if real power is not devolved

from Westminster and Whitehall to those regions, they will, by the nature of government and politics, take up power to justify their existence.

To me, the responsibility for that lies with local politicians who must ensure that they are absolutely clear about what a devolved settlement looks like for their neighbourhoods and communities. There is, however, also pressure on the Government to prove that they can really devolve power and responsibility down. In a lot of the country, people do not believe that the Government are listening to what they say. I shall not stray from the subject of the debate, but anyone who speaks to people in Lancashire at the moment will find that they are massively frustrated that their local decision to reject fracking was overturned by a Government hundreds of miles away. If we are serious about devolving power, it has to be the power that people are asking for: the power to determine what type of place they want to live in and their families to grow up in.

That is different from identity and people's sense of belonging. I feel strongly that that is a complex debate—we could have a debate for an hour and a half on what identity is and means, because it is complex. Devolution so far has not been about trying to rewrite people's historical and rooted identity, or about changing the entrance signs to places where people live to names that they do not recognise. That is very different from the 1974 reorganisation outside London, which tried to do just that.

Andrew Rosindell: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman made that point. That is exactly the problem we face. A “Welcome to Essex” sign has been placed on the boundary between Romford and Brentwood. Suddenly, we have been told that we are no longer Essex, because Essex County Council will only put the sign on the boundary of its area. That is nonsense. The traditional identity of the counties is being lost because of a failure by local government bureaucrats to understand true local identities. I would understand if the sign read, “You are now entering the Essex County Council area”, or whatever they want to call it, but instead it reads, “Welcome to Essex”. In my area, we are Essex, and a lot of people resent that identity being removed because of a failure to put signage in the correct location.

Jim McMahon: Perhaps I may prove my credentials. When I became the leader of Oldham Council, it stood out to me just how frustrated people were about their historical identities being challenged by a local authority that was artificially created in 1974. It did not work for either party: Oldhamers were frustrated that people in the surrounding district seemed to have an angst about them, because of this issue; and people in the district were frustrated because they did not feel that their identity was valued by the local authority. One of the first things I did on taking control of the council, therefore, was to change all the boundary signs back to reflect the district crest and the local identities of those places, which I believe are important.

That is sometimes a cause of confusion. The lines we draw on maps for administrative convenience—basically, we are talking about the most efficient administrative area for delivering and organising our public services—are often adopted to create a new brand identity for a place.

[*Jim McMahon*]

I see that happening where I am. Oldham, as a place, has one foot in Lancashire and one foot in the west riding of Yorkshire. Some people think they are Mancunian and others think they are Oldhamers, but identities travel even beyond that. It is true of every community in England, including every borough and town in London and Essex, that people do not stay in one place. They travel to work. Their relationships with places, communities, neighbouring towns and the heart of the capital, which the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) referred to, are complicated.

Let me make some practical suggestions. Power has been given to communities through the neighbourhood planning process. Communities can self-organise and decide what physical developments take place in their area, and they get some sense of being able to control what their community looks like at the end of that process. We do not do the same for revenue spend in local government. Think about the scrutiny we give to capital investment. When a capital project is initiated, it has to go through a number of gateways to get sign-off and be approved, and it then goes through evaluation and monitoring. We do not do that for revenue spend. We spend billions of pounds of public money every year, but we do not make the same assessment of whether it is invested in the right place or have a clear view of what return on investment we should expect. Equally, communities generally are not involved in organising that.

There is no reason why people at neighbourhood level—whether that is a ward or a collection of wards that make up a town's identity, which the hon. Gentleman mentioned—could not organise a community plan to corral all the public services in their area and decide where the local GP practice ought to be or how the police ought to organise. Local people should be able to decide how public servants work together to ensure that services are delivered in the right context for that place.

Clearly, there will always be a role for local authorities, and for strategic authorities that cover issues that naturally transcend local boundaries. We have already heard about transport, but policing now transcends those boundaries, too. Policing is far more complicated than it was before the 1960s, when we had local police forces with their own identities. We need a police force that can meet the challenges of cyber-crime, terrorism, cross-border crime and many other issues, but not at the exclusion of neighbourhood policing.

In some places, because of austerity—let us be clear that it costs money to do this well—and the demands of terrorism, cyber-crime and all the other new crimes that are really stretching the police force, resources have been transferred from neighbourhood level to the centre so the police can meet significant cost demands. People see that, because of austerity, public services are becoming more and more removed from the communities in which they live, and that hugely affects the connection they feel. We should look at that.

We need a clearly articulated devolution framework for the whole of England—London would be a beneficiary of that—rather than ad hoc deals that are agreed behind closed doors. We should not pit one place against another but have a comprehensive settlement—a framework for power to be devolved. We should start at the grassroots

and work upwards, with an assumption in favour of devolution. That should be supported by fair funding to meet need and demand in local areas.

That at least would allow us to test the ideas we are debating and to see whether one framework for the whole of England works. Without that, we will always be looking in the rear-view mirror at the consequences of what has been agreed. We need to get organised. We need a plan. This offer has been made before, but Labour Members are willing to work across party lines on the issues that are not party political. Much of this is not party political—it is about people and place.

10.13 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) on securing this debate, which is both hugely important for his constituents and nationally important in the wider framework of devolution. It is very timely and deeply appropriate given the situation we find ourselves in.

The debate has been about the future, but let me dwell for a moment on the history of local government reform in London, which to some extent put us in this situation. I do not have to tell my hon. Friend, who is proud to have been born and bred in Essex, about the 1960 Herbert commission, but it is worth focusing briefly on the Greater London Council years. We can learn a lot from our history. During those years, when the current shadow Chancellor was chairman of the finance committee, what we used to refer to as “loony left” politics came to the fore. Of course, that is now mainstream Labour politics. As someone from the city of Liverpool, I was interested to see the Labour party, at its conference in that city, move back to endorsing the views of Derek Hatton: that councils should set illegal budgets and that there should be a general strike.

Jim McMahon: I suppose I ought to intervene, given that I was more or less invited to by that comment. To be absolutely clear—this came from the leadership of the Labour party a couple of years ago, so it is not a new response: we do not support the illegal setting of council budgets. We think councils have been given a rotten settlement, and in many places they struggle to meet their legal obligations.

The question for the Government is how they can provide the resources councils need to be confident that they can set a legal budget that provides security for the people who need it, particularly in adult social care and children's safeguarding. The failure is not on the part of council leaders. No one proposes setting an illegal budget in any local authority in the country, but there are leaders who say, “We don't think we can meet our legal obligations if this carries on.” So far, the Government have failed to provide a convincing response.

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): Order. Now the politics are out of the way, I am sure we will get back to local government reform in Greater London.

Jake Berry: Well, of course the GLC was in league, through the Militant movement, with Derek Hatton's Liverpool Labour party. It is worth focusing on the GLC. The hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) parades the veneer of a gentle left—of

herbivorous, lentil-munching, north London lefties—but the people of Liverpool and those who lived under the GLC know what the hard-left Labour party is really like. Labour councillors went around Liverpool handing out 30,000 redundancy notices to the people who worked in that city. As someone from Liverpool, let me take the opportunity to say that we will never forget that we could not get our bodies buried or our bins emptied. That is what the hard left of Militant and Momentum does to cities.

Jim McMahon: Will the Minister give way?

Jake Berry: I will in a moment. It is all very well the hon. Gentleman saying that that is not the view of his party, but for a shadow Minister to endorse that view on the main platform on the first day of the conference was an absolute disgrace. I will give way to the hon. Gentleman, which will afford him the opportunity to apologise for that, and to apologise to the people of Liverpool for the devastation both there and under the GLC.

Jim McMahon *rose*—

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): Order. Before the hon. Gentleman intervenes, let me say that I want us to get back to local government reform in London very quickly.

Jim McMahon: My response is simple: what on earth does that have to do with local government reorganisation in London? The Minister has an opportunity to lay out something that has been absent during his tenure. What will the Government do to push real power down to local authorities—not just to newly created institutions through deals done behind closed doors? We need a genuine framework that pushes power down to people, communities and neighbourhoods and addresses the issues raised in the debate. That is what we are here to discuss, and we look forward to hearing his reply.

Jake Berry: I will take your guidance, Mr Hosie, and segue neatly from history to geography, which was always my favourite subject at school, but let me say briefly that the Labour party does not like the fact that the mask slipped. We should take every opportunity to inform the public in London and in our wider United Kingdom what lies behind that mask.

I move on to the geography of the Greater London Authority. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Romford has noted that, in fact, the GLA and the Mayor have had some notable success since their establishment. I am sure that he, like me, celebrates the London Olympics hosted by the former Mayor of London, my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson).

Andrew Rosindell: The Minister ought to be aware that the so-called London Olympics took place in Stratford, which is a traditional part of Essex. I do not object to its being called the London Olympics, but it is a perfect example of a national event in the London region, even though the reality is that the town of Stratford is traditionally part of Essex. There was no mention at all of the county of Essex. That is an example of where things have gone wrong.

Jake Berry: Perhaps I should have stuck to history, which may be a slightly safer subject for me to talk about. My hon. Friend may think that it should have been called the Essex Olympics, but I am not sure that that would have had the same international cut-through as the London Olympics. It was a significant event, not just for London—and Essex, where it took place in the traditional Essex town of Stratford—but for our entire nation.

Those Olympics, which were thanks in no small part to the late, great Baroness Jowell and the Mayor of London at the time, my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip, showed how the GLA and London can be at their best. Another previous Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone, introduced the congestion charge, which was extremely well implemented and significantly reduced traffic levels in the city. The Oyster card is also hugely popular, which the GLA and the Mayor were responsible for.

My hon. Friend said that today should be the start of the debate about the future shape of mayoralty and local government in London. He will understand that starting the debate for change will be hard; it will be a long road and probably require primary legislation. Most importantly of all, it will require consensus. From the Government's point of view, we hope any changes would come from a ground-up movement rather than a central diktat from Whitehall. That plays very well with my hon. Friend's desire for his constituents to have more control of their lives.

We must not forget that the Conservative party is the party of English devolution. We did not create the Mayor of London but we have successfully created six Metro Mayors, who were elected in May 2017. Since that date, a Mayor of Sheffield has been elected and, subject to the consent of the House, next Monday we will finalise the creation of a Mayor north of the Tyne, in Newcastle. Those elections have brought the biggest single transfer of power from Whitehall back to the people of England since the first world war. As Conservatives, we should celebrate that and be deeply proud of it. All those mayoral devolution deals have been about transferring power.

Jim McMahon: The Minister talked about the biggest transfer of power since the second world war—

Jake Berry: First world war.

Jim McMahon: The first world war. Does that take into account the power that has been removed from local authorities, particularly on housing and education?

Jake Berry: I assume the shadow Minister is talking about the Greater Manchester Combined Authority and the transfer of power up from local authorities to the Mayor across the country. In areas of devolution, it has been done by consensus; he was a leader of one of those local authorities that are now part of the combined authorities, so I guess he would support that.

This debate is very important when looked at in the wider context of English devolution. The Government will shortly publicise their devolution framework, in which we will talk about what devolution should look like in the rest of England and give a clear roadmap for devolution across England, in compliance with a Conservative party manifesto commitment.

[*Jake Berry*]

In London, there is an opportunity to talk about how we might improve the scrutiny and accountability of the Mayor of London and of Mayors in general. For inspiration, my hon. Friend could look to the mayoral model put in place by our Government in Manchester, where rather than having an additional tier of GLA governance, it is a combined authority, with representatives—the leaders of those borough councils—working with the Mayor in a collaborative partnership, but with a strong voice for their borough in that relationship. London should look at new solutions like that, on the proviso that they are always ground-up and locally supported.

Andrew Rosindell: I am delighted by what the Minister has just said, because that is exactly what I said earlier: it would be far better to have an assembly or council of leaders from each borough who have a genuine understanding of what is needed in their local communities. I am afraid I do not think that the London Assembly fulfils that task in the way that is needed.

In the London Borough of Havering, the legitimacy of the Mayor and the GLA is hanging by a thread. If there were a referendum in my borough to opt out of the GLA and become a unitary authority, in my view there would be an overwhelming vote to exit—as it has been termed—the GLA. Most people would overwhelmingly want a separation and to restore control to our local communities. An area such as Havering feeds money into central London and pays far more for services from which we do not benefit; at the same time, the Mayor is able to interfere with our local area and override the council on planning. I hope that the Government will take this seriously and look at what reforms can be brought forward.

Jake Berry: The Government take this issue absolutely seriously. My hon. Friend made a brilliant speech that has been widely supported, in which he made the argument very well. To be clear, it is not the Government's position that the GLA should be abolished, replaced or reformed; the Government welcome the discussion that my hon. Friend has led. If there is a drumbeat or a clarion call from his borough to look at reform of the GLA, he is quite right that he and his council should lead that debate, and on a ground-up basis come to Government and have that discussion with other boroughs. Our door is open for those discussions, but they must come from the ground-up, be locally supported and have consensus because it is his long-term political ambition to seek reform.

Andrew Rosindell: I thank the Minister for that invitation. Is he therefore willing to meet the newly elected leader of Havering Council, Councillor Damian White, who is the youngest Conservative leader of any council in the country, and me, to talk about how a borough such as Havering can change in a way that benefits our local community, with the support of our Government?

Jake Berry: Yes, I am. I hope that is helpful, and I congratulate my hon. Friend's new council leader on winning the election.

Another reason why it is appropriate for boroughs to lead the conversation about whether the existing GLA boundaries and structures are appropriate is simply that they have not changed since the 1960s. Our world has changed very much since the 1960s. A lot of the debate about English devolution is driven by a wider debate about the future of our country after Brexit. There is an ambition and desire out there for what I refer to as “double devolution”—taking a very European idea of subsidiarity and embedding that in the relationship between local government and national government.

The Government have committed to come forward with the devolution framework to try to stimulate the debate about what devolution should look like across England. As we start with year zero of creating a new, ambitious, globally competitive country, what part can the constituent local authorities—in some cases, parish councils and unitary authorities in our local government family—play in driving forward our nation's ambition?

I will touch on some of the specific points made by my hon. Friend in his excellent speech. When he started speaking, I wrote at the top of my piece of paper that the people of Essex want to take back control, although he got round to saying that himself. That plays into a much wider debate we should be having about people's identity. As a proud Member of Parliament representing Lancashire, I am aware of the strength of the Lancashire identity, which in many ways was undermined in local government reform when we lost the city of Liverpool, the city of Manchester and large parts of Greater Manchester. There is a real role for Members of Parliament and local councils in reinforcing those historic county boundaries.

My hon. Friend spoke passionately about his identity as someone born in Essex and representing Essex but having been sucked into the London agglomeration in some way. I feel similarly about Lancashire. Of course, Lancashire is one of the few county palatine boroughs in our United Kingdom, having been awarded the status by the King for protecting England from marauding Scots—something we occasionally see today. We in Lancashire are deeply proud of that county palatine status. We love our friends north of the border, with whom we have a great relationship, but we also like to be cognisant of our history.

My hon. Friend was edging towards saying, without realising it, that the GLA may be better represented or reformed with a Manchester model: a combined authority with a strong voice for the boroughs. The late, great Tony Wilson, of Manchester music industry fame, said:

“This is Manchester—we do things differently here.”

Where Manchester leads, many parts of the country can follow. The GLA was set up in 2000, and the debate has simply moved on. That is why the Government, and I as a constituency Member of Parliament, see this as a welcome time to debate the future of the GLA.

Jim McMahon: The nearest equivalent organisation is London Councils, where council leaders across the Greater London area come together. Could that organisation be given combined authority status, with powers similar to Greater Manchester's and the Mayor possibly taking the chair? Is that where Government thinking is leading?

Jake Berry: If the hon. Gentleman had listened to my earlier remarks, he would have heard me say that the Government are not suggesting that the GLA should be abolished, and we are not suggesting the creation of a combined authority. That is because the Conservatives, the party of English devolution, believe that devolution works best in England when it is ground-up and locally led. It is not for Whitehall to dictate what devolution should look like in Manchester, as he will appreciate, or to dictate what the changes—if any—that come forward for the GLA should be. It is for local politicians, led by Members of Parliament having this debate, to come forward to Government with ground-up proposals that the Government will look at, as we do with all such proposals.

Jim McMahon: I am sure the leaders of Yorkshire will be delighted with the spirit of that. Does that mean that we are heading towards a one Yorkshire devolution deal?

Jake Berry: I think the leaders of Yorkshire are always delighted when they hear me talk about devolution. As the hon. Gentleman knows—I do not want to be drawn too far from the subject of the debate—the Government have been clear: we remain committed to the implementation of the south Yorkshire city region deal, known as the Sheffield city region deal.

As someone who has lived in Sheffield, I am keen to see the near-£1 billion of Government money go into that economy. In that city there is the bizarre situation where four Labour authority leaders cannot agree collectively about what power they should have to release that money. The hon. Gentleman spoke of the challenges faced by boroughs across England in local government spending, and it strikes me as a little bit odd that when the Government are saying to four Labour boroughs, “Here is £30 million a year that we would like to give you to invest in growing your economy,” those Labour boroughs are more interested in fighting each other than in drawing that money down. However, we are straying.

Jim McMahon: Will the Minister give way?

Jake Berry: I will not, because we are straying a long way from the subject of the debate and I want to conclude my remarks.

This has been an interesting debate. I welcome the lead role that my hon. Friend the Member for Romford is taking in driving the debate on the future of the GLA

and the mayoralty, and the relationship between the two. There has been no change since the 1960s. Although we cannot guarantee that any change will come, if he can command a broad coalition of boroughs across London who would like to talk to the Government about what change could look like, we will welcome those discussions.

10.34 am

Andrew Rosindell: This has been a worthwhile debate. I hope that colleagues who represent London constituencies will take the time to read some of the interesting, useful arguments put forward on a range of topics and that they, too, will think about how London should develop.

I have thought deeply about this. I have lived in London/Essex my entire life and I care about our great UK capital city, which I want to be a success as a global city that attracts investment, trade and tourism. However, I also want this region of the UK to be seen as a place where people live, based on communities in towns and villages. The identities of those areas are really important to local people. I welcome the Minister’s offer to have a meeting to talk about how we can take this agenda forward. I hope we can organise that soon.

I urge the Government to take this issue seriously. My fear is that if we do not push for change, sit together and work out a new model for how London can be governed, nothing will change, and in years’ time this will be seen as another debate where nothing really changed. I hope this is the start of that debate where we can come together and find solutions, recognising—this is the crux of my argument—that London is not just the central part. What the capital is should be defined, but there is London way beyond Greater London and the existing boundaries. That is what we must focus on. It has all changed since the ’60s, and we cannot carry on any longer with the existing structure.

Let us be radical but also consistent with what local people truly desire for their local towns, local communities and local boroughs in our great capital.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered local government reform in Greater London.

10.37 am

Sitting suspended.

GP Extended Access Services: Privatisation

11 am

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered privatisation of GP extended access services in Stockton, Hartlepool and Darlington.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie, as we explore the important issue of the privatisation of local health services. Before I begin, may I bring to your attention my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests? I have worked in the local extended access service. I have been employed as a GP since my election to Parliament, and before that I was chief executive of Hartlepool & Stockton Health, which is a GP federation established by all local GPs as a non-profit-making venture to allow collaboration between practices and other parts of the NHS. I resigned my position when I was elected, and I served my notice. My partner, Vicky, is a nurse in the local NHS and she derives some income from the GP federation.

As the Minister will know, the Government's ambition is for all patients to be able to access evening and weekend GP appointments, which is a good thing. It is difficult for each individual GP practice in any area to open every evening and weekend, but it is achievable if GPs work together. In Stockton South in April 2017, Hartlepool & Stockton Health started to deliver extended access appointments between 6.30 pm and 8 pm on weekday evenings, for three hours on a Saturday, and for two hours on a Sunday. Local GPs did that as a collective through their federation.

The federation was set up as a private company—there is as yet no NHS GP federation organisation that it can belong to—but it was designed as a not-for-profit organisation because local GPs insisted on it. They did not want to make any profit out of collaboration. All the money earned by the organisation is reinvested into local primary care—I know the detail of that because it was my job before I came into Parliament to set up and run the organisation.

Evening and weekend GP services have now run for 18 months and they have been a success by all measures. Patients like it:

“Every aspect of my visit was excellent...it was prompt and professional...a lovely experience”

are three of the many comments received as feedback. During the past year, there have been 26,000 extra GP and nurse appointments for routine care. That has not just been good for patients; it has also reduced pressure on local practices. Teesside has one of the highest patient-to-GP ratios—we are an under-doctored area.

Down the road in Darlington, Primary Healthcare Darlington has run an extended access service in the evenings and weekends since 2015 when it received Prime Minister's Challenge funding. According to all the reports I have received, it has run an equally good service for the people of Darlington. So far, so good. However, in September this year the local clinical commissioning group launched an invitation to tender with two lots—one to run an extended access service in Darlington, and the other in Hartlepool and Stockton. The tender documents requested that organisations bid

to run one and a half hours of general practice each evening and a bit longer at the weekends. The bidding process is under way and I am sure the Minister will not want to say anything that might prejudice the process.

I have initiated this debate to ask some big questions. Biggest of all is this: how does privatising this service benefit local patients—the acid test for any NHS change? When local GPs work together to deliver this service, and when the local NHS has all partners collaborating so well, how can it possibly be right to bring in a new private sector provider?

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend, my next-door neighbour, on securing this debate. One thing that concerns me is the potential loss of good will from GPs across the Tees valley who are currently delivering the service. Does that concern him too?

Dr Williams: I will come later in my remarks to some of the reasons why the system works well at the moment, and to some of the potential threats that could arise from introducing a private sector provider.

Before I expand my point, let me establish my position so that there can be no confusion or misinterpretation. As I said, extended access services are a good thing. I worked hard before my election to establish them, and they are good for patients and for the NHS. I congratulate Hartlepool and Stockton-on-Tees CCG and Darlington CCG on delivering extra GP services for local patients over the past few years in Darlington and for the past 18 months in Stockton. They have done a good job. I also know that most GP practices are technically private organisations with a contract with the NHS, but there is an important difference between a local GP who is doing the work and making money from that, and a private corporation whose shareholders profit from the NHS.

Having said that, I am on the record as having said that GPs should be employed by the NHS, and I believe that the time has come for the NHS to set up community providers to integrate GPs, community nursing, social care and community health services. GPs should be offered employment in those organisations. The farce that I am describing today makes the case for that type of organisation stronger.

While setting out my credentials, I am also pragmatic and not dogmatic about private and voluntary sector provision within the NHS. Our local counselling services in Stockton are better for having multiple providers. Patients like getting hearing tests on the high street at Specsavers instead of going to the hospital audiology department. What I am describing today, however, is privatisation for privatisation's sake. It is privatisation because the “rules” say private, and not because anyone thinks that privatisation is good for patients. It is probably even privatisation by accident.

For me, the most important test of any change in the NHS is: how does this benefit patients? The NHS is there to improve health. I have huge respect for all the staff who work in our NHS, and I thank everyone for their efforts, but fundamentally local health services must meet the needs of local patients. How could bringing in a private GP company for an hour and a half each day possibly make things better for patients in my constituency? If there were a list of 101 things to do to

improve the NHS in Stockton South, finding a new provider for GP extended access would not be one of them.

Children's mental health services are in crisis and health inequalities in Stockton are the most stark in the whole country. Our local authority is struggling to deliver effective public health services because of the cuts, and waiting times for autism diagnosis for children have been four years, even though our health and wellbeing board, council and CCG have good plans to reduce that. For general practice, in some parts of Stockton South patients tell me they have to wait four weeks for a GP appointment. Fixing those things should be the priority for our CCG, not being forced to spend time and money on an unnecessary privatisation.

GP extended access is one part of the local NHS that is working well. The model has energised local GPs and, to an extent, local nurses. Eighty-five doctors and 25 nurses have worked in the service. Three years ago, before I was in Parliament, I led a workshop for GPs, and the No. 1 thing they asked me not to introduce was an extended access service. However, working together with the CCG, a model was created that people wanted to work for—one that works for staff and patients. Since GPs own the organisation that they work for, the things that matter are prioritised. The GP federation has a culture lead—an employee of the federation whose job it is to promote a happy, healthy working environment and reduce the pressure on frontline GPs. GPs working in that service are not motivated by profit. They are working as a collective and taking responsibility.

Extended access has also allowed new models of care to be tried, and pharmacist, physiotherapist and counsellor appointments are directly bookable at the weekend. The scheme is popular with patients—96% of GP and 70% of nurse appointments have been used. In short, the service works well. Although most people said at the start that it would not work, the service is popular with patients and well led. Why privatise it? What on earth could be gained? One and a half hours a day of private general practice—it is ridiculous.

More good collaborative things are happening in Hartlepool and Stockton. The local GPs are already working in partnership with the local hospital and the local ambulance service to run the local urgent care centre. Local services are integrated, everyone is talking to each other and most people are happy. Most areas would be delighted to have such a level of engagement and co-operation and such leadership. The service has been put out to tender simply because of the law. The Health and Social Care Act 2012 mandates competitive tender for certain contracts worth more than £615,000 a year.

In this case, I contend that the law is not working. It does not work for patients, it will not work for doctors or NHS leaders and I suspect it is probably not even what the Minister wants. There is hypocrisy here—a fundamental difference between what the Government are saying and what they are doing. I will quote from NHS England's "Next steps on the NHS Five Year Forward View" document, published in March 2017, which says that it will:

"Encourage practices to work together in 'hubs' or networks. Most GP surgeries will increasingly work together in primary care...hubs. This is because a combined patient population of at least 30,000-50,000 allows practices to share community nursing,

mental health, and clinical pharmacy teams, expand diagnostic facilities, and pool responsibility for urgent care and extended access."

That is what the NHS five-year forward view says will happen: GPs will work together to pool responsibility, which is exactly what is happening in my area. If private companies are invited to competitive tender for that, every GP has something to fear from the collaboration. They will do the work of setting up the services and somebody else will then come in and run them.

The Minister's colleague, the Minister for Health, the hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Stephen Barclay), recently gave evidence to the Health and Social Care Committee inquiry into integration in the NHS. When he was asked about privatisation, he said that

"there are a number of checks and balances in the system in the requirement for CCGs to consult their local populations, their health and wellbeing boards and their oversight and scrutiny committees. On top of that, there are safeguards at a national level of CCGs going through the integrated support and assurance process. Actually, there are a lot of checks and balances as to the fact that this is not privatisation."

I ask where the checks and balances were to stop the CCG having to put these services out to tender. Why did the Minister not intervene, when it is plain to everybody that it is a ridiculous idea to bring a private company in for an hour and a half each day?

Alex Cunningham: What concerns me is that this tender document sounds as though it will lead to a reduction in service, and the working people who access those extra clinics and appointments will not have the same level of service that they currently do. The Minister must intervene to ensure that we at least have the level of service that we have now.

Dr Williams: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting the potential risks to local patients. This is not about defending the interests of the staff who work in the service, however important they are; it is about ensuring that it is the best service for local patients.

Finally, I quote from the 2017 Conservative election manifesto; I am afraid I do not keep my own copy, but it is still available online. It says:

"We expect GPs to come together to provide greater access".

It also says:

"If the current legislative landscape is either slowing implementation or preventing clear national or local accountability, we will consult and make the necessary legislative changes. This includes the NHS's own internal market, which can fail to act in the interests of patients and creates costly bureaucracy. So we will review the operation of the internal market and, in time for the start of the 2018 financial year, we will make non-legislative changes to remove barriers to the integration of care."

I ask, then, what the Minister has done and how he has acted to remove barriers to integration of care in Stockton.

GPs in the NHS in Darlington and in Hartlepool and Stockton are doing everything they have been asked to do by this Government and the NHS. They have organised themselves into collectives, and together they are delivering social prescribing and pharmacists in practices, promoting nursing in general practice, introducing new technologies, helping physicians' associates and training. Those are all good things that I am sure the Minister would support. Integration works. Integration is the right strategy: collaboration, not competition.

[*Dr Paul Williams*]

Why privatise now, and what is the risk of a private company running this service? The tender encourages competition on price. The lower an organisation's bid, the more likely it is to win the contract. Cutting costs means less money to pay for things such as the culture lead I mentioned, so the kindness, the looking after staff, the encouragement and the "thank you" cards go, and with them much of the goodwill they bring, which my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) talked about.

Would local doctors and nurses want to work for a private organisation motivated by profit? Remember, I said that most local GPs were opposed to extended access only three years ago. Their participation has been carefully nurtured; they have ownership of the organisation delivering the service and they now really care about making it a success. How will the tender process take account of that? Today, we have doctors and nurses working in a service motivated by patient care. How can a for-profit company answerable to remote shareholders recreate that ethos? We have seen this Government's privatisation failures over and over again, with Circle, Serco and Carillion. This Government are saying one thing about NHS collaboration, but doing another.

I have three questions for the Minister, and I will give him plenty of time to respond. First, why did he let this happen and why did he not intervene to stop it? Secondly, what is he going to do to stop this happening again in other parts of the country? What changes to the law does the Minister think would be helpful? Thirdly, how can he expect the public to trust the Tories on their new integrated care system idea if he cannot guarantee that these new multi-million pound contracts to run all the local health services will not be put out to tender in exactly the same way?

In the Minister's response, I ask him to either defend this ridiculous privatisation of 1.5 hours of GP services a day, risking a great service being taken away from local GPs and given to a private company, or perhaps to concede that this type of privatisation—a consequence of the Conservatives' 2012 Act—does not help patients and runs counter to the aims expressed in his party's election manifesto, the stated aims of his ministerial colleagues and the strategy of NHS England. Maybe he will agree that the law needs to be changed. I look forward to his response.

11.16 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie—it is the first time we have done this. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stockton South (Dr Williams), who I always enjoy listening to, on securing this debate on an important issue for him as both a Member of Parliament and member of the important Health and Social Care Committee, and—as I think he is still—a practising GP.

We know that primary care literally, by definition, comes first. It has always been and always will be the bedrock of the national health service. The Secretary of State and I have made that absolutely clear, and the long-term plan, when it is published later this year, will

make it even clearer. As the hon. Gentleman rightly says—I think there is unanimity—we are committed to ensuring that everyone can see their GP at a convenient time by increasing the availability of routine evening and weekend appointments. Millions of patients have already benefited thanks to our investment of some £2.4 billion into general practice by 2021. I join him in paying tribute to his colleagues for making the leap and making that available to his constituents.

We have asked all clinical commissioning groups to ensure by March next year that patients have extended access to general practice across the whole of their registered population. That includes ensuring that access is available during peak times of demand such as bank holidays, and across the Easter, Christmas and new year periods. We have made great strides in delivering extended access, with the vast majority of England now offering weekend and evening appointments. Apologies to you, Mr Hosie—this of course is a devolved matter and we are talking about the English health service. That extended access will, as the hon. Member for Stockton South rightly says, help to reduce the pressures on general practice—it is not all squeezed into the original sessions—and, importantly, to reduce pressures across the wider NHS ahead of winter, which is creeping up on us.

Good access is key to improving quality and is not just access for access's sake. Problems with access make it harder for people to get the right care from the right person at the right time. It is a publicly funded health service and it is there for the public, and that is what the public say they want. However, for us improving access is not simply about all GPs working seven days a week or doing more of the same. There was certainly a comms failure with the 2012 Act, in that it was allowed to be presented as saying that we just wanted GPs to just do more and to work seven days a week. Many people work seven days a week—all MPs certainly do—but improving access was not just about asking GPs to do more of the same. It can be and often is about practices coming together to offer services to a larger population—I have seen it most recently at the brilliant Granta surgery in Cambridge, which does it very well—using technology in different ways to make it easier for patients to access services, and broadening the skills mix. The hon. Gentleman and I have talked about the multidisciplinary team many times. It is also about working smarter in greater partnership across the health and social care system. The Secretary of State was at Granta just last week.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the Health and Social Care Act 2012 and asked in effect why we do not just do away with the requirement in that Act—the section 75 rules—so that CCGs are, as he says, no longer required to tender for contracts. Let me assure the hon. Gentleman and you, Mr Hosie, that any fears of privatisation of our NHS are, we think, completely groundless. I do not accept the title of the debate on the Order Paper. The Government are fully committed to the NHS as a public service that is free at the point of need, as it has been since day one in 1948—70 years ago this year, of course—whether care is provided by NHS organisations, as the vast majority is, or by the private, voluntary or social enterprise sectors. That guiding principle remains absolutely the case today. The mechanisms for deciding who provides what service may vary, but the basic structure of our NHS remains exactly the same. The

key question is, and will remain, the pragmatic one: how do we best secure the outcomes that we want for patients and the best possible value for the taxpayer? I completely respect the fact that the hon. Gentleman started his speech by saying exactly that. He is spot on, of course.

We should avoid the blanket assumption that one form or other of provision is always the best or worst, as the evidence does not support that sort of sweeping conclusion, which the hon. Gentleman understands. As long as patients receive care that is high quality, timely and free at the point of use, the status of the provider is of little if any significance. That has been the policy of successive Governments for many years. It was certainly the policy of the last Labour Government and was what Tony Blair believed when he was in office. I know that many Opposition Back Benchers do not share the ideology of those on their current Front Bench, which is to make those sweeping conclusions that one form of provision is bad and one good. Where healthcare is free at the point of use, people are not as concerned about who provides the care as we think and often hear in the House. The British social attitudes survey showed that 43% of people had no preference whatever between a private provider, an NHS provider and a not-for-profit organisation.

A clear framework for public sector procurement is both necessary and, we think, desirable, just as it has been since it was introduced in 2006, under a previous Government, to implement the EU procurement directive. It is necessary to ensure that where a local, clinically led CCG decides that it is in the interests of patients and taxpayers to look at a range of potential providers for a service, it is able to do so. That is in the best interests of patients and taxpayers. Securing the best possible treatment for a patient is what we all want to achieve, but we also have to use NHS resources for the good of all patients. Achieving value for money is not just about making the numbers add up. It is about how we ensure that everyone gets the quality of treatment that they deserve.

Dr Paul Williams: The Minister has said that the CCG puts things out to procurement when it decides that that is in the interest of patients. Do I understand from his words that the local CCG had the option within the law of not going out to procurement on this service?

Steve Brine: I might have to send the hon. Gentleman a note on that, but I will repeat what I said, just for the purposes of accuracy—I know he is seeing the relevant people later this week. Where the clinically led CCG decides that it is in the interests of patients and taxpayers to look at a range of potential providers for a service, it is able to do so. Those are the words I have for him. What we need and have is a sensible, proportionate framework that effectively balances the need of commissioners to secure the best-quality service at the best price with their need to ensure the security and sustainability of supply. It has worked that way and worked well for the past 12 years.

Alex Cunningham *rose*—

Steve Brine: I will happily give way to the constituency neighbour of the mover of the motion.

Alex Cunningham: I wish to push this point. I know the Minister said that he might have to send my hon. Friend a note, but in putting the service out to tender, the CCG either is acting within the law or is not. Did it have the option within the law not to put this particular service out to tender? We need a very clear understanding of that.

Steve Brine: Let me repeat that the local, clinically led CCG absolutely decided that it was in the interests of patients and taxpayers to look at a range of potential providers for the service that they wanted to be provided. That is the process that it is going through. The hon. Member for Stockton South rightly said that he would not expect me to wade into the middle of the procurement process. I cannot do that, but I will say that sensible, dynamic commissioning will be central to the NHS meeting the challenges that it faces today and in the future despite the commitment to increase the funding by £20.5 billion a year. That is vital to ensure that the NHS delivers on our triple aim of improving quality of care, cost control and population health which, as I am the Public Health Minister and absolutely focused on prevention, is one of my and the new Secretary of State's key priorities. It is central. To achieve that triple aim, NHS commissioning will need to continue to develop as it has done since its inception. NHS England has designed a new commissioning capability programme to support commissioning systems. The programme provides tailored support delivered through place-based solutions to equip NHS commissioners with the skills they need to deliver on the challenges of today and the future.

Let me stress one of the fundamental principles of the 2012 reforms of the NHS—I served for many weeks on the Standing Committee that considered the Bill. That principle is delegating power away from Whitehall and Ministers such as me, who come and go with political cycles, to local clinical commissioning groups. They are led by fantastic GPs and other local health experts, who are best placed to make the important decisions that matter to local people. Darlington CCG and the Hartlepool and Stockton-on-Tees CCG are rightly making the decisions about how best to ensure that people in their areas have access to a GP when it suits them. Bids for local extended access GP services are currently being closely assessed with a view to the contract starting in April 2019. I have faith that those local commissioners will award this contract in a way that, as I have set out, improves access and quality for patients. Let me say that very clearly: I have faith that those local commissioners will award the contract in a way that I think the hon. Member for Stockton South will find satisfactory.

Dr Williams *rose*—

Steve Brine: We still have two minutes, so I will let the hon. Gentleman come in again.

Dr Williams: If the Minister had been asked for his advice as the Minister with responsibility for primary care by the CCG about whether it should put this out to tender, what would his response have been?

Steve Brine: My response would have been that the CCG needs to act in accordance with the law, with the Act, and I believe it is doing that.

Let me close by saying that I know the hon. Gentleman, and possibly his neighbour, the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham), are meeting regional representatives of NHS England later this week—probably on Friday, when they get back to their constituencies. Ultimately, these decisions are for the local NHS, not for Ministers. We merely set the legislative framework. They are absolutely the best people to discuss the concerns of the hon. Member for Stockton South. As I said, I have faith that the local commissioners will award this contract in such a way that he will be happy that it improves access and quality for local patients, as I have set out.

Question put and agreed to.

11.28 am

Sitting suspended.

East Coast Main Line Investment

[ALBERT OWEN *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered East Coast Mainline investment.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen, not least because I have attempted to secure a debate on this issue for some time in my capacity as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the east coast main line. I also represent one of the constituencies served by this vital route.

I am grateful to right hon. and hon. Members for attending this debate during an important Opposition day debate in the main Chamber on universal credit and social care funding, to which I would ordinarily want to contribute. Newcastle has been particularly hard hit by the roll-out of universal credit, for which it was a pilot area, and by the social care crisis. Sadly, the reality is that none of us can be in two places at once. I declare an interest: like many hon. Members, I use the east coast main line on a weekly basis, so I can personally testify to the pressing and increasing need for investment in the route.

I am proud of the pivotal role that Newcastle and the wider north-east have played in the development of rail travel through George Stephenson, the father of the railways, who was married at Newburn church in my constituency, and his son Robert and others, who pioneered their world-leading technology from our region through the industrial revolution. Whether it was the Stockton and Darlington railway, the Stephenson gauge, Locomotion No. 1 and the Rocket, which were both built at Stephenson's Forth Street works in Newcastle or William Hedley's earlier Puffing Billy, the world's oldest surviving steam engine that ran between Wylam in Northumberland and Lemington in my constituency, the north-east's contribution to Britain's railways has been second to none.

That impressive history was celebrated this summer during the Great Exhibition of the North, which was held across the region and included the sadly temporary return of Stephenson's Rocket to the region.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing the debate and for her excellent opening, which focuses on our proud history in transport and particularly in railways. As she said, it is unfortunate that Stephenson's Rocket apparently had to return to London. Stephenson's notebooks were recently found in York. Does she agree that there is now an excellent opportunity to bring them back to the city that she proudly celebrates?

Catherine McKinnell: That is off-point with regard to the east coast main line, but it is an excellent suggestion that we should pursue. I am sure that there would be a lot of support for bringing home—back to Newcastle and the north-east—more of what is rightly ours when it comes to our contribution to engineering and railway history in Britain.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): We are extremely proud of our railway heritage, particularly in Stockton, from where the first passenger train left on its journey to Darlington. Across the country, people are bringing heritage lines back into use, but we do not need that on Teesside, because our trains and lines are so decrepit, old and run-down that they ought to be confined to history. Does my hon. Friend agree that, although we desperately need more investment in the north-east line, we also need to cover the branch lines so that the people of Teesside and beyond have proper services to get to the main line?

Catherine McKinnell: I absolutely agree. I will make the case that investment is not only about the infrastructure of the vital east coast spine that runs up and down our country, but about the major impact that that would have on all the contributing branch lines and communities that rely on that infrastructure and the infrastructure that connects to it.

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): I represent Lincoln, which was promised six extra train services. We have one train to London in the morning at half seven, and one train back at six minutes past seven in the evening. Other than that, everybody has to change at Newark—it is a nightmare; I park at Newark.

I have heard through the grapevine—even though I am the MP—that we are not now getting those extra trains. Apparently there is a problem with the trains and the timetables. Does my hon. Friend agree that I should have been properly informed about that, along with other people, and that a formal announcement should be made?

Catherine McKinnell: My hon. Friend has put her concerns firmly on the record. The Minister may wish to refer to them at the end of the debate. Otherwise, I am sure that she will make her concerns about the issue known again.

As well as celebrating our railway of the past, this debate is about our railway of the future. The north-east can celebrate its proud role in that too, including through the manufacture of the new Azuma trains at Hitachi's Newton Aycliffe plant. That is the east coast main line of tomorrow, which is what we must focus on today.

The east coast main line is a critical piece of our national rail infrastructure. It is one of the country's most strategically important transport routes and enables more than 80 million passenger journeys a year, according to Network Rail. Between Berwick-upon-Tweed and London, the east coast main line carries more than 58 million tonnes of freight annually, equivalent to 6.9 million lorry loads. The Consortium of East Coast Main Line Authorities has estimated that the local area served by the route contributes £300 billion to the UK economy every year—and that figure doubles if London is factored in to the calculation.

Mr Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this timely and important debate. Does she not think it ironic that we have those new Hitachi trains, but they cannot go at their maximum speed because the lines are decades old? We are getting new trains, but the lines do not match them.

Catherine McKinnell: I would go further than my hon. Friend and say that it is not only ironic but completely unacceptable. That is part of the case that I want to make to the Minister.

The east coast main line is a significant employer in its own right, as more than 3,000 people work for London North Eastern Railway. Trains that use the east coast main line operate as far north as Inverness and as far south as London, and one third of the UK's population live within 20 minutes of the east coast main line, so the quality of the service and the capacity of the route has a real impact across the country.

The east coast main line is the fastest and most environmentally sustainable way to connect many of those locations, and enables cities in the north of England—or the northern powerhouse, to use the Government's terminology—to do business elsewhere in the country and with one another. When the railway works, its key city centre to city centre journey times compare favourably with air travel, which allows slots at airports to be reserved for connectivity into international economies. The east coast main line should always win hands down against road travel as an attractive alternative to slow-moving traffic and motorway driving, with all the air quality issues that they bring.

The line does not just facilitate the famous Anglo-Scottish trains of past and present that travel to and from London, but a multiplicity of other journeys that utilise every part of the route, such as Edinburgh to Leeds, Newcastle to Birmingham, Darlington to Bristol, Middlesbrough to Manchester and Stansted airport to Leicester. The east coast main line and this debate are important not just to the grand cathedral stations of King's Cross, Edinburgh, York and Newcastle, but to the other stations that serve commuter towns and larger villages across the route. When all those connecting lines are taken into account, that includes a far bigger swathe of the country than just those places immediately near the east coast main line.

For all those reasons, the east coast main line is a national asset to be prized and nurtured, not taken for granted. That is why I established the all-party parliamentary group to focus on the issue earlier this year, so hon. Members from both Houses could campaign together to secure investment in the route for an improved passenger experience, for capacity and reliability, and for shorter journey times.

The APPG is also looking at the economic growth that could be unlocked in the areas served by the east coast main line if those improvements are delivered, and at the future operation of the route, which has been beset by significant problems over the past decade. Given that the APPG's vice chairs are the hon. Members for Stevenage (Stephen McPartland), for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) and for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine), there is clearly strong cross-party and cross-country interest in this issue.

Of course, the Minister here today is well aware of the APPG's existence, having attended one of our meetings back in June, for which we are grateful, and having corresponded with me since. I am quite sure that we will remain in contact in the months ahead.

I am acutely aware that the performance issues facing east coast main line passengers do not come close to the frankly catastrophic service issues faced by people who

[*Catherine McKinnell*]

had the misfortune of having to use a number of other lines over the summer, including Arriva's Northern Rail passengers and those on the Thameslink, Southern and Great Northern routes.

However, there are also real problems on the east coast main line. The latest performance measures published by Network Rail indicate that in the year to 15 September, just 75.2% of trains on the east coast main line, under the former franchise and the current operator, arrived within 10 minutes of their scheduled time. That is well short of the national figure of 86% and even further adrift of the target figure, which is 88%.

Over the same period, almost 9% of east coast main line trains were cancelled or classed as being "significantly late", against an England and Wales performance of 4.6%. Of course, this issue is most serious for those communities not directly served by the line—for them, reliability is absolutely crucial if connections to adjoining routes are actually going to work.

Although passenger satisfaction data for LNER is not yet available, the spring 2018 figures from the independent transport user watchdog, Transport Focus, found an "overall satisfaction with the journey" rating for Virgin Trains East Coast of 87%—the worst score on the east coast main line route for five years. It will be very interesting to see what happens to that figure when Transport Focus publishes its autumn 2018 results, which will incorporate LNER's performance for the first time.

I am seriously concerned that the quality of the service currently being provided simply does not "sell" the line, or the local communities that it is supposed to serve. Why would anyone from overseas or from elsewhere in the UK want to come back to places they have visited on the route, or do business or invest there, if they have had a poor travel experience, as is far too often the case? Similarly, how can we possibly persuade more people to stop using their cars, to reduce congestion and improve poor air quality, if they simply cannot rely on the railway to get them from A to B on time and at a reasonable price, whether it is for business or leisure?

Alex Cunningham: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way to me again. She is championing people along the line. Across the line and the area, there is very poor access for disabled people—particularly at Billingham, where they cannot get on to a train at all. Will she join me in encouraging the Minister to back the application for a grant to give disabled people in the Billingham area proper access to rail services, from Teesside to Darlington and beyond?

Catherine McKinnell: My hon. Friend makes a vital point very well. I absolutely support that call—indeed, I support the call for such improvements to be made right up and down the line. That is something we should all focus on.

I am sure that many hon. Members will want to raise such concerns directly with LNER at the drop-in briefing that I will host next month, and that they will wish to update colleagues on their plans. That briefing is also an opportunity to put to LNER the case for some of the improvements that we would like to work together to secure.

It would be wrong to lay all of the problems that I have outlined today at the door of LNER, or indeed that of Virgin, given that the latest performance figures published by Network Rail show that some 58% of the delays and cancellations on the route over the last year were caused by Network Rail itself. Those figures are a clear reflection of the east coast main line's ageing and unreliable infrastructure. I suggest again to the Minister, as I have done at the APPG meeting that he attended and in writing, that that infrastructure is in urgent need of improvement or replacement, including of track, signalling and overhead power lines on the electrified sections. Also, far greater resilience is required in bad weather, which the rail networks of many other countries that have far more challenging climatic conditions than we do appear able to cope with.

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way. She is making a powerful argument, and I agree about the need to improve the infrastructure. There is a lot of talk about overhead cables and track, but does she agree that, given the new rolling stock, we should also look to invest in new digital technology, such as in-cab signalling? The Government have talked about bringing that forward, but there is no timetable for doing so. Does she agree that we should be looking at a timetable for that digital technology?

Catherine McKinnell: Absolutely. The hon. Gentleman has put that clearly on the record, and it would be good if the Minister referred to it in his response to the debate. Indeed, it is also an issue that the APPG can take up as part of the wider call to ensure that on the east coast main line we have the railway for the future and the investment that is required to deliver it.

Of course, the infrastructure-related poor performance on the east coast main line is not really surprising, given that the last significant large-scale improvement on the route was electrification to Edinburgh, which was completed back in 1991. To some of us, that feels like yesterday, but it is almost three decades ago.

In contrast, the west coast main line benefited from a major upgrade in the period between 1998 and 2009, at a cost of £9 billion in today's prices, accelerating journey times and offering greater passenger and freight capacity. That has resulted in at least 20% more passengers on the west coast main line, which is evidence that investment in existing rail infrastructure works.

So it is clear that the east coast main line, with its creaking infrastructure, is not currently fit for purpose and the demands that are already being made on it, but what about the demands of the future? Even without High Speed 2, forecasts predict that passenger demand on long-distance services will increase dramatically in the coming decades. For example, it has been estimated that between 2012 and 2043 there will be growth in demand of up to 175% for London to Edinburgh journeys, up to 145% for London to Leeds journeys and up to 62% for Leeds to Newcastle journeys. Therefore, increased capacity and, crucially, increased reliability will be vital for the east coast main line in the coming years, requiring short to medium-term investment regardless of any plans for HS2.

However, it is crucial to highlight that HS2 does not remove the need for longer-term investment in the east coast main line, as the benefits of HS2 phase 2b will be

fully realised only if there is an associated investment in the east coast main line. Also, as I am sure the Minister is well aware, the northern part of the line needs improvement so that HS2 trains can operate on it at high speeds. The east coast main line needs to be fast, reliable and resilient, day in and day out, as HS2, which aims to achieve Japanese-style timekeeping at a level that the east coast main line does not even aspire to yet, comes into use. Passengers must experience the same service when HS2 runs on the east coast main line as they do on the rest of the HS2 route. Of course, the far northern, central and southern parts of the east coast main line, which will not be served by HS2, also need such longer-term investment, so that they do not become more remote in terms of connectivity and prosperity.

However, the Consortium of East Coast Main Line Authorities has made it very clear to me that the Department for Transport's current proposals are insufficient to ensure that the east coast main line is HS2-ready by 2033, which is the point when the link between HS2 and the east coast main line is intended to be in place.

I know that on 23 July the Prime Minister made a somewhat unexpected announcement to

“confirm an investment of up to £780 million for major upgrades to the East Coast Main Line from 2019, to be completed in the early 2020s”,

which would give passengers

“more seats and faster, more frequent journeys”.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a passionate case on behalf of her constituents, and indeed on behalf of all the constituencies that rely on the east coast main line.

Does my hon. Friend agree that part of the problem is that over a long period the Government have not invested sufficiently in the rail infrastructure of the north-east? For example, we know that in 2016-17 transport spending per head in the north-east was just £291 per person, compared with £944 per head in London. However, what is more concerning is that even if we project forward and look at the figures for the future, as the Institute for Public Policy Research North has done, the north-east will remain in second place among the regions and far behind places such as London.

Catherine McKinnell: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend, and I have huge respect for her grasp of detail as Chair of the Select Committee on Transport. I thank her for her support in this debate. She has highlighted some of the issues specific to the north-east, whereas I have been working hard to speak for the whole east coast main line route and make the case for it as national infrastructure, but I agree with what she has said and I am grateful to her for putting on the record some stark figures that need to be addressed by the Government.

Going back to the Government's surprise announcement of £780 million of investment, somebody considerably more cynical than me might suggest that the timing and content of that pledge was more to do with the Cabinet's visit to the north-east that day and the pressing need to announce something north-east-friendly. Indeed, they do need more north-east-friendly announcements; my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) has pointed out the disparity in the investment

that goes into the region. That concern is possibly backed up by the fact that it took several days for the Department for Transport to confirm what the funding would be used for. However, as was eventually confirmed in writing following the Minister's attendance at the all-party parliamentary group on the east coast main line, it is intended that this control period 6 investment will include power supply upgrades between Doncaster and Edinburgh, a new junction near Peterborough, a new platform at Stevenage, and track layout improvements at King's Cross—improvements that are mainly paid for by necessary maintenance and renewal expenditure.

Let me be clear: any investment in the east coast main line is welcome, given the scale and nature of the improvements required. However, the Minister will also know that Network Rail published its east coast main line route study covering the section from London to Berwick-upon-Tweed, which contained a long list of potential investment projects or investment opportunities that would deliver much-needed improvements to the east coast main line. Most have been known about for some time and have been mooted repeatedly, including some that have not been delivered in Network Rail's control period 5, 2014 to 2019. The Consortium of East Coast Main Line Authorities estimates that the route requires at least £3 billion of investment to fulfil Network Rail's proposals, but there is no indication of where the remainder of the funding to pay for these projects will come from, either via Government funding or third-party investment. Meanwhile, Network Rail's renewal and maintenance fund for control period 6, 2019 to 2024, is barely enough to stand still, replacing items on a like-for-like basis.

I acknowledge that, as is made clear in Network Rail's route study, “recent rail industry developments” have seen a shift away from the historical model of railway infrastructure improvements being provided and funded centrally, via national Governments and Network Rail raising capital against its asset base. However, as a reclassified publicly funded body, Network Rail can longer finance enhancements through financial markets. A welcome devolution of funding and decision making on transport infrastructure means that more local, regional or sub-national bodies—such as LEPs, combined authorities, and Transport for the North—have been tasked with defining the railway needs in their area and applying for Government funding or attracting third-party investment. However, the Network Rail east coast main line route study states:

“Overall, this means that improvements in rail infrastructure should not be seen as an automatic pipeline of upgrades awaiting delivery; rather, they are choices that may or may not be taken forward depending on whether they meet the needs of rail users, provide a value for money investment, and are affordable.”

I understand that could mean the Treasury taking final decisions on individual rail improvements in England on a case-by-case basis. I fear that does not bode well for the comprehensive, coherent programme of infrastructure improvements that I and others believe is required for the east coast main line route. To that end, it would be helpful to hear what the Minister's plans are for working with the Scottish Government to secure that investment right across the line.

Chi Onwurah: I thank my hon. Friend for being generous with her time, and for the points that she is making. Specifically regarding the way in which the

[*Chi Onwurah*]

Treasury assesses opportunities for investment in north-east infrastructure, we have heard how discriminated against that region has historically been. Will the Minister look at the definition under which that assessment is made, taking into account the economic value of infrastructure investment in the north-east region and how it contributes to delivering a less unequal society?

Catherine McKinnell: Again, I echo my hon. Friend's comments, and I thank her for putting on record some of the specific requirements of the north-east as part of the wider east coast main line infrastructure demands that we are making.

Lilian Greenwood: My hon. Friend is being generous with her time. Is she aware that the Transport Committee's report into rail infrastructure investment called on the Government to do more to reflect the fact that the way they deal with business cases disadvantages places like the north-east that are in need of economic regeneration? Does she share my disappointment that the Government's response to that report does not take on board the Committee's recommendations, which might help to ensure that such places get their fair share of transport funding?

Catherine McKinnell: Absolutely, because apart from the other issues that have been raised, businesses need certainty about infrastructure and the quality of any improvements on a route before they will bring new investment and jobs to communities that depend on that line. It is not clear how that will be delivered under the current system, or whether we can expect a series of unexpected announcements from Government Ministers, such as the announcement that was made over the summer. Although that announcement was welcome, I would be interested to hear whether the Minister believes that the issues now arising with the long-awaited Azuma trains, which have been 10 years in the planning, reflect this piecemeal, seemingly un-strategic and ad hoc approach to investment in the east coast main line's infrastructure. Last month, it was reported that ageing track-side equipment on the line north of York meant that the electro-diesel trains would have to operate only on diesel on that part of the route, travelling much more slowly than their promised speed, with all the air quality issues that would create. In Hitachi's words,

"There are a number of 30-year old signalling systems on the East Coast line which require modifying to operate with modern electric trains".

I am acutely aware that there are myriad issues affecting the east coast main line that I have not touched on today, including the never-ending franchising sagas that were covered so well in the Transport Committee's recent excellent report; the future operation of the route; the Government's ongoing proposals for a new east coast partnership, which the Transport Committee has described as an experiment; and how any of this fits into the root and branch rail review announced by the Secretary of State last month and re-announced by the Secretary of State last week. However, I hope I have made it clear that the east coast main line, one of the country's most important transport routes, is in urgent need of a significant, coherent programme of investment for the short, medium and long term if it is to be fit for purpose now and into the future.

Such an investment programme would include improving the resilience and reliability of the east coast main line. It would include improving signalling, power supply and tracks, so that the Azumas can run at their full speed, offering faster train journeys and better connections. It would include improving capacity, particularly between York and Newcastle, for the east coast main line, HS2 and Northern Powerhouse Rail. Ideally, it would ensure that HS2 services can continue north from Newcastle to Edinburgh, both from the start of phase 2b and in the longer term as an upgraded route north of Newcastle. Such an investment programme would deliver real returns for the whole country. Independent research undertaken on behalf of the Consortium of East Coast Main Line Authorities estimates that the scale of investment required and subsequent improvements to passenger services could generate more than £5 billion in extra GDP, or an additional £9 billion per year when combined with HS2 phase 2 and the link to the east coast main line in the York area.

I look forward to the Minister's response, and to hearing what he believes to be the main issues that the east coast main line faces and, therefore, what his future priorities might be in terms of investment. I would like to hear what additional money for investing in the route could, and will, be made available for devolved bodies to bid for, and at what point the Government will enter into meaningful dialogue involving Network Rail and key stakeholders along the route to develop a series of interventions to ensure that the east coast main line is fit for purpose, both now and in the future. Crucially, I would like to hear how he intends to ensure that a significant, coherent programme of east coast main line investment is delivered.

3 pm

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. I congratulate the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) on securing this timely and important debate. Sadly, my constituency does not lie on the direct route of the east coast main line, but it is heavily reliant on it, as am I. Looking around, most of the Members in the Chamber will be very familiar with LNER, as it now is, as we go to and from our constituencies. As the hon. Lady rightly said, the east coast main line is vital to the economies of the eastern spine of the country, but it is also important to those communities that lie off the main line. Quite simply, I cannot get home without using the east coast main line, but sadly I then have to use TransPennine. It is perfectly fine—the only problem is that it takes 65 minutes to do 50 miles, which is not exactly what we expect in the 21st century.

The hon. Lady rightly focused on the history of Darlington and the north-east in the development of the railways. My constituency includes Immingham, which along with Grimsby is part of the largest port complex in the UK by tonnage. The ports of Immingham and Grimsby were developed by the Manchester, Sheffield and Lincolnshire Railway, or the MS&LR. It was affectionately known as "Mucky, Slow and Late". Nowadays we get much cleaner trains, but they are not much faster. To be fair, they are usually on time, but they are not exactly express.

If the Minister was visiting Immingham, I would suspect that happens, as with most ministerial visits, I would get a call saying, "Can you meet me at Doncaster?"

That is because they appreciate how difficult it is to get to the east-coast communities from the main line. The same applies to Scunthorpe, Skegness, Boston and other towns. The coastal communities are vital. They need revitalising and new industry. To get that, they need good transport connections. I suspect that if the Minister was coming to Immingham tomorrow, even in his Department people would not know that Habrough station is two miles from the port of Immingham. I would again get the call asking to meet at Doncaster.

We have recently secured for my constituency the Greater Grimsby town deal, which has great potential to revitalise a fairly left-behind coastal community. Returning to the point I made a moment or two ago, to do that it is vital that we have transport connections. Most importantly, we need a direct train service to King's Cross.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Ind): I regret that I was unable to be here for the beginning of the debate, but I support everything the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) said. I have made a number of specific suggestions for upgrading and improving the east coast main line, particularly the southern half of it, that would make possible the restoration of direct fast services from King's Cross to Grimsby and Cleethorpes. Should the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) not be demanding that as of now?

Martin Vickers: The hon. Gentleman regularly comes to the all-party parliamentary group on rail, which I chair. I am very familiar with the proposals that he has been championing for a number of years. I am demanding now and have been demanding ever since I arrived here that more investment goes into the routes that serve not only my constituency, but other routes off the main lines.

I was rather disappointed to hear what the hon. Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee) said. She said she was lucky to have one direct train. We have got no direct trains, and we have not had any since British Rail ended them in 1992. I was rather disappointed to hear that the expected increase in trains through to Lincoln is in some doubt.

Karen Lee: It is not happening.

Martin Vickers: I am very disappointed to hear that. I put three alternatives that the Minister could consider in my notes, and one of them was to extend one or two of those new services to Lincoln through to Grimsby and Cleethorpes. Given what the hon. Lady is saying, it might not be possible.

The Minister will be aware that an open-access operator has shown an interest and has previously been in negotiations with the Office of Road and Rail about direct services. That is yet again on hold. I understand that a review is taking place on access charges for open-access operators. I can understand the logic of that, but it creates further delay. Earlier this year, Grand Central was intending to put an application in to run four direct services from King's Cross through to Cleethorpes via Doncaster and Scunthorpe, but that is now on hold.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Although the hon. Gentleman is outlining some of the difficulties he has in getting direct services to his constituency, I am

pleased that the new publicly run LNER has just announced that it will extend direct services to Harrogate, which would increase the number of trains stopping in my constituency from one a day to six a day. That clearly shows that publicly run rail can deliver.

Martin Vickers: I was not intending to embark on a pro or anti-nationalisation debate, but I remind the hon. Gentleman that since privatisation—I cannot remember, and the Minister can probably give the exact figure—hundreds of millions of pounds from the private sector has been invested in the rail network. The simple reality is that if we nationalise the rail network, which I sincerely hope we do not, British Rail or whatever we choose to call it would be very low down on the list of demands on the Treasury. Do we want money for the health service, schools and 1,001 other things? The simple fact is that there would be a spiralling down, just as there was in the 1970s and 1980s.

To conclude, I urge the Minister to meet me to discuss further how we can get over the immediate problems and look forward to a direct service along the east coast main line serving my constituency and the neighbouring constituency of Grimsby. I ask him not to say, as many other Ministers have over the past few years, "When we get HS2, there will be more capacity on the east coast main line, so you will be able to get a service through to Cleethorpes." I am afraid that that timescale is simply not acceptable, even if it is 2033 or thereabouts when HS2 comes along. If a week is a long time in politics, 15 years must be generations. I urge the Minister to look again at the economic arguments for the regeneration of an area that has just been granted a unique town deal status by the Government. We need improved road and rail networks. I am fully supportive of improvements to the east coast main line, but only if they can in addition provide direct services to Cleethorpes.

3.8 pm

Mr Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. I repeat my earlier comments about my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell), who managed to secure this extremely necessary and timely debate. At the outset, I give big thanks to the staff of the east coast main line, which we all use regularly, for their hard and excellent work and courtesy at all times.

Like many of my colleagues, Members from other parties and Members of the other place, I am a regular traveller on east coast rail. We travel regularly with each other. Our constituents also use the line to go to work or to visit friends or family to keep in contact. The one thing we have in common—I am convinced about this—is that we believe the east coast rail line and the trains on it should be in public hands. It is in desperate need of investment.

Reference has already been made to the Cabinet meeting held in July, which was nothing but a gimmick. Reference was made to the advantages of privatisation, and we laughed when the Cabinet could not get back to London on time because the trains were delayed because of the chaos on the east coast rail line.

Privatisation is a joke. Three times in recent history, certainly since I have been in Parliament, the line has been in the hands of the private sector and has failed.

[Mr Stephen Hepburn]

Its only successful time was from 2009 to 2015 when Labour nationalised it and it returned £1 billion to the public coffers in the Treasury. On numerous occasions, both the Transport Committee and the Public Accounts Committee have criticised the services, but Ministers have unfortunately ignored the criticisms. The clear message from taxpayers and passengers and from this House and its Committees is that privatisation is bad for our rail system.

There is a broader argument for investment in the east coast rail line. Everybody agrees that this country is running an imbalanced economy. It is too focused on London and the south-east at the expense of the north-east. The east coast rail line could be a solution. It could be used as a driver to boost economic growth. House of Commons figures show that under 3% of Government transport funding has been spent in the north-east since 2012. As has already been pointed out, that is the lowest of all the English regions by far. For rail spending it is even worse, with over 15 times more being spent in London compared with the whole north-east.

Research has shown that an investment of only £3 billion over the next decade could boost the north-east economy by £9 billion if that investment went into the east coast rail line. Why do we not do that? Ideology has taken over the Government rather than practical measures to try to improve the north-east.

I hope the Minister will address a couple of questions when he replies to the debate. First, following the 2013 announcement of the proposed privatisation that took place just before the general election in 2015, Ministers boasted of the benefits of privatisation and how it would lead to increased investment. Do they now admit that that was wrong? Secondly, fares have been put up year after year under privatisation with the promise of improvements. Where are the improvements? I travel on the line weekly, as lots of people do, and we have not seen the improvements. Thirdly, the Government continually state that they are undertaking the biggest investment in rail since Victorian times. Well, it is certainly not happening in the north-east of England or on the east coast main line. I look forward to the Minister's response.

3.13 pm

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): I had not intended to speak, Mr Owen, but I am inspired by the speeches and by the mover of the motion, my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell). She spoke with great passion and clarity about how much the line means to our national economy, our culture and our society.

It thrills the blood to be on an east coast main line train and to arrive, for example, at the tremendous station in the great historic city of York on race day, or at Leeds—I am sitting next to my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel)—with its shops and culture and its new cathedral of a station, with lots of investment to come. It will uniquely house the main line station, HS2 and HS3 as well. It will perhaps be the premier station in the whole of the country when that happens.

It is a great pleasure to speak in this debate and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow (Mr Hepburn). Regardless of the ideology of privatisation,

the line has had a sorry history. GNER, National Express and Virgin-Stagecoach all failed, despite the amount of money that went into the franchises and despite the lawyers. Then they were taken back. I have a few questions for the Minister, and just an appeal, really.

Lilian Greenwood: Before my hon. Friend goes on to ask questions, does he agree with me that it is important to remember that today is the anniversary of the accident at Hatfield, which occurred when the infrastructure was privatised under Railtrack? As a result of that accident, the infrastructure was brought back into the public sector under Network Rail. Should we not remember that on 17 October 2000, four people lost their lives and 70 were injured? We saw then the dangers of putting ideology and profits ahead of running a safe railway.

John Grogan: We should certainly remember that anniversary. Regardless of ideology, one achievement of Network Rail over the intervening period, under all parties, has been to put a much higher emphasis on safety on our railways, and we should never lose that again.

On my questions for the Minister, is there not a strong case for a period of stability on the east coast main line? As we have heard, we have a promise of some investment from the Government, but we really need a period of stability so that people know where they stand. Ministers have mentioned the east coast partnership, but have given very little detail. We have no idea who will be involved in that partnership. Will Network Rail be involved? Will it be a privatised operator?

For the period of this Parliament, should it last until 2022, it would be welcome if the Government were to say that the service will be run as it is now: a directly run state-operated company with Network Rail. The Minister should be very cautious about disrupting the system yet again. There are other operators on the east coast main line who write to me to ask whether they will be involved in the partnership; there are other franchisees and open-access operators and so on.

Civil servants might put the next possible option in front of the Minister when the best possible option is, as my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow mentioned, what happened in the period between 2009 and 2015. During that sustained period, the line was run for public service in the public sector. The stats went up, reliability went up and £1 billion was paid into the public coffers. The line could be a public sector comparator. From the Government's point of view, it would be a good thing over the next five years to look at evidence-based policy.

We have heard a little about extra trains to Harrogate and Lincoln. Are they happening or not? Extra trains to Middlesbrough were promised. Seven a day to Bradford from next May were promised. Will those trains definitely run? Can I put in my diary for 1 May next year that I shall be there watching as seven trains from Bradford, rather than the one, go on that line?

Can the Minister tell us a little more about the Azuma trains? We have heard about the problems of electromagnetic interference with signals—it sounds like science fiction. Are Ministers getting a grip of that?

When will that problem be solved? Will the Minister be able to say a little more on that this side of Christmas or in the new year?

I do not want to speak for long, but I want to say that the Labour party looks forward to government. We look forward to the main franchisee, the east coast main line, being run in the public sector with Network Rail, with all the co-ordination and efficiency that that will bring. From time to time, I raise the question of open-access operators with shadow Ministers, because there are open-access operators on the east coast main line. Hull Trains and Grand Central have re-linked towns such as Halifax to the east coast main line, and First is planning to bring in an open-access operator in 2021 to Edinburgh.

We can afford to be magnanimous as a new Labour Government. We should also recognise that just as the BBC is a great public service broadcaster but benefits from challenge from Channel 4 and the commercial sector, at the margin we should be confident in our belief in public sector efficiency, and still allow challenge in a 98% or 99% publicly owned sector.

I used to represent Selby, where Hull Trains identified a gap in the market and provided a service. A big national operator will not always be quite as fleet of foot as we might want. In thinking about how to change the railways we must give more of a role to local authorities, for example. However, there should not just be one decision maker in Whitehall deciding on routes. I hope for assurances on that matter from the Labour Front Bench.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Albert Owen (in the Chair): Order. I remind hon. Members that I shall call the Front-Bench speakers promptly at 3.30. The Minister may want to leave time at the end for the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North to wind up.

3.20 pm

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. I, too, want to start by thanking the hard-working staff on the east coast main line. They are always friendly and as helpful as they can be. They take a lot of stick, because it is not a very good service, and they deal with that in a positive way. I aim no criticism at them at all.

Like many of my constituents, I rely on the east coast main line, which connects Lincoln to the rest of the UK. Along with those people, I have been greatly concerned that it has once again come to be in a position of such uncertainty. Since June, the east coast main line has been temporarily run under the publicly-owned LNER, after Virgin-Stagecoach overbid for the contracts and defaulted on its contractual obligations. The latest contract failure is the third time in 10 years that a private train operator has failed to see out its contract on the east coast main line. To break the cycle, we must overhaul a deregulated system that enables companies to make reckless bids, safe in the knowledge that the taxpayer will bail them out.

The most pressing concern for people and businesses in Lincoln is that further uncertainty casts doubt on Virgin's promise of increased direct trains between Lincoln and London from May 2019. Additional services would

provide a huge boost to the local economy. Tourism is a big deal in Lincoln. There would be benefits to residents, businesses and Lincoln's industry in general. For months, I have been fighting to ensure that Lincoln gets the extra services that have long been promised. My constituents should not have to suffer because of the Government's mismanagement of the rail travel system. Neither should businesses.

I have sought assurances from Network Rail, local stakeholders and Ministers. On 24 May in the Chamber, I asked the Secretary of State for Transport to make a "firm commitment" that the pledged extra services would be delivered. He responded by giving

"all Members who are waiting for these new services an assurance that I will make sure that they are delivered."—[*Official Report*, 24 May 2018; Vol. 641, c. 978.]

Contrary to those assurances, I now understand that the extended services will not be going ahead as planned. There has been no formal announcement; I have that second hand from other stakeholders. Perhaps the Minister will clarify the point. Will he also reassure people and businesses in my constituency by giving a clear, unequivocal commitment that at some point Lincoln will indeed get the increase in the provision of direct trains that we have for so long been promised? If he can give me that assurance, when will we get them?

3.23 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. As other hon. Members have done, I congratulate the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) on securing the debate, and I commend her for the work that she does as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the east coast main line.

The hon. Lady's speech covered history and looked forward. As to the history, we heard about Stephenson and the Rocket, and the development of the original engines in Newcastle. That was interesting to me, and it made me feel I should mention some of my constituency's rail history. The oldest remaining railway viaduct in the world, the Laigh Milton viaduct, is in my constituency. The town of Kilmarnock has a proud heritage of building railway locomotives. There are still two companies active in Kilmarnock involved in the manufacture and refurbishment of rail rolling stock: Wabtec and Brodie Engineering. QTS, which is located just outside my constituency, employs many of my constituents and is involved in the ongoing maintenance of rail infrastructure up and down the UK. It is a company that helps to keep trains running.

The hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North clearly highlighted some of the issues affecting the east coast main line. As to punctuality, I noted the figure of 80%, against an 86% average in England and Wales. It is worth mentioning that the ScotRail franchise in Scotland operates at nearly 90% punctuality, and even that gets quite a bit of criticism, which shows what the level of performance on the east coast main line really is. However, it is not just a matter of statistics: the statistics mirror passenger experience, and it is important to point that out. If there is an intention to increase passenger or visitor numbers, and to get people to return to the railways, clearly there is a need for an enjoyable rail experience. That is tied in with punctuality and reliability.

[Alan Brown]

The issue underpins the whole argument about investment on the east coast main line. I support those calls, because the route is a cross-border one.

The £780 million package that magically appeared at the time of the Cabinet visit to the north in July was interesting. Obviously, it was welcome, but it made me think. I hope the Minister can explain. A surprise announcement kind of makes a mockery of the whole asset management system—the approach to managing infrastructure and going about long-term planning and investment—because suddenly, from nowhere, there is an announcement of a £780 million investment. It would be good if the Minister could explain the rationale for that and how it was prioritised in relation to other things that are still needed—either investment for the east coast main line, or other rail investment called for by Members in the surrounding area.

I have my own experience and memories of travelling on the east coast main line, which was the service of choice when going from the west coast of Scotland to London. At one time, the east coast main line had a much better service than the west coast main line, even though the journey was longer. It is clear that upgrades to the west coast main line have changed that dynamic and resulted in a shifting of the passenger balance, with more now using the west coast main line. That underpins the need for upgrades to the east coast main line. However, there are some parallels, looking forward; some upgrades will be made to the west coast main line to facilitate High Speed 2, but they will leave other areas of the rail network further behind. Some passengers will end up with an even poorer second-class system, while other areas of the network will get upgrades to facilitate High Speed 2.

The valid point has been made that the Treasury can spike projects or control the final release of money. We need to move away from that. Surely the Department for Transport should make the final decisions on investment.

The hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) made another of his repeated requests for upgrades in the Cleethorpes and Grimsby area. I have heard those requests many times, in the main Chamber and here, so it might be thought that at some point Ministers would hear his requests and act on them. It would be good to hear the Minister's response. An ongoing issue that the hon. Gentleman touched on was the theory that privatisation brought in a lot more investment from the private sector. What it did was to allow private companies to borrow money at a higher rate than the UK Government can, against, effectively, the guarantee that taxpayers and rail users will pick up the tab. It is not free money or magic money. It is a different way of hiding the Government's borrowing. That is my issue with privatisation and the argument that it has brought in all this extra investment. It is actually just another way of hiding the borrowing.

That took us neatly on to the speech of the hon. Member for Jarrow (Mr Hepburn), who responded by saying that privatisation is a joke. I think that the hon. Gentleman will gather that I agree with his sentiments—certainly, as to how the matter is presented. He rightly pointed out that between 2009 and 2015, the state-operated rail company generated £1 billion in track fees and £42 million operating profit. Of course, that profit did

not go to shareholders but was invested straight back into the railway, again showing the merits of public sector involvement in the operation of the railways.

The hon. Gentleman highlighted the fact that the UK runs an unbalanced economy with a focus on London and the south-east, which he said was to the detriment of north-east England. I observe, however, that a Labour Government were in power from 1997 to 2010, and surely they should have done something about that imbalance and invested in the east coast main line up to the north-east.

Mr Hepburn: Do not forget the neglect that we in that Labour Government inherited. We turned around the imbalance in hospitals and schools, and we spent a fortune on raising standards to give working-class people a better chance in life.

Alan Brown: I take the hon. Gentleman's point about the mess that was inherited, but I still think something could have been done about the east coast main line. When the west coast main line was being done, it would have made sense to have a long-term plan for upgrading the spines along the west and east coasts, to see how that could generate growth and connectivity with cities and regions across the UK.

I can exclusively reveal that any speech in Westminster Hall by the hon. Member for Keighley (John Grogan) starts with, "I wasn't going to speak, but I was inspired and now feel obliged to do so." I agree completely with his comments about franchises and the fact that lawyers suck a lot of money out of the system. Cost consultants also suck a lot of money out of the system, and the money that we are paying for lawyers, cost consultants and management is money that could be used for investment and to drive growth in the railways.

Relevant points were raised about the Hatfield disaster, and about how ideology led to the privatisation of the rail infrastructure. That reminded me of a recent statement on the railways by the Transport Secretary, in which he spoke about the forthcoming rail review and kept referring to the fact that some failures of the existing system were due to what he called the "nationalised" part of the railway system. For me, that had bad undertones of future privatisation, which is why I challenged him on that point. Thankfully, he said on the record that there are no plans to privatise Network Rail, and we must certainly never go back to the disaster of the Railtrack venture.

The hon. Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee) made a plea for the improved services that have apparently been promised for Lincoln, and it would be good to hear the Minister's response to that. She correctly pointed out problems with the existing franchise system, and the fact that tenderers are allowed to over-promise, under-deliver and walk away. There is something fundamentally and morally wrong with the fact that Virgin Trains East Coast was able to walk away owing the taxpayer £2 billion. The Secretary of State always says—the Minister probably does as well—that the £2 billion was not a bail-out, but if I let somebody who owed me £2 billion walk away from me, that would effectively be a £2 billion bail-out. Vtec had an IOU for £2 billion, and it was able to wrap it up and walk away. That is a bail-out, in layman's language, and that money could have been invested in the railway. We have an investment of £780 million, but

with £2 billion coming from track fees, that is old money being invested in rolling stock. I understand that the new operation will still generate track fees, but no private company should be able to walk away and still be involved in other franchise bids. It makes no sense.

I agree with the comments made about the franchise system, and I welcome the review into that. We must, however, move away from short-termism and towards longer-term plans for investment in the east coast main line. I agree with the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North about the need for the UK Government to work with the Scottish Government on cross-border planning and investment. The Scottish Government funded the reopening of the Waverley line down to the borders, which was the biggest new rail project in the UK for something like 100 years. We want that to extend further and become a proper cross-border connection again, and I ask the UK Government to work with the Scottish Government on that in the long term.

I cannot finish a speech on the railways without saying that the SNP wants Network Rail to be devolved to Scotland. The Transport Secretary keeps saying that Network Rail is such a problem, so why do the Tory Government not allow that part of Network Rail in Scotland to be devolved and become the responsibility of the Scottish Government, along with other operations in Scotland? That would perhaps help the efficiency of the east coast main line. It would save money spent on Network Rail, and any money saved could be reinvested. I will now conclude my remarks, and I look forward to hearing the Minister's response.

3.35 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is good to see you in the Chair, Mr Owen, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) for opening the debate with many pertinent points, as well as going over the heritage of our railways. I am pleased to say that the Rocket will end up residing at the National Railway Museum in York where it will have a good home. Our city can certainly boast its share of rail heritage.

I represent York, which is the mid-point on the east coast main line and a significant railway hub that brings many networks together. I therefore have a constituency interest to ensure that we get the right upgrade—as we have heard, it is well overdue. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee) and from the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) about the significance of good connectivity through to London—my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) and other hon. Members also mentioned connectivity. We must ensure that we get right that connectivity to the main line, and keep those flows moving through. Although we are talking about the east coast main line, this debate is also about routes that feed into that line and are being brought into the modern age, so that they are not, as my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North described, a kind of heritage rail service. We must ensure that control period 6 considers the continuum of a journey as opposed to the segregation of different routes.

Too often with transportation not only are road, rail and other forms of transport segregated, but separate segments of our fragmented rail system go to different

places. Instead, we need to understand the power of connectivity and bring that forward. One of our biggest frustrations in the north is the fact that the Government have downgraded the trans-Pennine opportunity—Crossrail for the north—which would create connectivity between Liverpool, Manchester, through to Leeds, York and Hull, stretching north and south and, importantly, feeding into Sheffield and getting that connectivity right. We must connect up the powerhouse of the northern cities and drive the economy forward. Without that we have linear routes as opposed to the rail consolidation we need—that point was made powerfully by my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North.

This is not just about rail; it is about economic growth. The tremendous site of York Central sits adjacent to the main line. We want investment, and upgrading the east coast main line is one opportunity to drive that forward. Connectivity to the ports and across the trans-Pennine route will enhance that, as will heading north to Newcastle and Scotland.

We unquestionably need more capacity and speed, and we certainly need fewer delays—that is the real frustration faced by many passengers. It was shocking to learn this week that stations in York had the second highest number of delays in the country. The measure was just one minute, but that still leads to the stark realisation that we need great improvement across our rail networks.

The lack of investment in control period 5 has brought that into sharp focus. There are bottlenecks. There are overhead power line failures around, I think, the Retford area, which cause constant delays there. There are problems with old-fashioned fencing, through which animals come on to the tracks with great frequency. If animals can get on to the tracks, so can people, which creates a safety risk. The numerous level crossings along that route snarl up different conurbations. We need to ensure that the power needed to drive our railway into the future is available.

We also all know about the issues with our old infrastructure and rolling stock. That brings me on to the new Azuma trains, which have been put on pause by the Office of Rail and Road. Will the Minister tell us more about that? We understand that ORR has put the pause on because it requires Hitachi to resolve some safety issues, yet it has not withdrawn trains elsewhere on the network that have the same problems, including the Pendolino trains. There seems to be inconsistency in the safety features of those new trains and we need to understand why. I sat down with representatives from LNER last week who were also scratching their heads about that inconsistency, as were those from Network Rail. We therefore look to control period 6 to deliver a railway for the future.

Engineers say that one of their biggest frustrations is that they are brought in to find the best way to generate the most efficient and cost-effective rail enhancements at the wrong stage of the process. We need to ensure that, when engineering takes place, it is of the highest spec possible, because this is a once-in-a-generation opportunity for the east coast main line. We do not want to have to keep going back and tinkering with and tweaking the spec. We want that investment at the forefront. Why have we seen a downgrade in the money? LNER and Network Rail told me that more resource is

[*Rachael Maskell*]

needed to bring the enhancement and opportunity to the east coast main line that we need, so I want to know why that spec has been reduced.

Tracks are being upgraded, which we recognise the need for, as is the overhead line equipment between Peterborough and Doncaster—I mentioned Retford—and the power supply for digital signalling. Anyone who has the opportunity to visit the Rail Operating Centre in York will see the absolutely mind-blowing things that digital signalling can achieve. We will also have welcome upgrades of fencing and bridge-strike prevention planning. I talked to engineers in my constituency from Low & Bonar about their using laser technology to look at the strength of bridges and the opportunity that that provides. They can use digitalisation to engineer infrastructure, and to work with train designers as they do so. Level crossing closures are also needed. However, the opening up of Kings Cross will also be a real enhancement to the line.

We need to make sure that we have the full benefit of digital rail on the east coast main line, because that is where the future of our rail network sits. That upgrade is therefore important—it is a passion of the route operator of the east coast main line. It is certainly also one of mine and will be one of any future Labour Government. We will take those strides into the future, not into the past.

We know what needs to be done on the railways and do not need another year-long review. The power of bringing operations back under public control has been shown, with an increase in LNER patronage since it took over the east coast main line franchise. There is no appetite for a fourth franchising process. However, we need to bring track and train together in the public sector to bring the connectivity together. I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (John Grogan) that we absolutely believe that we should invest in new routes and new opportunities, and that we can do that under a national rail service. That is certainly what we want to do. It will not be a big, centralised body, as in the British Rail days. We are looking for a new model of public ownership that very much listens the voice of the passenger at the local level when devising what to do. He will have to hold his breath before seeing the details. We have been working with the industry, and it is very excited about the model we are putting forward.

We also need to ensure that we see a return for the passenger as well as the state, and we believe that our model will deliver that. We have rightly heard of VTEC's £2 billion scandal. It robbed that money from passengers and got away with it, and passengers are now paying more and more for tickets.

There is without doubt great opportunity for the future of the network. Journey times will be down. We also have to think of the opportunity for growth. Some 80 million passengers travel on that route each year. We want a modal shift, with people having confidence in the reliability of rail and moving out of their cars. Since 22 May, people up and down the country have lost confidence in rail because of the timetabling chaos. Our model will make sure that that can never be repeated. Putting responsibility for operations and infrastructure in one place will mitigate against such disasters as those we have seen on the Government's watch.

We want to make sure that rail is focused on the passenger, with good environments for passengers from stations through to trains, making sure that it is a public service in which people can once again have confidence. That requires good investment, which is what we want from the Government.

3.46 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Joseph Johnson): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. I congratulate the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) on securing the debate and on giving us the opportunity to discuss investment on the east coast main line. She is the chair of the APPG which, as she mentioned, I was pleased to attend a meeting of earlier in the year. She takes great pride in the railway and its contribution to her region of the north-east. The Government very much want to build on that heritage and ensure that we leave a railway that is stronger for future generations.

As the hon. Lady says, the east coast main line is a great national asset. Its sheer scope makes its huge importance to the national economy absolutely inevitable. It runs from London, through the east midlands, Yorkshire and Humberside, north-east England and reaches Scotland. The scope of the line speaks for itself. The extent of that scope creates wonderful opportunities for communities that depend on the line to access many other parts of the country, such as the region so well represented by my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers).

That said, the route is not without areas that need investment. The Government are committed to ensuring that we provide the money, time and resources that those areas require. I will take a few moments to describe to right hon. and hon. Members some of the investments that we are making in the east coast main line. However, before doing that, I will quickly respond to some of the more general points made about the distribution of transport infrastructure spending across the country, which is obviously a subject of great importance to Members for understandable reasons.

The chair of the Transport Committee, the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), criticised the Government's appraisal methods when deciding where to spend transport infrastructure funds. We do not accept that our methods do not provide regions with a fair share. As her Committee acknowledged, it is difficult to assign benefits specifically to one region from spending in that region when we have a national system such as the rail system. Benefits often spread beyond the area in which a specific investment is geographically located.

However, the Government have long acknowledged that the economy is imbalanced and needs rebalancing, and that changing the distribution of transport infrastructure spending to redress past patterns of underinvestment is an important part of what we need to do as an economy. We will therefore invest significantly in the north of England over the next few years. For example, between now and 2021, we will invest £13 billion in transport infrastructure in the north of England. Some of our biggest transport infrastructure items will be in the north of England, such as the trans-Pennine upgrade, which has been allocated £2.9 billion for the next five-year spending period from 2019 to 2024.

It is often asserted, seemingly without challenge, that the south gets more planned transport infrastructure spending from central Government than the north, but analysis by the Infrastructure and Projects Authority suggests otherwise: for the next four years, it reckons that the three northern regions will receive more per head than southern regions.

Let me focus on what the Government have been doing to ensure that the east coast main line continues to play an important role in our national economy. Hon. Members will be aware of the £5.7 billion Government-led intercity express programme—the new trains to which hon. Members have referred. The programme will provide the east coast and Great Western routes with a completely new fleet of trains equipped with the latest technology. The trains are being built at Hitachi's County Durham factory, which is home to more than 700 permanent staff and supports thousands more in the national supply chain. Up to 70% of the train parts will be incorporated from sources in the UK. The full roll-out should be complete by 2020, as planned. As part of the programme, Hitachi has invested in a new state-of-the-art maintenance facility at Doncaster and has enhanced other ageing depots along the length of the line.

As I informed the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North in my letter last month, and as she mentioned in her speech, the Prime Minister has announced funding of up to £780 million in control period 6—the next five-year planning period—for the east coast enhancements programme. The programme will provide funding for important works, some of which the hon. Lady mentioned; they include power supply upgrades between Doncaster and Edinburgh, a new rail junction at Peterborough, modifications at Stevenage station to allow turn-back, and track remodelling at King's Cross station. Together, those works will reduce congestion and enable more services to operate.

Rachael Maskell: Will the Minister explain why there has been a reduction in the amount made available to provide the upgrade when £900 million was requested?

Joseph Johnson: First of all, I would point out that this money represents a very significant increase in spending on the east coast main line. In control period 5, from 2014 to 2019, we spent about £400 million on upgrades to the line. In control period 6, that amount will increase to £780 million—it will almost double. To cast that increase as a reduction does an injustice to the Government's ambition for this section of our network. That spending will be coupled with a £5.7 billion programme of investment in the new rolling stock, a significant proportion of which will result in increased capacity and more comfortable journeys for passengers along the east coast main line—that cannot be described as a reduction.

Of course, there will always be bids for further Government spending on all bits of the transport network. They cannot all be accommodated at the same time, but as and when business cases develop for specific pieces of work, they can be considered as part of our enhancement programme.

Alan Brown: Will the Minister give way?

Joseph Johnson: May I deal with a specific point raised by the hon. Member for Jarrow (Mr Hepburn) about the trains and the line? He questioned whether they would operate at their potential. The top line speed on the east coast main line is 125 mph, and the new Hitachi Azuma trains will run at that speed. Passengers will benefit from journey time improvements delivered as a result of the trains' improved acceleration and reduced dwell times in comparison with the existing fleet. Some of the passenger benefits from saved journey times are striking: journeys will be 10 minutes quicker between London and Newcastle, 15 minutes quicker between London and Edinburgh, and so on up and down the line. Those time savings should be celebrated.

The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) mentioned issues with electromagnetic interference on IEP trains. Hitachi and Network Rail are working together to resolve those electromagnetic compatibility issues and ensure that new trains can operate in electric mode when they enter service as soon as possible.

Rachael Maskell: I was referring to the cabling of the trains and to the fact that passengers or members of the public could climb up on the roof. There was an electrocution on a Pendolino train because of that design, yet those trains are still running on the Great Western route, even though the Office of Rail and Road has stopped them running on the east coast.

Albert Owen (in the Chair): Order. I remind the Minister of the time constraints, especially if he wishes to allow the mover of the debate to wind up.

Joseph Johnson: Thank you, Mr Owen. I will move rapidly on. The hon. Lady's question is a matter for the ORR, which undertakes safety reviews of all equipment operating on the network.

My hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy) asked about the digital railway and the east coast main line. Network Rail is developing proposals for deploying digital railway technology on the southern part of the line, which would have benefits for the entire route. Decisions about progressing the project depend on that important development work.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes raised several important points relating to his coastal constituency. I congratulate him on all his campaigning to get the town deal for Greater Grimsby and Cleethorpes—a hugely important £67 million deal that will generate almost 9,000 new jobs and help to create 10,000 new homes. Plans for a direct service to Cleethorpes are not being developed at present, but TransPennine Express, which serves the area directly, will be getting new trains from December 2019, with more seats and faster journeys.

The scope of investment in the east coast main line extends beyond just the infrastructure and the rolling stock running on it. Hon. Members will note that further time and money has been spent to improve stations, such as Lincoln's listed building.

Karen Lee: Will the Minister give way?

Joseph Johnson: I am just coming to the hon. Lady's points about Lincoln. I want to address directly her important questions about the introduction of new services.

[Joseph Johnson]

We have accepted the industry's recommendation to significantly reduce the extent of the timetable change planned for this coming December. The industry is also reviewing proposed changes to the May 2019 timetable as part of a new and strengthened process to ensure that everything is ready before improvements are introduced and avoid the unacceptable disruption that passengers experienced in parts of the country this summer. That process is ongoing for the whole industry, but at this stage LNER has taken the decision to introduce improvements more gradually than was previously planned. The hon. Lady will get her services at Lincoln, and the rail industry intends to provide an update on plans for the May 2019 timetable across the country in the coming months.

I will end my remarks there to give time for the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North to wind up the debate.

Albert Owen (in the Chair): I call Catherine McKinnell, for the few seconds remaining.

3.59 pm

Catherine McKinnell: I thank the Minister for his response. He has been very good at engaging with the all-party group—let him be in no doubt that we will continue to engage. As much as he tried to present a rosy picture of Government investment in the east coast main line, we all know that it has serious challenges. It needs investment. We need to work together to ensure that we get that investment up and down the line where it is most required, and that the Government get this right. Railway investment is not an end in itself. It is about investing in the communities that rely on it.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Prison Education and Employment Strategy

[MR CLIVE BETTS *in the Chair*]

4 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered prisons education and employment strategy.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts, and to raise this issue. I am sure that the Minister will agree that it is an incredibly important topic. It has at its heart the issue of recidivism—or reoffending, as it is more commonly known. The issue costs our society more than £15 billion every year, about twice the budget of the Ministry of Justice. I am sure that we would all agree that that is a big problem, which creates an additional burden on the prisons estate, and on taxpayers.

The prison population projections for England and Wales detail an expected rise in the prisoner population, with more than 90,000 expected by the end of June 2020. With that in mind, the importance of reducing reoffending is crystal clear, especially as reoffenders are one of the largest groups contributing to prisoner numbers. I note that the Minister has made reducing reoffending a central plank of his philosophy and strategy on prisoners and prisons.

There are some things that we can do better, and education in prison and employment after release are key. All too often, people with criminal convictions face significant barriers and prejudices on their release, which often prevent them from getting a job after they leave prison. As such, education and training is incredibly important, because it leads to jobs after release, which reduces reoffending.

In recent years, unfortunately, education participation in prisons has declined and prisoners have continued to have trouble getting a job after release. Reoffending is too high as a result.

I warmly welcome the education and employment strategy presented to Parliament by the Minister; it is a good strategy with a compelling vision that I wholeheartedly support. I want to consider the three main parts of the strategy: education in prisons, prison work, and employment after release. I thank the Minister very much for responding to this debate.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Does the hon. Lady agree that, although it is essential that inmates have access to gym and sporting equipment, which is very important, it is equally important that there should be access to skills training and basic level education? Half of Britain's inmates are functionally illiterate. Courses such as cookery—how to cook on a budget—are very important as well, as is skills training in order to get a job. Those are essential basic skills, which need funding.

Rachel Maclean: No Westminster Hall debate would be complete without the hon. Gentleman in his place. I agree with his point. Sport is a central part of the whole strategy, and I look forward to hearing the Minister's points. My speech does not contain a lot of references to sport, but the hon. Gentleman has made an eloquent point. We discussed the issue recently in the all-party parliamentary group for running, led by my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove). We are all

planning to run the marathon together, which may be foolish, but we want to use that opportunity to highlight the importance of sport in prisons and in wider society.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): Although only 1% of the population of young people has been in care, 25% of the prison population has. They have particular challenges with regard to their education, given the chaotic lifestyle of their youth. Does my hon. Friend think that that is a particular issue?

Rachel Maclean: My hon. Friend highlights an important point. No doubt he is drawing on his vast experience of housing and local government. I thank him for raising that point; he is absolutely right.

I come on to other factors that lead to prisoners coming into the system. Many prisoners are without basic qualifications—many do not have English and maths skills beyond those of an 11-year-old. That is quite a shocking statistic and highlights the need for change, which is why it is at the centre of the strategy. I am pleased that the Government are taking steps to address the problem.

We want individuals to be given the skills they need to unlock their potential, based on their strengths. That is a profoundly Conservative value. We want to help individuals get a job as soon as they can after release because that is the chance they have to rebuild their lives. I know the Minister believes that as well. The strategy echoes that vision by setting out several steps to improve the provision of education in prisons. I want to focus on one or two of those steps—the empowerment of prison governors and the establishment of a prisoner apprenticeship pathway. Those two steps in particular will help address the future challenges we face. They will not only help address reoffending, but help to do that in the context of a changing prison population.

Many prisoners have low literacy rates, but there is also an increasing number of higher-educated prisoners, as a result of the increased prosecution of fraud, IT and sexual offences, which are often committed by a slightly different demographic. Although it might benefit one prison to be offered basic education services or more practical education courses, it might benefit another to have a greater choice of education options—including, potentially, higher education. By empowering prison governors and giving them the authority to set strategy, they can do what is right for their prison. I understand that the strategy is already in action. I look forward to hearing from the Minister how it is going and where he sees it going in the future.

No doubt many prisons would choose the Open University as a provider of higher education. I put on the record my respect for the OU, which has long been trying to reduce the burden of reoffending; it has provided higher education courses to prisoners since 1972. More than 1,000 prisoners have studied with the OU in the past year. There is clearly an appetite for self-improvement in prisons. Let us make the most of it.

Unfortunately, too many prisoners still do not engage with any education service while they are in prison. Education is a key opportunity for rehabilitation of what is quite literally a captive audience; this is an opportunity that the Government cannot and should not miss.

The prisoner apprenticeship pathway is an excellent example of how the strategy will help to increase the uptake of education and training programmes in prisons. It is a superb tool that makes good use of the time people spend in prison. Offenders will train in prison and then put that knowledge to good use in a guaranteed job on release. The scheme guarantees a prisoner a fresh start after release. Surely that is what we all want in our society—people to be given a fresh start to rebuild their lives, which is exceptionally important when it comes to reoffending. Education leads to jobs, which lead to an income, which leads to responsibilities and a lower likelihood of reoffending in future. A job can help someone who has lost their way to successfully transition back into society and normality. In the Conservative Government, we certainly all believe—as I believe others do across the House—that work is the primary way of rebuilding dignity and releasing human potential.

With that in mind, there is no reason why a prisoner should not have a job while they are in prison. I am so pleased that work in prisons is being encouraged by this Government. I note that more than 11,000 prisoners were working in prisons in the year 2016-17. That is giving purposeful activity, structure and meaning to a prisoner's day, which contributes to a more stable prison environment and reduces costs on taxpayers, because prisoners undertake essential services themselves. More importantly, work in prison helps offenders develop many of the skills and attributes needed on release. About two thirds of prisoners are unemployed before entering custody and so may not have good employment records to recommend them to employers on release. Prison has a vital role to play in developing the skills and work ethic that employers are looking for.

Offenders who found employment in the 12 months after release from prison had one-year reoffending rates nearly 10 percentage points lower than similar offenders who did not find employment. That is a truly wonderful and life-enhancing statistic, where the value of work in prisons is clear. Employment really does help with a successful transition into society. Of course, that statistic highlights that more can be done, too.

There is benefit in exploring what more can be done to better use temporary release to facilitate smoother transitions into the workplace. For whatever reason, the use of temporary release has fallen, but work placements with employers outside prison walls would give prisoners the chance to apply their skills and to prove that they are hard-working and trustworthy, just as we all hope our young people will have a chance to do work experience while they are at school. Such placements would give prisoners a taste of work and a chance to readjust to life outside prison. I will be keen to hear what the Minister thinks about releasing more prisoners on temporary licence.

I note that the education and employment strategy recognises the importance of prisoners proving themselves to an employer. Although better education can help ex-offenders overcome some of the barriers to gaining employment on release, it cannot help overcome others; I am thinking particularly of the issue of prejudice. I welcome the strategy's focus on supporting the offender after release by engaging with employers on issues such as prejudice. Understandably, many employers are reluctant to hire an ex-offender, and prisoners face stigma. I have come across this in my life experience—I was an employer

[Rachel Maclean]

before I came into Parliament. There is a notable lack of understanding about what prisoners can contribute to a workplace, and there are natural concerns for the other people who work there. I am glad that there will be some practical suggestions in the strategy to help overcome some of those barriers.

Employers sometimes express concerns that they might find ex-offenders difficult to trust, or they expect them to be unreliable. However, people who have employed ex-offenders have told me that, with effective rehabilitation, some ex-offenders demonstrate that potential employers' prejudices are unfounded. Once someone has had a chance to show what they can do and to prove themselves, they can sometimes become the most trustworthy member of a team or organisation. That is to be warmly welcomed.

The education and employment strategy sets out a number of steps for improving the employment prospects of ex-offenders, and that is really encouraging. I note that one aspect of the strategy is the introduction of the New Futures Network, which will engage with employers by educating them about the changes that the strategy will bring to prison education and training and by persuading them to take on ex-offenders. I am pleased to see the civil service leading by example by employing ex-offenders—it is obviously in a position to lead and to shine a light on other employers.

Challenges remain, of course. Many employers are still at best sceptical about recruiting ex-prisoners at the end of their sentences. A YouGov study recently revealed that 50% of employers would not even consider employing an ex-offender—that is a great shame, because at the moment there are many vacancies that companies are unable to fill. Ex-offenders are a valuable pool of resource, and we ought to be able to give people an opportunity to rebuild their lives. I hope to hear from the Minister about what more can be done.

I am pleased that I have been able to raise this important issue in the debate. Of course, we need as a society to see prisons fulfilling their role: to punish offenders. That is absolutely right, that is what the taxpayer demands, and that is justice—its primary purpose. They should also be places of discipline, hard work and self-improvement. It is right that prisoners get the help they need to turn their lives around.

Prisons can do more, and I am pleased that the Government have introduced a very positive and constructive strategy that seeks to address that issue. In recent months, we have seen the Minister on our television screens, making many comments about the strategy—that is to be applauded, because we have to put it at the front and centre of our policies as a progressive and compassionate Conservative Government.

If we get this right, that will be wholly positive. Prison is an opportunity for rehabilitation, which has clear benefits for society: it leads to less reoffending and a lighter burden on the taxpayer and on society. I warmly welcome the education and employment strategy. I look forward to hearing the Minister's remarks, and I thank him for coming to the debate.

4.14 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend

the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) for making a powerful speech and for securing a debate on such an important subject. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), both of whom have been strong supporters of the entire project of engaging with prisoners and offender reform in many debates in Westminster Hall and in the Chamber.

In essence, we are dealing with a classic issue of public policy—something where the objective or target really is a big prize. If we can get prisoners into education, and through education into employment, they are less likely to offend and there will be fewer victims. The public will be safer, and the prisoners' lives will be turned around. The problem is that it is also a classic issue of public policy because it is easy to talk about but difficult to do much about.

The problem with this debate is that at almost any time in the past 175 years, Ministers would have stood up and talked about prison reform. Despite 175 years of Ministers talking about prison reform and about investing in education in prisons, we are still in a situation where only 20% of prisoners get a job on release—that has been pretty static for decades. About one fifth of the people coming into prison have a job and about one fifth of the people leaving prison have a job.

What is the answer to this problem? Clearly, it is not a question of silver bullets. In 1898, Herbert Gladstone stood up and gave a great speech in the House. In language that I cannot hope to emulate, he said that prison

“discipline and treatment should be more effectually designed to maintain, stimulate, or awaken the higher susceptibilities of prisoners, to develop their moral instincts, to train them in orderly and industrial habits, and, whenever possible, to turn them out of prison better men and women, both physically and morally, than when they came in.”—[*Official Report*, 24 March 1898; Vol. 55, c. 858.]

That is over 120 years ago—it is very difficult to disagree with the basic expression of what we have been trying to do in this country for a very long time.

What are the problems? The first problem was touched on by my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North: many prisoners come from very difficult backgrounds. As we have heard, perhaps a quarter of them come out of care. Nearly a third of prisoners have serious alcohol addiction issues, and another third have serious drug addiction issues. Perhaps half of prisoners have a reading age of under 11 and a significant number have a reading age of under 6. Nearly 40% of our prisoners have been excluded from school at one time or another.

To fast-forward from the rhetoric around education to the reality, one needs to imagine oneself in Pentonville—I was there today. Imagine a small classroom in midsummer. It is very hot and five men are sitting there with a single teacher. These are people who have never found it easy to go to school. They have never found it easy to listen to a teacher. Those five men will be at very different educational levels. One will be unable to read and write, and another one will be bored because he is in prison for theft but he can already read and write and does not understand why he is in the class. There will be a general sense that everyone is rotating through—on an average day at Pentonville, 45 to 50 new prisoners turn up and a similar number are released. It is very difficult to deal with that.

Solving the problem is not a question of making grand statements about the human soul—Mr Gladstone made much better statements about that in 1898 than I am able to make today. It is about understanding exactly what is going wrong in that prisoner's journey, step by step. The first thing is to recognise the type of prison that that prisoner is in. Is it a reception prison that they are coming into for a short period, straight out of the courts from remand? If it is a prison where they are likely to spend six months, 12 months or two years of their life, a very different kind of education provision can be delivered.

Secondly, are the kind of qualifications offered in prison A the same as the qualifications offered in prisons B, C and D? A prisoner could move to four prisons in the course of their career. Too often, as a prisoner follows that course, they pursue a City & Guilds qualification in prison A, but it is not available in prison B. Even more fundamentally, the core common curriculum might not be available, so they might not be able to study English, maths and information and communications technology. In addition, governors frequently do not feel genuinely empowered to control the prisoner's life. They do not feel that they have the leverage or flexibility to say to the education provider, "What really matters in this area is bricklaying," or, "We have a real shortage of people in scaffolding. I want you to provide scaffolding training." They do not feel they would get rewarded or promoted for that.

We are trying to deal with those kinds of practical issues in the education and employment strategy. The first thing we did was introduce a common core curriculum, which will ensure that, right the way through the prison service, every single prison, regardless of where it is, which part of the country it is in and how long the prisoner is there, will deliver the core curriculum of English, maths, ICT and English as a foreign language for people who do not speak English.

Secondly, we are ensuring that the qualifications in prisons are the same. A lot of this sounds pretty simple, but the complex and strange world of Government procurement means that we have ended up having a series of conversations about dynamic purchasing systems. We have ended up with 12 preferred suppliers for the core common curriculum and 300 suppliers for the additional work. We have 17 core groups bidding in, with a selected shortlist of five for each area.

What does that mean? Imagine that you are the prisons group director for Yorkshire, Mr Betts. You get your six prisons together and you have five people on a shortlist—it could include Milton Keynes college or Novus. Eighty per cent. of the score is based on your judgment, with your prison governors, of which will provide the best quality of education, and the other 20% is based on the cost of the provision.

Rachel Maclean: I welcome what the Minister is saying. It is heartening to hear how much progress has been made. Will he enlighten us about the role of volunteers who go into prisons and offer their time freely because they believe in the cause of helping prisoners to rebuild their lives? For example, my son is an English literature student and he went to a nearby prison and taught prisoners Shakespeare. He said it was the most profound experience he had ever had. The feedback was that the prisoners got something out of it

too. Clearly, there is a vast spectrum of that sort of activity. I very much hope that what he did does not crowd out the kind of activity that the Minister is describing. Will he enlighten us about that?

Rory Stewart: Absolutely. To put this in context, if you were the Yorkshire prison group director, Mr Betts, you would get your governors together to look at your list of five. You would choose the supplier that you think will provide the best quality for your core common curriculum, and then you would adjust for your area. How do you do that? Humber, which is a training prison, is currently offering coding, upholstery and design services to other prisons. Lindholme—again in Yorkshire—will be focusing on construction skills. Then, as my hon. Friend pointed out, you need to be open to bolting on to that the incredible education offerings of other types of volunteers. I taught Shakespeare in prisons when I was an undergraduate, so I can relate to what my hon. Friend's son has been doing. The governor needs to provide space for those voluntary organisations to come into the prison, and they need to get the regime right for the core common prison day so they can get the prisoners into the classroom.

Jim Shannon: In the Minister's response to the intervention of the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), he referred to the educational quality of the providers he is looking at. Everything he said is right, but some prisoners need daily living skills, budgeting skills and how-to-live skills. How do we incorporate those sorts of skills into the very basics of their lives?

Rory Stewart: The core of the answer is that we must give governors the freedom to adjust to the prisoners. They must take responsibility for that. One of the big changes in this framework is that we have taken power out of the centre and given it to governors so they can do exactly that. How are governors doing that? Increasingly, numeracy, literacy and budgeting skills are taught through the upholstery, carpentry and construction courses. The best way to get people to learn those things is often to focus on the practical vocational skills, and attach life skills to them.

In Yorkshire—I want to pursue this example a bit further—the New Futures Network gets people with the prisons group director to connect directly to employers. It reaches out to employers' boards and ensures that employers understand what is on offer in the prison. I pay tribute not just to Paul Foweather, the prisons group director in Yorkshire, but to organisations such as Tempus Novo. My hon. Friend the Member for Redditch asked about voluntary organisations. Tempus Novo is a charity run by two terrific ex-prison officers who have spent 25 years working on the landings. They left as band 4 officers—not governing-grade officers—and set up that organisation. They walk with employers into the prison, introduce them to the prisoners, reassure them about what is involved in employing offenders, and go into the workplace with the offender for the first interview. If any problems emerge in the workplace, Tempus Novo follows them up.

In the end, education and employment for prisoners is not about big ideas or fancy strategies. It is about doing 50 or 60 things well and looking carefully at the quality of what we are delivering. It is about speaking

[Rory Stewart]

to prison governors and prisoners and saying, “What is going wrong with the curriculum? How many hours a day are you able to spend in the classroom? Is the fan working in the classroom? Are the teachers actually turning up? Is the qualification you got of any use in the outside world? Yes, you are beginning to go on an apprenticeship scheme, but are you able to connect it to the Government system? Yes, you are learning how to abseil, but are you getting the health and safety support to be able to turn that into being a window cleaner on a high-altitude building? What are we doing with release on temporary licence”—that is a question from my hon. Friend—“to make sure we give people the chance to spend time in an employer’s workplace before they leave prison formally?” Changing that is about changing a dozen small rules. We must ensure there is not a statutory lie-down period in each new prison, so that if a person is released on temporary licence in one prison and moves to another prison, they do not suddenly have to sit back in the prison and lose touch with their workplace.

If we get all those things right—it will be hard yards—we can make a difference. At the moment, only 20% of prisoners who leave prison get a job. If we can get it up to 25% or 30%, it would be fantastic and would change nearly 40 years of stagnation. Those do not sound like big numbers, but nearly 200,000 people circle through our criminal justice system every year. Every one of those people we get into a job is 7% less likely to reoffend. That translates not just into tens of thousands of families with an income and somebody at home with a job, but into thousands fewer crimes and thousands fewer victims of crime. It leads to a society that is healthier and safer.

At the core of this is our belief in the capacity for humans to change, and in our incredibly hard-working prison officers, governors and prisons group directors who are driving through this change. Employers such as Timpson take a huge risk, but they put a lot of energy into understanding prisoners, their needs and the skills they need to stand eight hours a day on the shop floor dealing with customers. If we get all those things right, we can be proud not just of our criminal justice system and our education strategy but of our society.

Question put and agreed to.

Mental Health: Absence from Work

4.30 pm

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the financial effect of absence from work due to mental health problems.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. World Mental Health Day took place a week ago, and I am pleased to have secured this debate on such an important issue so close to the marking of that day. It is hugely encouraging that in the last couple of years the world has woken up to the realities of mental illness. According to the mental health charity Mind, in the UK alone, one in six workers is affected.

The issues and challenges surrounding those suffering and recovering from mental ill health have become better understood and, as a result, its prominence as a public policy issue has grown considerably. NHS England’s five year forward view dashboard provides statistical evidence of the Government’s investment in mental health services, with a total planned spend of £11.9 billion in this financial year. Encouragingly, over the last two years, there has been a total real-terms increase of 3.7%. However, despite that investment, the Government’s landmark independent review of mental health and employers last year showed that 300,000 people in the UK lose their jobs every year as a result of long-term mental health issues, and that nearly 13% of all sickness absence days in the UK can be attributed to a mental health condition.

The workplace needs to be at the forefront of better policy to secure better outcomes for sufferers. Today, I intend to focus on the financial effect that absence from work because of mental health has on the individual, their employer and, in turn, the economy. Eighteen months ago, I led a debate in this very Chamber on employers’ role in improving work outcomes for people with long-term health problems. One of the most telling pieces of information that I discovered was from the research at that time by the Mental Health Foundation, which found that 45% of working people with a diagnosed mental health problem had not disclosed it to their employer in the past five years. Of those who had felt able to tell their employer, only half reported mainly positive consequences. Someone who took part in the research concisely summed up the reality in a single line, which I am sure rings true with people here today. They said “no one is able to say, ‘I have a mental health problem and I can’t come to work today’.”

At the time I was encouraged to hear of the review carried out by Lord Dennis Stevenson and Paul Farmer, entitled “Thriving at Work: a review of mental health and employers”. On publication, the report set out a mental health vision for our country by 2027. The report proposed that all organisations

“whatever their size, will be equipped with the awareness and tools to not only address but prevent mental ill health caused or worsened by work”;

that they would be

“equipped to support individuals with a mental health condition to thrive, from recruitment and throughout the organisation”;

and that they would also be

“aware of how to get access to timely help to reduce sickness absence caused by mental ill health”.

It is well documented that one in four people is affected by a mental health problem—the effects of which are wide-ranging—at some point in their life. Those problems can affect an individual's physical health, their relationships, their financial resilience and their work life. Mental health problems are also linked to other illnesses and fluctuate significantly. Often, people suffering from mental ill health find themselves needing to take a period away from work to recover, which may lead to a significant reduction in income. That reduction often means that people fall behind on their bills, rely increasingly on credit or run down their savings, which can also have the effect of prolonging their illness further.

Not only is supporting those affected by mental health issues the right thing to do, but it makes total economic sense. A joint study soon to be published by Mind and the Chartered Insurance Institute puts the annual cost of mental ill health to employers in the UK at as much as £42 billion, with the total cost to the UK economy estimated to be £99 billion. Those costs come from presenteeism—when individuals are at work but significantly less productive because of their condition—as well as from sickness absence and staff turnover. With such a significant impact, it stands to reason that if we are to improve the mental health outcomes of our society, we need to focus on supporting the workplace to help drive that.

The Stevenson-Farmer review highlighted the fact that the average return on investment of workplace mental health interventions is £4.20 for every pound spent. Clearly, we need to look at ways in which companies can develop preventive strategies to secure the right work-life balance and develop a holistic understanding of wellness, while also encouraging staff to look after both their physical and mental wellbeing. It is reassuring to see therefore that a range of tools are already available to assist employers. Training managers and empowering HR professionals, who can then give line managers the support they need, should be a priority for employers large and small across the country. A critical point to return to is that if employees do not feel able to disclose a health problem, employers cannot hope to put in the right support for them. The earlier open and supportive conversations take place between an employer and an employee, the more effective the support will be.

As a former insurance professional and chairman of the all-party parliamentary group for insurance and financial services, I emphasise the role that health and protection insurance benefits can play to support employers in identifying the solutions that work best for their workforce. From my ongoing conversations with all parts of the insurance industry, it is clear to me that it is constantly working to improve understanding of medical conditions, as well as the availability of existing and new treatments, while helping customers manage the financial risks of their medical condition. The growth in resources offered by insurance companies to support firms and workers experiencing mental health difficulties is testament to how seriously those issues are taken by the industry. As an example, AXA PPP healthcare has teamed up with a health tech start-up, BioBeats, to help employees manage stress and fatigue through wearable technology.

We need to remember that for many of us, the workplace is where we spend most of our time. Employers of all sizes and from all sectors should be prepared to support

their staff through periods of crisis when they are unable to work as a result of mental ill health, by providing preventive measures and access to early rehabilitation, and offering them a financial safety net if they need to be off for longer periods of time. Insurance products such as income protection can—and do—help with that, producing results that benefit employees as well as employers. However, there remains a need to raise awareness among employers and the workforce about the need for, and availability of, insurance solutions in the workplace. To aid that, there needs to be a conversation with Government about how we can incentivise employers to take up covers such as income protection for their workforce. The new Single Financial Guidance Body should be at the forefront of that as it has the potential to place a significant focus on improving greater financial resilience as well as improving awareness of protection.

Our mind is our most valuable asset, and like any asset, we need to make sure that it is properly taken care of. As the Government's review demonstrated, the UK can ill afford the productivity cost of poor mental health. Moreover, the cost to individuals is difficult to calculate. While the insurance industry has made progress in helping to support its customers and employees through mental health struggles, that will work only if people feel supported enough to seek the help that they need while at work.

There is a huge incentive for employers, for the Government and for the industry to work together to better improve policy, minimise the financial impact of sickness absence because of mental health problems, promote sustainable recovery and, in turn, improve productivity. I look forward to hearing colleagues' contributions and the Minister's response.

4.39 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to be called to speak, Mr Betts.

I congratulate the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey) on securing the debate. His introduction was excellent. The subject is important and topical, and one that I am aware of primarily through my constituents, as will be the case for others who participate in the debate. I hope that the Minister will give us some answers.

Recently, I read an interesting article in the *Safety and Health Practitioner* about this very issue. The crux of the matter is clear: with great respect, we are doing a disservice to those suffering from mental health issues if we make no changes. That is why this debate in Westminster Hall is important, even though many other things are happening in the House at the same time.

We are all aware of the massive impact that mental health issues have on our physical wellbeing, our mental acumen and our ability to cope with work relationships, home life and, simply, life in general. As an elected representative, I am into my 34th year, whether as a councillor, an Assembly Member or, now, an MP. Over all those years I have been very aware of those with mental health issues such as depression and anxiety, and the impact that all that has on their life, work, income and whole lifestyle. The issue is so important.

[*Jim Shannon*]

The article is worth reading—it would be time well spent—but I do not have the time to repeat it verbatim in full:

“In the workplace, mental health issues can have a serious impact on both the morale of employees, those suffering from mental health issues and their colleagues who then pick up the additional workload.”

If an individual is under pressure to work but is not able to cope and is doing less, who knows who else will have to do more? That is one of the reasons why I want to highlight the issue.

The article goes on:

“It can also impact an organisation’s productivity and profitability through overtime costs, recruitment of temporary or permanent cover—absence from work due to mental health issues is thought to cost the UK economy £26 billion per annum.”

That assesses the magnitude of the issue financially, but it only tells a small part of the story. Each one of us, as elected representatives, will have individual cases with which to illustrate matters. Furthermore:

“Mental health issues can appear as the result of experiences in both our personal and working lives.”

Sometimes people’s personal life spills over into their working life, and sometimes their working life spills over into their private life. The person who is always happy and jolly in the workplace might not be a happy or jolly person when he or she gets home.

The Health and Safety Executive’s draft health and work strategy for work-related stress identifies that 1.5% of the working population suffers from mental health issues, a figure that resulted in 11.7 million lost working days in 2015-16. That is another indication of how, if we improve the health ability of our workforce, we can save working days and thereby turn around the profitability of a company. Compare that figure with self-reported injuries: 4.9 million working days lost—the scale of workplace mental ill health is almost two and a half times the physical impact of unsafe workplaces and working practices. Clearly, something needs to be done. Perhaps the job of the Minister and his Department is to lead the way. Furthermore, it is suspected that at least a third of injuries go unreported, and the same is likely to be true for work-related stress.

The initiative “Mates in Mind” has identified that the suicide rate in the construction industry could be 10 times more than the rate for construction fatalities. If that estimation is true, we have a massive problem that needs to be addressed. I am pleased that the Government created a suicide prevention Minister—that is a direction we need to be moving in. That Minister is not present, but perhaps the Minister responding to this debate will also comment on that initiative.

In 2011, the then coalition Government developed “No Health Without Mental Health”, a cross-Government mental health outcomes strategy for people of all ages. It was a great idea, but it has not stopped the rise in the numbers of those with mental health issues. The document states how the Government want people to recognise mental health in the same way as they view physical and biological health.

The strategy also set out the aspiration of improved services for people with mental health issues. However, only an extra £15 million is expected to be pledged for

creating places of safety and, with respect to the Minister, that amounts to only about £23,000 per parliamentary constituency. That is not a terrible lot per constituency—mine has a population of 79,000; I am not sure about the Minister’s constituency, but the average one has about 70,000, 75,000 or 80,000. If that is the case, that is about £3 per person, which does not really go anywhere towards addressing the issue.

According to the Centre for Mental Health, the financial cost to British business of mental ill health is an estimated £26 billion per annum, but positive steps to improve the management of mental health in the workplace can enable employers to save at least 30% of the cost of lost production and staff turnover. We are looking not only for the Government to do something but for companies to. It is important for companies to accept their responsibility—clearly, if they cut down on days lost to mental stress by making some changes, they thereby help themselves. If they can indeed save at least 30% of the cost of lost production and staff turnover, I say gently that it is an open-door policy and one that should be adopted right away.

One in four people will experience a mental health problem in any year. A common misconception is that mental health problems are only caused by issues at home—no, they are not—so some employers feel that it is not appropriate, or their responsibility, to intervene and provide support to employees. More commonly, the cause of an employee’s mental health problems is a combination of issues relating to both work and private lives.

To conclude, what I have sought today is not only to show in a small way support for the hon. Member for North Warwickshire but to seek Government intervention and help, and to raise company awareness. Companies have a clear role to play and one that they cannot ignore or not take responsibility for. I believe that the hon. Gentleman intended to demonstrate in his introduction to the debate that it is more cost-effective to take small steps to promote good mental health in the workplace, rather than having members of staff feeling like they cannot cope and going on the sick. We want to prevent that if possible.

I believe that enforced lunch breaks away from desks are an essential component, for example. It is all too easy for people to stay at their desks—my staff do it all the time. I was thinking about this before the debate: sometimes we ought to say to our staff, “Girls, go on down to the wee café there and take half an hour, 45 minutes or an hour, whatever it may be, away from the office”, because if they stay to eat their lunch, they also answer the phone. If someone comes in, they speak to them. I am not saying that they should not do that, but I am saying that the two—work and breaks—need to be divorced from each other.

I do not have all the answers but I do believe that we must do more—not because that is good for business, but for the sake of our one in four who are struggling with their mental health and who simply need help.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): We are going to have a Division imminently, so it is sensible to suspend the sitting now for 15 minutes. We can go to vote and then come back to resume the debate.

4.47 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

5.3 pm

On resuming—

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I congratulate the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey) on securing this debate and on speaking so passionately and eloquently, and with such knowledge of this subject.

I have been in the position of being off work long term with stress, which is a mental health issue. I was in the fortunate position of being on full pay. A colleague of mine—a fellow college lecturer—was also off long term with stress but she did not want to admit to her employer the real reason why she was off sick long term. It still requires a great deal of courage for someone to admit that they have a mental health issue. As usual, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) gave us a very good picture of what is going on in Northern Ireland, and concentrated on the economic case for dealing well with this issue. Employers have a part to play.

Hon. Members would not expect me to do anything but talk about Scotland—that is my role here, because there is some good work going on in Scotland on this issue. I am sure the Minister knows of some of it, and I would like to draw it to his attention. In the workplace, mental health issues can have a serious impact on the morale of employees: those suffering from the mental health issues, and their colleagues who pick up the additional workload. They can have an impact on an organisation's productivity and profitability, through overtime costs and recruitment of temporary or permanent cover. Absence from work due to mental health issues is thought to cost the UK economy £35 billion per annum. We can play with those numbers but it is still a huge amount of money. A total of 91 million days are lost each year due to mental health problems. The scale of workplace mental ill health is almost 2.5 times the physical impact of unsafe workplaces and working practices.

In January 2016, the Conservative Prime Minister pledged to

“tackle the stigma around mental health problems.”

I am sure she really meant it. She also pledged an extra £50 million, expected to be used to create places of safety, which, as was mentioned, is about £23,000 per parliamentary constituency—not nearly enough. The House of Commons Public Accounts Committee said in September that it was “sceptical” about the Government's attempt to improve mental health services without a significant amount of extra cash.

Providing support for employees is very important for the individual concerned. There is a strong business case for getting it right on mental health at work. We must eliminate stigma and discrimination in work. That requires a joined-up approach and a genuine commitment to support staff and to make it okay to talk about mental health. The Scottish Government funds the “See Me in Work” programme, which aims to support organisations to improve the working lives of employees with mental health problems, to encourage an equal and clear recruiting process and to ensure that those returning to work following ill health are fully supported back into the workplace.

The Scottish Government are working with employers on how they can best act to protect and improve mental health, and to support employees experiencing poor

mental health. That will help employers to identify and provide appropriate training opportunities. To support workplace mental health and wellbeing makes economic sense for businesses. The Scottish Government are exploring with others innovative ways of connecting mental health, disability and employment support in Scotland. That will allow individuals to more easily navigate the current fragmented and complex landscape of support, allowing them to find a way to support at an early enough stage to make a real difference to their ability to sustain or return quickly to paid work when they encounter problems.

When I had my experience, everyone around me knew that I had a problem; I was in the middle of it and did not know. We need to look after each other when we are in such a situation. People who develop poor mental health should receive support to stay in work, just as they would if they had physical health problems. The Scottish Government endorsed “Good Mental Health For All”, which was published by NHS Health Scotland in 2016.

Issues that can contribute to inequalities that can lead to poor mental health include low pay and working poverty. The Scottish Government believe in promoting fair work and the real living wage. The real living wage as defined by the Scottish Government is £8.75 an hour. The UK promotes a living wage, for over-25s only, of only £7.83. People who are in employment but who are not earning enough to sustain themselves and their families often find themselves with bad mental health, because of the sheer pressure on their daily lives due to low wage employment.

We need to look early at preventive mechanisms, so that subsequent generations will be able to enter and remain in work. As with most systemic problems, the earlier we can get to people to help them, the better for all concerned. Prevention and early intervention are key to minimising both the prevalence and incidence of poor mental health and the severity and lifetime impact of mental disorders and mental illnesses. Prevention and early intervention must be a focus of activity and funding. The Scottish Government are funding an improved provision of services to treat mental health problems among children and adolescents so that, when they grow older, they can cope better with their illnesses in the workplace. Teaching our children resilience from an early age will help with mental health issues over a whole lifetime.

In December 2017, the Scottish Government announced a £95,000 investment in a youth commission on mental health, which will be delivered in partnership with the Scottish Association for Mental Health and Young Scot. It launched formally in April. As reported by the mental welfare commission for Scotland in 2016, there has been an improvement—a lower incidence of young people being admitted to non-specialist wards—and we want to see that continue. Mental health really deserves parity of esteem with physical health.

Mental ill health accounts for the biggest cohort of people unable to work due to sickness, yet that cohort has the poorest outcomes from the Department for Work and Pensions-contracted Work programme. The Department's own evaluation of the Work programme suggests that it is not leading to the provision of appropriate specialist support. Instead, people with more complex needs are often parked by providers. The activities that people are asked to do are often inappropriate, with their conditions not being taken into account. That leads to a higher turnover of staff and more days off.

[*Marion Fellows*]

Both employers and employees are incurring costs from the UK Government's Work programme, which in many cases is shambolic.

The UK Government should scrap their work capability assessments so that people with mental health problems are better able to enter the workforce in jobs suitable for their needs. The current isolated nature of the WCA means that it functions as an eligibility test for employment and support allowance but not an assessment of what support is needed.

No Government can ignore the financial effect of absence from work due to mental ill health. I look forward to the Minister's response to some of the issues raised today.

5.12 pm

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I thank the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey) for securing such an important and timely debate. Further, I thank him for his thoughtful speech. My friend the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows), who represents two places that she knows I am familiar with from my childhood, spoke incredibly bravely, which is no surprise, about her own battle with mental health in the workplace. Everyone in the Chamber will agree with her that prevention and early intervention must be the key when we are looking at all aspects of mental health.

As other cases that we have heard about have shown, for the one in four people who experience mental health issues there are serious consequences in all areas of their lives. Of course that includes work, which the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said is where we spend most of our time—I am sure hon. Members agree. Right now, it is estimated that up to 5 million workers are experiencing a mental health condition, although we all acknowledge that it is difficult to quantify such numbers when we are talking about millions of people. Many are frightened to come forward, for a variety of reasons.

The human cost of the mental health epidemic we face is incalculable, and every individual deserves the treatment they need. When it comes to mental health in the workplace, research from Mind and others has shown that we can put a number to the cost of failure to fund our mental health services adequately. Poor mental health at work is estimated to cost taxpayers between £24 billion and £27 billion a year in NHS costs, benefit costs and lost tax revenue.

The costs for British businesses are also significant. Research from the insurance sector shows that it costs small and medium-sized enterprises £30,000 to replace a staff member in recruitment costs, training time and lost productivity. When 300,000 people with long-term mental health problems are losing their jobs each year, that is no small problem. The hon. Member for North Warwickshire also alluded to that figure. The total annual cost to the UK economy from our mental health crisis is an eye-watering £99 billion.

There is also a flip side. As the TUC points out, UK workers with mental health problems, despite often suffering illness, contributed £226 billion to UK GDP

in 2016. Their work supports our economy and our society must support them. However, in so many cases of poor mental health at work there is a direct, negative link to Government policies. Many of the worst-affected professions are in our public services, which have suffered under austerity. For example, the Office for National Statistics has found that health and social careworkers—including those who treat others for mental health conditions—are at an especially high risk of experiencing poor mental health. It also found that low-income workers who do not earn enough to make ends meet, sometimes receiving a top-up via universal credit, are more than twice as likely to experience poor mental health as other workers. Not being able to put food on the table and being forced to rely on the shambolic universal credit system is enough to affect anybody's mental health.

What about people in precarious work? Under this Government we have seen an explosion in the number of insecure workers: staff on zero-hours, temporary or agency contracts and workers forced to be self-employed so that employers do not have to take responsibility for their rights. Research from the GMB union—I declare an interest as a proud member of it—showed that more than 60% of precarious workers had suffered stress or anxiety as a result of their work or had been to work while unwell for fear of losing their pay or their job. Over a third would also struggle to cope with an unexpected bill for £500, with all the anxieties and stresses that creates.

Those with barely any employment rights have three options when it comes to their mental health. They can take days off unpaid, lose their insecure work due to their condition or suffer in silence, continuing to work as things get worse and worse. Seventy-eight per cent of the workers the GMB spoke to had previously been in permanent employment. That is not flexible working; it is the new normal. The Prime Minister has declared that austerity is over and promised to tackle insecure work. The Budget will be the test of whether she means it.

Health Ministers have given us warm words but little action on mental health. The Farmer-Stevenson report made a number of recommendations on mental health and employers, which the Government claimed to support wholeheartedly. However, almost a year since its publication, how much action has there been? Several recommendations were addressed to the Government, including changes in the public sector and ensuring the NHS prioritises mental health. However, the NHS is crippled by cuts, and its own staff are suffering. For example, the GMB found that 39% of ambulance workers have suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder, and 12% took sick leave due to stress, anxiety, depression and related conditions in 2016-17, which totalled 80,000 sick days. Given that the chronic lack of funding for frontline mental health services has led to excessive waiting lists for even basic talking therapies, is it likely that those workers got timely and effective treatment as the Farmer-Stevenson report advocates?

The report also recommended an increased role for the Health and Safety Executive. However, instead of providing resources for its work, the Government have continued to cut its funding. In a particularly bitter irony, the HSE now has one of the highest levels of anxiety among its staff of any public service employer. Perhaps the Minister can tell us who will inspect the

inspectors. What resources will go to the HSE and what progress has been made in implementing that specific recommendation?

One of the report's key findings was that the stigma around mental health is still a barrier for employees seeking support. Other Members have alluded to that. The Conservative manifesto committed to

"extend Equalities Act protections against discrimination to mental health conditions that are episodic and fluctuating."

That would protect people who have long-term mental conditions from discrimination, and people who have short-term episodes of poor mental health, such as those caused by bipolar disorder.

People with such life-changing conditions might be deemed by an employer not to meet the current Equality Act 2010 definition. In one case, a worker with bipolar disorder was stable on medication, but asked to start work a little later because of the effect of the medication. Their boss refused. Mental health charity Rethink advised the worker that they could take legal action, but they felt that would just cause more stress. With the stigma around complex conditions such as bipolar disorder, when will the Equality Act 2010 be extended so that people get the support they so desperately need?

Similarly, employers sometimes see making reasonable adjustments as doing someone a favour rather than meeting their legal obligations. I have heard this in my constituency surgeries—I suspect others have heard the same. Will the Minister tell us how the Department has been monitoring progress from employers on achieving their legal obligations and what it has done to ensure proper HR training and processes?

Given that people spend on average 90,000 hours at work over a lifetime, the Government must ensure that employers prioritise health and wellbeing in their workplaces. The Government must also put their own house in order. Mental health services are still reeling from years of underfunding and we are all paying a price. It is high time this Government put their money where their mouth is.

5.21 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Nigel Adams): It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey) on securing this important debate and on putting his point across with such characteristic eloquence.

I was particularly struck by the recognition in the debate that employers and Government both have a stake in the nation's mental health. The Government provide the necessary health support, offer a safety net when people are out of work and promote the right action in the workplace. However, employers are increasingly recognising that they have a crucial role to play in creating healthy workplaces to enable their employees to remain in work and thrive, providing a supportive environment in which their employees can discuss health issues, and helping people return to work promptly when they fall ill.

Mental health is a matter of national importance. It is particularly relevant this month, following World Mental Health Day on 10 October, during which the Prime Minister announced that the Government are

providing £1.8 million over the next four years to cover the cost of calls to the Samaritans helpline. This will enable more people to receive support when they reach out for help.

The Prime Minister is personally committed to improving mental health services and addressing one of the most burning injustices in our society. As we have heard, the Government are backing that up by investing record levels in mental health, with annual spending reaching just under £12 billion last year. In addition, the Prime Minister announced a five-year funding settlement, which will see the NHS budget grow by more than £20 billion a year in real terms in the next five years. In return, she has asked the NHS to develop a long-term plan for the next 10 years. She has been clear that mental health needs to be a key element of that.

Financial difficulties can have a serious detrimental impact on mental health, but mental health problems can devastate our finances, too. As we heard from the hon. Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff), one in four people who suffer from mental health problems may have debt problems as well. Supporting people with their financial resilience is vital. We are committed to addressing issues faced by people who fall into problem debt. This year, the Government commissioned the Money Advice Service and spent just over £56 million to provide help to more than 530,000 people.

The NHS provides some services to people who may be experiencing the symptoms of debt problems or financial difficulties. Mental health services, including improving access to psychological therapies, may also signpost patients to debt advice services as part of their care. In our 2017 manifesto, we committed to developing a breathing space scheme for people in problem debt. We will publish a consultation shortly and lay before the House regulations on breathing space by the end of 2019. The Prime Minister has also announced a review of the practice of GPs charging patients to complete debt and mental health evidence forms. We are considering options to end the need for GPs to charge their patients to provide this information to their creditors, and I know that that will be welcomed.

We know that too many people with a mental health condition do not participate fully in key activities of society, including work. The figures are stark: people who are unemployed for more than 12 weeks are between four and 10 times more likely to suffer from depression and anxiety. That is why this Government are committed to supporting people with mental health conditions who are out of work, including through our Jobcentre Plus network. All work coaches across the network receive training on supporting people with health conditions and disabilities. In addition, the roll-out of the health and work conversation across the UK supports work coaches to continue to build engagement with claimants who have disabilities and health issues.

The Government also continue to invest in mental health-related trials and studies. These include doubling the number of employment advisers in IAPT services and launching a £4.2 million challenge fund to build the evidence base of what works to support people with mental health conditions, as well as musculoskeletal conditions.

The good news is that staying in or returning to work after a period of mental ill health can help mental health recovery. Good work supports our good health. It keeps us healthy, mentally and physically. It enables

[Nigel Adams]

us to be economically independent and gives us more choices and opportunities to fulfil our other ambitions in life. Our Command Paper, “Improving lives: the future of work, health and disability”, which was published jointly by the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Work and Pensions last November, sets out a comprehensive strategy for achieving the Government’s challenging target of ensuring that 1 million more disabled people are in work by 2027.

Given the scale of this ambition, a key part of our programme is to achieve transformational change by focusing action on three key areas: welfare, workplace and health. We have made good progress. Employment rates are at historic highs and the number of disabled people in work reached 3.5 million in 2017, having increased by nearly 600,000 since 2013. The Government recognise the crucial role of employers in creating mentally healthy workplaces. Too many people fall out of work because of their mental health. We are asking employers to do more to prevent that.

That is why, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire, in January 2017 the Prime Minister commissioned Lord Dennis Stevenson and Paul Farmer, the chief executive of Mind, to conduct an independent review into how employers can better support all employees, including those with mental ill health or wellbeing issues. The review set out a compelling business case for action, with the central recommendation that all employers should adopt a set of six core mental health standards to encourage an open and transparent organisational culture that supports employees’ mental health. Those standards included developing mental health awareness among employees, encouraging open conversations about mental health and routinely monitoring employee mental health and wellbeing.

The review went further by recommending that all public sector employers, and private sector companies with more than 500 employees, deliver mental health enhanced standards, including increasing transparency and accountability through internal and external reporting. We have made progress with implementation and are developing with partners, including employers, a framework for voluntary reporting on mental health and disability. We will publish supporting guidance, including on the important issue of how to encourage employees to disclose health issues.

It will take time before we can call all of our workplaces truly healthy and inclusive, but we have been encouraged by the level of engagement and commitment to this agenda. Momentum is building around the challenge to all employers to adopt the core standards that lay the basic foundations for good workplace mental health, and to larger businesses to adopt the enhanced standards. Following the Prime Minister’s acceptance of the Stevenson-Farmer recommendations as they apply to the NHS and the civil service as major employers, both organisations are making progress.

Working in partnership is vital. The Government recognise the collaborative approach that has created the new mental health at work gateway, which is aimed at employers, senior management and line managers, to help them to support a colleague, challenge the stigma or learn more about mental health in the workplace. Looking at the wider system in which employers make

decisions, the Government are committed to reforming the current system of statutory sick pay so that it supports more flexible working, which can help people to return to work after a period of sickness.

I will use this opportunity to take a moment to address some of the points raised by hon. Members in the debate. I will come on to my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire shortly. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who gave a characteristically eloquent exposition of the issues, talked about employees sharing responsibility. I could not agree more, and nor could the Government. Employers have a key role to play in creating good working conditions and providing supportive line management so that people have the opportunity to speak out about issues and keep in contact with employees. I was encouraged by what he said about ensuring that his own staff took breaks and had some downtime during the working day.

It is also important that we keep in contact with employees who happen to go off sick. The Government have worked with Mind to produce a new website resource, and we are reviewing current obligations and incentives to see what we can do to encourage more good behaviour. The hon. Gentleman talked about suicide prevention; as hon. Members will be aware, on World Mental Health Day the Prime Minister announced not only the appointment of my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) as Minister for suicide prevention, but, as I mentioned earlier, almost £2 million to cover the costs of calls to the Samaritans helpline, where there will be help for people who reach out.

The hon. Gentleman also talked about parity of esteem for mental and physical health. It was this Government who legislated for parity of esteem by making mental and physical health an equal responsibility for the NHS in the Health and Social Care Act 2012. We are also backing our commitment with a significant increase in funding.

We are all extremely delighted to see the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) in her place, and it was a genuine pleasure to hear from her. It takes enormous courage to admit that one has suffered mental health problems, so to hear that from the hon. Lady was incredibly moving, and it was a privilege to be in the Chamber for that moment. It is important that employers create the right supportive environment. One thing we are doing is investing to make sure that there are 1 million mental health first aiders in the workplace, which is crucial.

The hon. Lady talked about the impact of low wages, and I agree with her. That is why we introduced the national living wage and are providing in-work financial support through tax credits and now through universal credit. That also makes it easier for people to move in and out of work, removing difficult transitions. She mentioned work capability assessments; it is true that they are designed to determine benefit eligibility, but they should not be viewed in isolation. We provide personalised and tailored support through work coaches in our jobcentres.

Moving on to the remarks of the hon. Member for Dewsbury, I politely and gently remind her that the funding picture in the NHS is not quite so gloomy as she painted it. We are backing our commitments with some significant funding increases in this space. We have record levels of investment in mental health, with

annual spending reaching just under £12 billion just last year. The Prime Minister, as I have mentioned, has announced a five-year funding settlement. That is not the picture that the hon. Lady paints.

Paula Sherriff: How would the Minister respond to the professionals I speak to every single week, who tell me that mental health services—particularly child and adolescent services—are in crisis; that on some weekends there is not a single psychiatric bed available in the country; and that people are travelling up to 300 miles to get an inpatient psychiatric bed? Perhaps there are positives out there, but it is difficult to say that things are not so gloomy when that is what I hear every week.

Nigel Adams: The hon. Lady makes a fair point. The need to travel hundreds of miles out of area, in some cases, for inpatient treatment is something that we desperately need to tackle, and we are tackling it. That is why we are putting in the investment. I gently remind her again of the additional £20 billion a year in real terms for the NHS over the next five years. Nobody is saying that this is a perfect situation, but we are matching our words with real-terms cash and investing a further £1.4 billion for mental health services for children and young people, which I am sure she would support.

We briefly mentioned the Stevenson-Farmer report, and I remind the hon. Lady that we responded in full through the “Improving Lives: the Future of Work, Health and Disability” Command Paper and fully supported all 40 recommendations of the Stevenson-Farmer review. Progress is being made, and has been made, on implementing those recommendations.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire raised the role that the insurance industry can play. We recognise the positive aspects of group income protection for helping to retain sick employees, in particular access to expert-led health services and the financial certainty it offers individuals. I am not entirely sure that the product is widely known out there in the business space; I have run businesses for the last 20-odd years and was not aware that such insurance products were available. I very much hope that my former colleagues are tuned in at this precise moment and will do some research on it.

GIP is clearly a product that works well for those employees who choose to buy it, and we encourage the industry to continue to promote its benefits. I am sure the Association of British Insurers is doing a good job of that. However, we believe that small and medium-sized enterprises, in particular, lack sufficient incentives to invest in GIP as it is currently structured, because they often choose not to offer sick pay for periods beyond statutory requirements. That is why we have been looking more broadly at incentives and obligations on employers. We will continue to engage with the industry, and I know that the ABI will play a big role in that as well. We are listening closely to employers’ views about the

appropriate products that retain the positive aspects of GIP and that overcome the existing barriers to increasing take-up.

By working with our partners, including employers, the Government can continue to tackle poor mental health, ensuring that disabled people, and people with physical and mental health conditions, go as far as their talents can take them.

5.38 pm

Craig Tracey: I thank every Member here for their contribution and for the general spirit of the debate. It has been conducted in the way that I hoped it would be. It is clear that we all want to see progress on this matter.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made some excellent comments, as usual. His arguments complemented those that I put forward, particularly on the role that companies can play. However, it is important that we give companies the tools—whether through Government action, insurance products or whatever else—to allow them to play that role. He also mentioned a critical point about encouraging people to come forward and share their health issues.

I also thank the Opposition Front-Benchers for their comments—particularly the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows), who shared her experience. Only if people come forward and share their experiences will others understand that they are not the only ones to have such feelings. That can happen to us all, and such case studies are the best way to help us to progress. No strategy will work without people coming forward; it is a two-way street. I will particularly reflect on the hon. Lady’s comments about teaching resilience, particularly to younger people. That is important, not only in these matters but throughout their lives in general.

I also thank the Minister. We are all pleased to hear that good progress is being made and that good, positive steps are being taken. I appreciate as well as anybody that there is no quick fix to this issue, but the Government are taking it forward and driving it. Steps such as getting more people into work are critical to doing that. However, the more people in work, the greater the potential for people to suffer from these difficulties. It is important to recognise the issue and provide solutions and tools to enable business to combat it.

It is key that we, as Back-Bench Members, continue to push this issue and encourage the Government to keep it at the forefront of their thinking. At the end of the day, tackling it will bring a benefit not only to employers and the people affected but to the overall success of our economy and our country.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the financial effect of absence from work due to mental health problems.

5.41 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 17 October 2018

JUSTICE

Civil Liability Bill

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): I have today published a written submission outlining the Government's analysis of how the English votes for English laws principle in accordance with the application of Standing Order 83L relates to the Government amendment tabled for Commons Report stage of the Civil Liability Bill.

The Department's assessment is that the amendment does not change the territorial application of the Bill. The analysis holds if the Government amendment is accepted.

I have deposited a copy of the submission in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS1018]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Employment and Support Allowance

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton): This written statement is a further update to the House on progress in correcting historic ESA underpayments and paying arrears.

The Department began work to assess cases in December 2017. For that stage of the exercise we expect to review around 320,000 cases, of which around 105,000 are likely to be due arrears.

We now have a team of over 400 staff working through these cases and have paid around £120 million in arrears. We expect to complete the vast majority of this part of the exercise by April 2019, and have to date completed all cases where an individual is terminally ill and responded to the review, thereby ensuring they receive due priority.

The announcement in July to pay cases back to the point of conversion requires us to review an additional 250,000 cases, of which we estimate around 75,000 could be due arrears. We will undertake this work through the course of 2019. We now have a team of over 400 staff working through these cases, with a further 400 due to join the team through October and November, and will be assigning more staff to review the additional 250,000 cases. This will enable us to complete this important activity at pace.

The Department is publishing an ad hoc statistical publication today setting out further detail on the progress it has made in processing cases and revised estimates of the impacts of this exercise, including details of the number of claimants due arrears and the amounts likely to be paid. This will be published on gov.uk.

There are currently around 2.3 million working-age people on employment and support allowance. In 2018-19, £54 billion will be spent on benefits to support disabled people and people with health conditions this year, which is over 6% of all Government spending and a record high.

A frequently asked question guide will also be deposited in the Library of the House for further information.

[HCWS1017]

ORAL ANSWERS

Wednesday 17 October 2018

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
PRIME MINISTER	630	SCOTLAND—continued	
Engagements.....	630	PIP Reassessment Cost	628
SCOTLAND	621	RBS Branch Closures.....	626
Leaving the EU: Devolution	621	Scotch Whisky Industry	629

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Wednesday 17 October 2018

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
JUSTICE	45WS	WORK AND PENSIONS	45WS
Civil Liability Bill.....	45WS	Employment and Support Allowance	45WS

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
Wednesday 24 October 2018**

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.

CONTENTS

Wednesday 17 October 2018

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 621] [see index inside back page]

Secretary of State for Scotland
Prime Minister

Collective Defined Contribution Pension Schemes [Col. 644]

Motion for leave to bring in Bill—(Paul Masterton)—agreed to
Bill presented, and read the First time

Opposition Day [17th allotted day]

Universal Credit [Col. 648]

Motion—(Margaret Greenwood)—on a Division, negatived

Social Care Funding [Col. 725]

Motion—(Barbara Keeley)—agreed to

Petition [Col. 753]

Drug Trafficking: County Lines [Col. 755]

Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall

Local Government Reform: Greater London [Col. 309WH]

GP Extended Access Services: Privatisation [Col. 327WH]

East Coast Main Line Investment [Col. 336WH]

Prison Education and Employment Strategy [Col. 360WH]

Mental Health: Absence from Work [Col. 368WH]

General Debates

Written Statements [Col. 45WS]

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
