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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 29 November 2018

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

UNIVERSITY OF LONDON BILL [LORDS]

Bill read the Third time and passed, without amendment.

Oral Answers to Questions

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Leaving the EU: Farming Policy

1. **John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): What plans he has to implement an independent farming policy after the UK leaves the EU. [907899]

6. **Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): What plans he has to implement an independent farming policy after the UK leaves the EU. [907907]

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): The Government's Agriculture Bill, which is currently going through Parliament, is the first major piece of legislation affecting agriculture since 1947. It provides certainty for farmers through a seven-year transition period and lays the foundations of a new farming policy based on public goods and fairness in the supply chain. At their request, it also includes provisions for Wales and Northern Ireland. This critical piece of legislation will enable us to seize the opportunities to help our farming, horticulture and forestry sectors become more profitable and sustainable.

John Lamont: Many farmers in my constituency are very concerned at the decision of the SNP Scottish Government to opt out of key parts of the Bill. Does my hon. Friend share my concern about the fact that the Scottish Government have not presented alternative proposals, so many farmers may not be sure whether there will be a legislative framework to ensure support for farming after we leave the European Union?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend makes an important point. As he knows, agriculture is devolved. At the request of the Welsh Government there is a schedule containing provisions for Wales, and at the request of the Northern Ireland Administration there is a schedule containing provisions for Northern Ireland. Scotland has yet to decide what it wishes to do. We have maintained an open offer to insert provisions in the Bill at later stages should the Scottish Government wish us to do so.

Alternatively, they can legislate through their own Parliament, but they will need some legislation in order to be able to pay their farmers in 2020.

Sir Edward Leigh: Can the Minister confirm that under a clean, global, free trade Brexit the United Kingdom will be able to protect farmers with tariffs just like every other country, and to provide more help for smaller farmers? Can we have more optimism from the Government, and less "Project Fear" with gumboots on?

George Eustice: As my hon. Friend knows, I have always been very optimistic about the opportunities presented by Brexit. It is important to note that in a no-deal Brexit, the UK would be free to set its own trade policy unilaterally. The options open to us would be to create autonomous tariff rate quotas, tariff rate suspensions or lower-band tariffs on certain goods if we wished to do so, but we would have an independent trade policy in the event of a no-deal Brexit.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Has the Minister had any discussions with the Prime Minister about her withdrawal agreement's implications for the transport and sale of livestock from Northern Ireland to the rest of this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Mr Speaker: That was not altogether adjacent to an inquiry about an independent farming policy. The hon. Gentleman might more usefully have shoehorned his inquiry into Question 2. Because he is a very public-spirited fellow, I will let him off on this occasion, but he should not repeat his offence.

George Eustice: The withdrawal agreement and the political declaration on a future economic partnership set out the Prime Minister's and the Government's approach to trying to deal with issues relating to the Northern Ireland border, and I am sure that we have many days of discussion on those matters to look forward to.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): Can my hon. Friend assure me that we will not be replacing one set of bureaucrats with another set of bureaucrats? How can we ensure that the right sort of assistance goes to the less favoured areas that are so important to our countryside?

George Eustice: My right hon. Friend makes a good point, but I can tell him that the Bill has important provisions that will enable us to strike down and improve some retained EU law, particularly in relation to the burden of administration. We are absolutely clear that we want a totally different culture in how we regulate farmers in the future. The Bill also enables us to target support at farmers who are delivering public goods, including those in severely disadvantaged areas.

Trade Agreements: Environmental and Animal Welfare

2. **Helen Goodman** (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for International Trade on maintaining environmental and animal welfare standards in future trade agreements.

[907903]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (David Rutley): Ministers and officials from DEFRA regularly meet their counterparts in the Department for International Trade to discuss a wide range of trade issues. The Government are clear that future trade agreements must work for consumers, farmers and businesses in the UK. We will not water down our standards on food safety, animal welfare and environmental protection as part of any future trade deals.

Helen Goodman: I begin by congratulating DEFRA on the contribution that it has no doubt made to the excellent Government document on the implications of Brexit. In the section on agri-food we see that a no deal could produce a 35% reduction in competitiveness, and even the Prime Minister's estimates predict a reduction of 7%. So will the Minister confirm today that we will not allow unfair competition from imports from countries that produce to lower standards?

David Rutley: Yes, I can confirm that.

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): My hon. Friend will be aware of the overwhelming support for a ban on the export of live animals after we leave the European Union, and I know he has great sympathy with that position. Can he confirm that under the terms of the withdrawal agreement that would still be possible?

David Rutley: Yes, and we have a call for evidence on that.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I recently met the lovely children in the reception classes of St John's infant school in Dewsbury. They have written to the Secretary of State because they have been learning about the poaching of elephants and rhinos and they are really concerned about it. Can the Minister say something today to reassure them so they know we are taking action on this?

David Rutley: It is good to hear that the children at St John's school are taking a keen interest in this. We are taking strong action through the Ivory Bill, and I congratulate the Environment Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), on the work she is doing to take that forward.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Will the Minister ensure that under any future trade agreements it is a requirement that food imported into the UK be produced to at least equivalent standards to those required of our domestic producers?

David Rutley: Yes—again, we will ensure that we do not water down those standards. I am sure that later in these questions we will hear from the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), who is doing a tremendous job in taking the Agriculture Bill through the House.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee said in its report on the Agriculture Bill that the Government should put their money where their mouth is and accept

an amendment stipulating that food products imported as part of any future trade deal should meet or exceed British standards relating to production, animal welfare and the environment. I have tabled such an amendment; will the Minister undertake to accept it in order to keep Frankenstein foods off the tables of families the length and breadth of these isles?

David Rutley: I know that amendments have been tabled, and they will be properly considered on Report.

Air Pollution

3. **Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Ind):** What steps he is taking to reduce levels of air pollution to legal limits. [907904]

7. **Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab):** What steps he is taking to reduce levels of air pollution to legal limits. [907908]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): The only statutory air quality limit the UK is currently failing to meet is on roadside concentrations of nitrogen dioxide. Members will be aware of our plans to combat air pollution. A £3.5 billion investment has already been set aside, but we are now working with 61 local authorities to tackle their exceedances. I have directed local authorities, including Sheffield, to achieve compliance in the shortest possible time. Some £495 million has been specifically set aside for those councils, but I will take legal action if necessary to make sure that councils do what they need to do.

Kelvin Hopkins: I thank the Minister for her answer, but she will know that at least 4.5 million children are growing up in areas with unsafe levels of particulate matters, with long-term implications for their health. UNICEF is now calling for the Government to introduce legally binding limits to meet the World Health Organisation recommended limit values for air pollution by 2025. Will Ministers consult UNICEF to discuss how that can be achieved?

Dr Coffey: The issue of particulate matter has grabbed my attention ever since I became a Minister in this Department. It is soot and dust, in essence, and one of our challenges is that a lot of particulate matter is naturally generated; for example, it is sand or sea salt. There are a number of different issues that we need to tackle, and we will continue to work with local authorities to bring the level of particulate matter down, because the Government are very conscious that we need to make sure that the most vulnerable in society, including children who are still of growing age, get the best possible start in life.

Paul Blomfield: The Minister has acknowledged the challenge Sheffield faces. We have multiple sites where nitrogen dioxide levels exceed legal limits and threaten the health of our people. Sheffield's council has ambitious and innovative plans to tackle the problem, but its resources have been drained by eight years of deep cuts. Will the Minister commit to provide the funds we need to clean Sheffield's air, and will she meet me and representatives of the council to discuss our plans?

Dr Coffey: Sheffield City Council could start by stopping cutting down trees, which is not good for the environment and costs money. However, it is making good progress with its plan, and it is considering introducing a charging clean air zone—of course, it has had the power to do that since 2000. It is being funded by DEFRA to make sure it gets on with its plan—it will be able to bid for further funding, but it is being given the funding it needs to do that.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): The Government are rightly tackling air pollution, but the proposed diesel ban is having the unintended consequence that people are hanging on to their older, more polluting diesel vehicles rather than investing in the new, cleaner generation of Euro 6 standard models. Will the Minister commend cities such as Birmingham for proposing a distinction between the newer and older models in their low emissions zones, and will she urge London to do the same?

Dr Coffey: My right hon. Friend is right. It has been a pleasure to work with Birmingham City Council, which is making reasonable progress on producing its plan. There is no doubt that “dieselgate” had a massive impact on people’s willingness to do what the Government were recommending, so it has not had the intended consequences. We will continue to work with car manufacturers, and the Chancellor has changed vehicle excise duty to ensure that people are incentivised to buy the cleanest possible vehicles.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): The burning of biomass makes a major contribution to air pollution. The Government have estimated that 1.7 million lives are lost every year because of the burning of biomass, but they have now stopped making those calculations. Why?

Dr Coffey: I am not aware of the figure to which the hon. Gentleman has just referred. I am conscious of the impact that burning has, which is why we have a consultation about the domestic burning of household smoky coal, wet wood and similar materials, but I will look carefully into the issue that he has raised.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Pollution is not just a matter for city centres; it is also about major roads. Around the M1 in my constituency, levels of nitrogen dioxide pollution have got so bad that, for the first time ever, the Department for Transport is bringing in variable speed limits just to deal with pollution. It is also looking at installing barriers to absorb NO₂. What involvement does the Minister’s Department have in that? Does she think that those measures will be successful, and will she report back to the House on their effectiveness in due course?

Dr Coffey: The Minister of State, Department for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), and I work closely together on this issue. My Department and the Department for Transport have a joint air quality unit, and I am in regular contact with Highways England about its progress on improving air quality on the strategic road network. I welcome the work that it is considering to change speed limits and to install the barriers to which the hon. Gentleman referred.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): The Government’s plans to tackle air pollution are unravelling into a shambolic and piecemeal mess. Exposure to fine particulate matter is linked to poor health, including asthma, heart disease, stroke and lung cancer, and new evidence shows impacts on diabetes, Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s. We must ensure that we have the highest standards of public health, so will the Minister tell us how she will enshrine the World Health Organisation’s limit on fine particulate matter into UK law?

Dr Coffey: We have already agreed targets that are now in law regarding PM₁₀ and PM_{2.5}, and we are well below those targets. We will continue to work on this. I know that the House is eager to see the outcome of the clean air strategy, which I expect to be published shortly. I can assure the hon. Lady that this issue is close to my heart, especially the question of particulate matter, because I am very conscious of the impact that it can have. However, we need to be careful when we read some of the reports, because there is often a correlation link but not necessarily a causal link, which means that we still need to do research on these matters. I am pleased that the Department of Health and Social Care, through Public Health England, and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs are undertaking that research.

Trade Agreements: Environmental and Animal Welfare

4. **Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con):** What steps he is taking to ensure that agricultural products produced to lower environmental and animal welfare standards than UK products will not be included in any future trade agreements. [907905]

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): Our current high standards, including on import requirements, will apply when we leave the EU. Some of them, such as the ban on the use of growth-promoting hormones, are already in domestic legislation. Others, such as the ban on chlorine washing of poultry, will be brought on to our statute book through the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. Countries seeking access to our markets in future will have to abide by our standards.

Neil Parish: Ministers are naturally keen to raise welfare standards in this country, and to reduce the use of antibiotics and produce greater and better food than we already have, but if we are undermined by imports, that will put farmers out of business and reduce global animal welfare. Will Ministers therefore accept the amendment that the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee has tabled to ensure that imports are not allowed into this country if they do not meet our standards of production?

George Eustice: As my hon. Friend will be aware, we had a good discussion on these matters in the Bill Committee, and I look forward to discussing his amendment on Report. Our view is that the types of measure that he has outlined would probably not be right, because it is sometimes possible to recognise equivalence, and our standards do not have to be identical in drafting regulations.

However, there are a number of other approaches that some countries take, including scrutiny and oversight roles for Parliaments as trade deals are discussed.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I very much support the amendment from the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, and I have also tabled new clause 1 on the same topic. It is estimated that by 2050, antibiotic resistance could cause up to 10 million deaths a year, and we know that 80% of the antibiotics sold in the US are sold for animal use. We heard from the chief veterinary officer yesterday at the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee about what we are doing to reduce antibiotics use here. Will the Minister resist it in US imports too?

George Eustice: The hon. Lady makes an important point. Here in the UK, we have made huge progress in reducing the use of antibiotics. Poultry in particular has seen a 50% reduction in the use of antibiotics. US agriculture remains quite backward and some years behind in these matters, but we continue to work together to try to raise its game and approach.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): My hon. Friend's good will on this issue is recognised, as is my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State's, but I re-emphasise the seriousness with which we on the Agriculture Bill Committee dealt with this issue. We cannot rely on good will. We need certainty for our food producers across the country on the face of a Bill—it could be the Trade Bill or the Agriculture Bill—that standards will be maintained and that they will not be priced out of the market.

George Eustice: My hon. Friend made his case powerfully in Committee. He will recall that, as a result, I undertook to give this issue further consideration and have further discussion with colleagues in government in time for Report.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): The discussion in the Agriculture Bill Committee was very good, but unfortunately the Government chose not to accept our amendments, so I congratulate the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) and the whole of the Select Committee on tabling theirs. I hope the Minister will confirm today that he will accept that amendment.

George Eustice: As I have explained, I do not believe that that particular amendment is the right way to approach the issue, nor is the Agriculture Bill the right place for such an amendment, as this is a trade issue. Nevertheless, I gave an undertaking to have conversations and discussions with other Departments in time for Report.

Farming: Funding Schemes

5. **Alex Burghart** (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): What steps he is taking to deliver equitable funding schemes for farmers throughout the UK. [907906]

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): Once we leave the common agricultural policy, we will be able to create fairer funding for farmers, with greater freedoms across the four Administrations. On 16 October, the Government announced a review of the intra-UK allocation of domestic farm support funding

between 2020 and the end of the Parliament. The review will consider a range of factors that reflect the unique circumstances of each part of the United Kingdom.

Alex Burghart: I very much welcome the news that we will have fairer funding across all four parts of the UK after we leave the EU. Will the Minister reassure me that this fairer funding will take account of each country's individual circumstances, particularly the environment, their agriculture and their socioeconomic needs?

George Eustice: I can confirm to my hon. Friend that the review will indeed will consider all those issues—the environment, agriculture and socioeconomic circumstances of each part of the UK. We have a manifesto commitment to keep the agricultural budget the same until 2022 and a commitment to put in place a new funded scheme thereafter.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Government Front-Bench team stop blaming Europe for everything in farming and recognise that it is modern industrial methods of agriculture that are responsible for denuding our country of wildlife and for species going into extinction? That is the problem. We need a funding system that is equitable but deals with that problem.

George Eustice: It is Government policy to support a more sustainable approach to agriculture. The common agricultural policy has failed to do that. The new policy that we have set out in the Agriculture Bill will deliver a fairer, more sustainable and more profitable agriculture for the future.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): Since it was established in the Agriculture Bill Committee that further primary legislation is required for direct payments to be made to Scotland and other parts of the United Kingdom, what steps is my hon. Friend taking to ensure that Scotland is in the UK Agriculture Bill and that it conforms with the needs of the National Farmers Union Scotland and my constituents?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend makes an important point. As I said earlier, there is an open offer from the Government to add a schedule for Scotland at a later stage of the Bill's progress, should Scotland wish us to. This area is devolved to Scotland. The Scottish Government have the power to act in this space and they need to make up their mind and decide what they want to do.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): How can the Minister talk about ethical funding when Westminster has stolen £160 million of convergence uplift meant for Scottish farmers? What are the Government doing to replace that up to 2020, and what is going to happen beyond 2020?

George Eustice: As the hon. Gentleman will no doubt be aware, the average receipt for Scottish farmers tends to be higher than in other parts of the UK, because Scottish farmers have larger holdings in more disadvantaged areas. We are having this review precisely to address the importance of fair funding in the future.

Leaving the EU: Fishing Industry

8. **Chris Law** (Dundee West) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the effect on the fishing industry of the UK leaving the EU. [907909]

11. **John Mc Nally** (Falkirk) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the effect on the fishing industry of the UK leaving the EU. [907912]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): I have regular discussions with my Cabinet colleagues and, indeed, with all Members of the House about the benefits for the UK fishing industry of leaving the common fisheries policy and becoming, once more, an independent coastal state. The Government's vision for this bright future was set out in the White Paper, "Sustainable Fisheries for Future Generations."

Chris Law: We all know we cannot trust the Tories with Scotland's fishing industry. After all, former Prime Ministers Ted Heath, Margaret Thatcher and John Major all sold Scotland's fishing down the water. Now we know that the current Prime Minister has signed an agreement with the EU to

"build on...existing reciprocal access and quota shares."

Can the Secretary of State help the House understand how that is in any way taking back control of the waters?

Michael Gove: I have enormous affection and respect for the hon. Gentleman, and he makes his case with characteristic fluency, but I fear he has been misled. The truth is that, as an independent coastal state, we will be able to decide who comes into our waters and on what terms. It is perhaps rare for me to quote the French President, Emmanuel Macron—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Members are chuntering from a sedentary position, but I want to hear the right hon. Gentleman quote the French President.

Michael Gove: The soi-disant Jupiterian President was, nevertheless, speechless with rage on Sunday when he discovered that this withdrawal agreement and the future political declaration mean that France will not have access to our waters, save on our terms. His anger should be a cause for celebration on both sides of the House.

John Mc Nally: Yesterday the Prime Minister told the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) that, as an independent coastal state, the UK will be able to "negotiate access" to its waters with other countries. Constituents have asked me why, at such a pivotal and crucial time for the fishing industry in Scotland, there are no Scottish Tory constituency MPs in the Secretary of State's Department in order to be a more effective and balanced Government.

Michael Gove: Far be it from me to say but, as someone who was born in Edinburgh and brought up in Aberdeen, and who had the privilege of growing up in a

household in which my father ran a fish processing business and his forebears went to sea, I think the interests of the fishing industry are very much at the heart of the Department. I would love to extend an open welcome to my Scottish Conservative colleagues to join the ministerial team but, sadly, the size of our ministerial team is a matter for the Prime Minister, rather than me.

One thing I would say, though, is that, in the consideration of our Bills in Committee, and in the shaping of policy in the interest of rural and coastal Scotland, Scotland's Conservative MPs have been consistently more effective in delivering more money, more freedom and more rights even than the nicest and friendliest Scottish nationalist, which of course the hon. Gentleman is.

12. [907914] **Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): It is vital that the UK is in complete control of our fisheries after the implementation period ends, and that our fish stocks are not used as a currency to buy any trade deal. Will my right hon. Friend look at including in the Fisheries Bill a cut-off date of the end of December 2020, and will he urge the Prime Minister not to use our fish as a currency?

Michael Gove: The fishing industry has no stronger friend in this House than my hon. Friend, and she is absolutely right to remind us that fishing will not be bartered away in the event of any final deal. I will make sure that we work with her to ensure that consideration is properly given in Committee to all possible safeguards for our fishing industry.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): Can the Secretary of State update the House on how his Department is working with the devolved Administrations to adopt common approaches to fisheries management to preserve UK vessels' right to fish in the waters around all four home nations?

Michael Gove: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that detailed, practical point, and he is absolutely right. Notwithstanding the occasional disagreements on the Floor of the House, I have to say that the Scottish Government Minister responsible for fisheries, Fergus Ewing, has behaved, I think, in a very mature fashion in making sure that UK vessels can have access across the waters of the UK, while, of course, respecting, and indeed enhancing, the devolution settlement.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): Regardless of what happens in the coming days and weeks, we are going to become an independent coastal state, like Norway, Iceland and the Faroes. Like them, we will have to come to a fisheries agreement with the EU. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, in the negotiation of that agreement specifically, he and the officials in his Department should take the lead?

Michael Gove: Yes, I do. It is vital that we are there getting the best possible deal for this country. I said that my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) was probably the strongest voice for the fishing industry in this House, but there is stiff competition for that role now that my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) is here. I look

forward to working with him and other colleagues, and those in the Scottish Fishermen's Federation and elsewhere, who recognise that there is a sea of opportunity for our fishing industry as an independent coastal state.

Mr Speaker: The Secretary of State is characteristically keen to keep all his Back-Bench colleagues happy, and that will have been noted by the House.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): In five weeks, the EU discard ban will kick in. While much attention is on what fishing will look like after Brexit, this poorly implemented discard ban before Brexit risks tying up our fishing fleet, especially mixed fisheries such as those in the south-west. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to ensure that the concerns of the fishing industry are listened to and that this ban does not result in its boats being tied up alongside?

Michael Gove: It is not just Government Back Benchers whom I wish to be kind to; it is also Opposition Front Benchers, because the hon. Gentleman raises a very important point. It is the case that the management of the discard ban in the past, and potentially in the future, is a real issue of contention. My hon. Friend the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has been talking to a number of fishing industry representatives to see whether we can make sure that at this December Council we can put in place appropriate mitigation measures. One thing we can be sure of is that as an independent coastal state we can take appropriate conservation measures in a way that does not lead to those who are practising mixed fisheries facing the sorts of problems the hon. Gentleman rightly draws attention to.

Pollinators

9. **Alan Mak** (Havant) (Con): What steps he is taking to protect bees and other pollinators. [907910]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): Protecting pollinators is a priority for this Government and that is reflected in our 10-year national pollinator strategy for England. Our 2017 review of the strategy has highlighted positive progress and the Government recently announced £50,000 to support large-scale pollinator projects in Devon and, of course, in Hampshire, and £60,000, following petitioning from my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley), to develop pollinator habitat mapping.

Alan Mak: Community groups and local schools play an important role in protecting our pollinators. What support can my right hon. Friend give to those groups? Will he join me in congratulating St Albans Church of England Primary School in Havant on its award-winning work in this area?

Michael Gove: I absolutely agree; community groups, including our Wildlife Trusts network, do an enormously valuable job in making sure that the habitats that pollinators depend on are kept in good repair. It is also the case that schools across the country are playing an increasingly important role, and next year's Year of Green Action will give me and my hon. Friend the opportunity to

congratulate those schools and those teachers, who are doing so much to remind us of our environmental responsibilities.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The Secretary of State will be aware that lots of small and medium-sized enterprises that produce honey do an awful lot of work to try to protect bees. For example, Tŷ Mêl farm in my constituency does a lot of work on ethical beekeeping and making sure we produce good Welsh honey. What more support can he give small businesses that are not only producing honey, but supporting bees?

Michael Gove: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right and I congratulate the business in his constituency on its initiative. From the Welsh valleys to the rolling acres of Hampshire, and indeed the rich heather-strewn hills of Scotland, UK honey is a world-beater, but we must do more to protect our pollinators.

Deposit Return Scheme

10. **Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): What progress has been made on introducing a deposit return scheme for plastic bottles. [907911]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): The consultation on a deposit return scheme will be published shortly and it will look at the details of how a scheme could work, alongside the other measures to increase recycling rates. We are continuing to work with the devolved Administrations, potentially on a UK scheme.

Wera Hobhouse: A recent BBC documentary showed a dead sperm whale with a large amount of plastic waste in its stomach, including four plastic bottles. So given the urgency, and the keen interest that my constituents have in this issue, can the Minister actually confirm a date of the roll-out of a deposit return scheme?

Dr Coffey: No, I cannot, because we have yet to consult on the scheme. It is important that we give proper consideration not only to the opportunities but to the challenges. The hon. Lady is right to continue to raise the impact of people being careless with litter, which is how plastic often ends up in the marine environment. That is something that everyone in the House wants to prevent.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): The Environmental Audit Committee's report on the Arctic is published today. Because of weather and tides, most of our marine plastic ends up in the Arctic. It is imperative that the deposit return scheme is introduced as soon as possible. Will the Minister confirm that the measures to introduce the DRS will be included in the draft environment Bill when it is published? Or will it be in separate legislation and thereby further delayed?

Dr Coffey: It really matters that we get the DRS right and that we get the outcomes that we all want to see. It is just a little too early to commit to a certain kind of legislation; we must wait until we have done the consultation.

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): Given how successful the plastic bag levy has been, reducing the use of plastic bags by 80%, and bearing in mind that the working group report in February this year showed that Germany's deposit return scheme delivers the recycling of 98% of polyethylene bottles, will the Minister tell us whether we will have a deposit return scheme, as suggested by the evidence, or whether her decision will be determined by the British Soft Drinks Association?

Dr Coffey: I note that after 13 years of a Labour Government nothing similar was introduced. I have looked into this issue carefully and visited several countries. The thing is, the front end is similar for everybody, but we must get the back-end solution right, because that is what we need to deliver the scheme effectively, rather than just getting headlines.

Topical Questions

Mr Speaker: I remind the House that topical questions are supposed to be significantly briefer.

T1. [907916] **Mr Philip Dunne** (Ludlow) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): I am looking forward to addressing the annual conference of the CLA—the Country Land and Business Association—later today, where I will congratulate the association on its fantastic work in environmental enhancement.

Mr Dunne: Good farming practice depends on multi-year rotations. The existing financial support system, the common agricultural policy, is multi-year and the proposed transition system is multi-year. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that when the Agriculture Bill comes back on Report, it will include a multi-year framework?

Michael Gove: I will enlist my hon. Friend's persuasive powers in making just such a case to the Treasury.

T4. [907919] **Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): Guide dog owners rely on their dogs to get around safely. They are rightly worried about what will happen with EU travel after any transition period or, worse still, in the event of no deal, which would require four months of advance planning. What contingencies have the UK Government put in place to minimise delays to guide dog travel? What post-Brexit arrangements will there be for pet travel?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (David Rutley): The Government have already set out very clear guidelines as to what needs to be done ahead of no deal. The feedback that we have had already tells us that this is being well received.

T2. [907917] **Simon Hoare** (North Dorset) (Con): Rural roaming can bring huge benefits to farmers, businesses and our rural communities. We are at a key point in trying to deliver it, so will my right hon. Friend commit to use all his considerable energy to convince the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport that it is the right thing to do, is affordable and can be done quickly?

Michael Gove: I presume that my hon. Friend means roaming applied to mobile telephones, rather than to wild rovers.

Simon Hoare: Yes.

Michael Gove: I will absolutely do that. I have had a number of fruitful conversations with DCMS and, indeed, rural roaming is a key plank of the CLA's campaign to improve connectivity in rural areas, which is vital to improving productivity across the field.

T6. [907921] **Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): A doctor from Deptford, the most deprived part of my constituency, recently welcomed the new low emission bus zone along New Cross Road, after she had seen a rise in cases of lung disease and asthma among her patients. Does the Minister acknowledge the role that such schemes can play in tackling the inequality of increased air pollution in deprived areas?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): Absolutely, which is why we have been pleased to provide Transport for London with funding. The Mayor has received additional funding for certain kinds of buses and other things to do; we just want him to continue to get on with it.

T3. [907918] **Jeremy Lefroy** (Stafford) (Con): What is my hon. Friend's assessment of the implications of the Migration Advisory Committee's report on immigration for the agricultural and food processing industries in the United Kingdom?

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): The Government obviously did not agree with every element of the Migration Advisory Committee report. The food industry is the most important manufacturing industry in this country and horticulture is one of our most productive agricultural sectors. It is important that we ensure that these crucial industries have the labour requirements that they need in future.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Illegal waste sites such as the Twyford factory in Stoke-on-Trent pose a huge risk to our environment. Despite the £10 million that was in the Budget, that site is not eligible for that help because it remains in private ownership. Court action has ordered a clearance. The local authority and the fire service want it cleared. Will the Minister meet me and those interested parties so that we can find a way forward so the site can be cleared once and for all?

Michael Gove: The hon. Gentleman is a formidable advocate for his constituency and I will make sure that a meeting happens at ministerial level in order to try to ensure that that waste site is tackled.

T5. [907920] **Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): The Secretary of State will have heard the comments of the French President about access to our fishing grounds. Can he confirm to the fishing industry in Torbay that those are hollow threats and that we will in future decide our own fishing policy?

Michael Gove: Certainement. Le Président de la France—

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): You are not allowed to speak in French.

Michael Gove: Sorry. I will translate. The French President is, on this occasion, wrong.

Mr Speaker: Stunning, absolutely stunning—the articulacy and the accent. What a dramatic performance by the right hon. Gentleman.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I believe that the 13 Scottish Tories have all signed the latest pledge of the Scottish Fishermen's Federation to reject the Prime Minister's deal. Will the Secretary of State do the same?

Mr Speaker: In fact, I was almost as pleased with the right hon. Gentleman's performance as possibly was the right hon. Gentleman.

Michael Gove: No, I am afraid not, Mr Speaker. I thought that it was a hesitant and fumbling schoolboy attempt of the language, but if it brought you pleasure then my day has not been entirely wasted.

The Scottish Fishermen's Federation is clear that the Government's approach to safeguarding our fishing stocks, and indeed enhancing opportunities, is one that we wholeheartedly endorse, which is why it is behind the deal that the Prime Minister has secured.

Mr Speaker: I so enjoyed it, and the right hon. Gentleman knows how much I enjoyed it.

T7. [907922] **Zac Goldsmith** (Richmond Park) (Con): In many ways, the UK has led the agenda on wildlife protection. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we would enhance that reputation if, like France, the Netherlands and Australia, we banned the import of so-called hunting trophies?

Michael Gove: I have a lot of sympathy with what my hon. Friend says. I find the idea of trophy hunting a difficult one to contemplate as anyone's idea of a wise use of time or resources. However, it is the case that the current regime allows trophies to be imported, provided that there is no impact on the sustainability of species. We keep these rules constantly under review and I am grateful to him, to Members across this House and to non-governmental organisations for keeping a spotlight on the issue because it is one that troubles many of us.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I look forward to welcoming you to Newcastle this evening, Mr Speaker. I know that you, like many of my constituents, will appreciate the gorgeous Northumberland and County Durham countryside that surrounds it. The US countryside is much different, with wheat farms the size of small counties and pig farms the size of small towns. How will the Secretary of State protect our glorious countryside when he expects our farmers to compete with American farming methods post Brexit?

Michael Gove: I have to join the hon. Lady in saying that, from Alnwick to Bishop Auckland, the north-east contains—[*Interruption.*] Okay, from Morpeth to Seahouses—

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): Berwick to Barnard Castle.

Michael Gove: Exactly. There is a whole gazetteer. From Consett to Sedgefield, there are beautiful parts of our country in the north-east. Thanks to the hon. Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock), who is enjoying maternity leave at the moment, I had the opportunity to talk to hill farmers in her constituency. I have also received representations from the Members for all the Northumberland constituencies. I am on their side in making sure that we do not dilute our high environmental and animal welfare standards and that we continue to support farmers to produce the high-quality food that they do, which is the envy of the world.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): What steps is the Secretary of State taking now to ensure that, after Brexit, once we are free of EU controls, halal and kosher meat is appropriately labelled?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend raises a very important point, but we have to consider not just high animal welfare standards and appropriate consumer information, but the sensitivities and traditions of our religious communities. Given the increase that we have seen in expressions of hostility towards religious minorities in this country, this is an area that requires handling with great care, but he is absolutely right to say that we do need to look at ways in which we can improve animal welfare at every stage in the life of the animals with whom we share this planet.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Page 33 of the national flood resilience review highlights how natural upper catchment management must be part of the next comprehensive spending review. How will the Minister ensure that upper catchment management is a major feature of that impending spending review, so that we can particularly protect York with catchment management on the River Ouse and the River Foss?

Dr Coffey: We do have a £15 million scheme, which is going into much greater detail in assessing the different methods of natural flood management. This will be an important part of flood defences for homes and businesses, but we need to ensure more than just anecdote, although I do recognise that some of these methods are seen to work already. This will help constituents in the hon. Lady's wonderful city of York.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

The right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—

UK Food and Drink

1. **John Spellar** (Warley) (Lab): What steps the Commission is taking to increase the sale of UK-produced food and drink (a) in catering outlets and (b) for events hosted on the parliamentary estate. [907924]

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): The right hon. Gentleman will be very pleased to know that there is a lot of promotional activity for British food. For example, Red Tractor Week took place in September, and we worked with British farmers and the National Farmers Union to promote British food. He will also be pleased to know that the wine list in Strangers' and Members' includes a good selection of English wines. Something that he may want to consider—if he has not already taken advantage of it—is that individual Members can ask for a specific cask of ale from an independent regional brewer from their constituency to be placed in the Strangers' bar.

John Spellar: I am certainly aware of the provision for regional breweries in the Strangers' bar. I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on the steps that the Commission has taken on this and on reducing plastic use, but will the Commission take the lead from other public bodies in ensuring that our suppliers are, at every possible opportunity, prioritising and insisting on supporting British farmers, manufacturers and workers, and maximising UK-produced food and drink, especially from small and medium-sized enterprises?

Tom Brake: I can assure the right hon. Gentleman that in this place we push hard for very high quality produce, which is often British-sourced. The overwhelming majority of food throughout the catering establishments is British. If he is suggesting that we should adopt a “buy British” policy, I am sure he aware that that is not something that we can do in practice.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): As the House of Commons Commission is encouraging British-produced food and drink on the parliamentary estate, may I commend to the right hon. Gentleman Weetabix breakfast cereal made in Burton Latimer and Warner Edwards gin made in Harrington—both within the Kettering constituency—as appropriate for the start and end of the parliamentary day?

Tom Brake: The hon. Gentleman's love of Weetabix is now on the record.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I am sure that other cereals are available. I commend the moves of the catering outlets and events teams to increasing UK-produced food and drink, but will the right hon. Gentleman recommend to the Commission an increase in the amount of UK-produced healthy food, especially after the success of Vegan November?

Tom Brake: I will certainly pursue that suggestion to ensure that the food here is not only British, but healthy as well.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): Following the question of my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), may I stress to the right hon. Gentleman that there really is a need for more diversity in the food served by the catering outlets, particularly vegetarian and vegan food? This is an extremely important issue for members of the public and Members of the House.

Tom Brake: Absolutely; it is necessary for this estate to respond to the increase in veganism, perhaps in the way in which the kebab industry has, whereby vegan kebabs are now available.

Cox Report

2. **Marion Fellows** (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): What representations the Commission has received on bullying and harassment since the publication of the Cox report. [907926]

4. **Carol Monaghan** (Glasgow North West) (SNP): What representations the Commission has received on bullying and harassment since the publication of the Cox report. [907928]

5. **Brendan O'Hara** (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): What representations the Commission has received on bullying and harassment since the publication of the Cox report. [907929]

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): The Commission has received representations from individuals, companies, the unions, interest groups and hon. Members, for which we are extremely grateful. Correspondence has included general opinion as well as extensive comment on the report's findings. We have also received offers of assistance from both companies and individuals on the approach that we should take to maximise the opportunities for change.

Marion Fellows: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that any actions taken as a result of this report must be taken at the earliest opportunity, and that while we can all agree that this is a time of particular political turbulence, that should not be held up as a reason for postponing such actions?

Tom Brake: I agree entirely with the hon. Lady. She will be pleased to know that the Commission has debated this on a number of occasions already. We have issued a statement, and we have two further meetings already planned to ensure that the necessary priority and emphasis is indeed placed on this critical issue.

Carol Monaghan: Female Members in this House were not surprised that 70% of the complainants responding to the Cox report were women. I am the 400th woman to be elected to this place; there are more than 400 men currently sitting as Members of the House. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that until we address this gender imbalance in our representation, this abuse will continue?

Tom Brake: I certainly agree that we need to ensure that we have 50:50 representation in this place. No doubt the hon. Lady, like me and others here, has taken part in events to promote that. Clearly, we cannot wait until we have 50:50 representation to address these very serious issues. That is precisely what the Cox report and, indeed, the White report that is now under way are focusing on to ensure that we address this problem as quickly as possible, not in the next 50 or so years' time.

Brendan O'Hara: The Cox report revealed that a culture of bullying and harassment had spread to every part of this place. Can the right hon. Gentleman assure me, and give confidence to all those working across the estate, that if a complete, top-down reorganisation is required to effect genuine and lasting change, that will

happen, and that seniority, length of service or any other factor will play no part in shielding anyone from scrutiny or criticism where it is warranted?

Tom Brake: I can certainly give the hon. Gentleman that assurance. I think that the House, and everyone in this place, has recognised that there is a serious issue that we need to address. I would draw his attention, and that of other Members, to an email that is sitting in their inboxes encouraging them to take part in the consultation around the grievance scheme to ensure that, for instance, allegations of historical abuse are effectively addressed within the scheme. I hope that he and others will want to contribute to that.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

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

Northern Forest Initiative

3. **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): What discussions the Commissioners have had with representatives of the northern forest initiative; and if she will make a statement. [907927]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman): The Church Commissioners own 3,500 acres of forestry in England, some of which falls within the focus of the northern forest initiative. The Church Commissioners have had some high-level conversations with the Woodland Trust and would certainly consider being part of this initiative.

Rachael Maskell: With 50 million trees expected to be planted as part of the northern forest initiative to improve air quality and mitigate flooding, as well as to improve wellbeing and be there for us all to enjoy, it is really important that the Church of England estate also participates in that, not least as the 13th biggest landlord in our nation, owning land the size of Iceland, I believe. How many trees will the Church of England be planting, particularly around the area of York, where the archbishop's palace, no less, was affected by the floods of 2015?

Dame Caroline Spelman: The Church Commissioners own a great deal of agricultural land. The important thing with the planting of trees is that it needs to be on land suitable for that purpose. Prime agricultural land is usually reserved for food production, but land that is, for example, wet—it can be in close proximity to rivers—is better suited to tree production. The hon. Lady, representing the city of York, has every interest in trees being planted that would slow the flow of the river through her city.

Persecution of Christians

6. **Fiona Bruce** (Congleton) (Con): What steps the Church of England is taking to raise awareness in the Government of the persecution of Christians throughout the world. [907930]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman): The Church of England remains concerned about the increase in violence and intimidation against Christians and all religious minorities across the globe. In fact, my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) reminded colleagues

at this week's Prime Minister's questions of the visit of the Patriarch of Jerusalem, His Beatitude Theophilos III, who will be in Parliament next Wednesday. He is regarded as a senior cleric from the Christian communion in Jerusalem, and he is to give a talk about the future of Christians in the Holy Land.

Fiona Bruce: Aid to the Church in Need's latest world persecution report and Baroness Cox's "Hidden Atrocities" report, both published this month, state that the religious element of attacks by militants on communities in northern and central Nigeria is increasing. For example, 539 Christian churches have been destroyed in Nasarawa state alone in 2018. Catholic Bishop William Avenya of Gboko has now warned the international community,

"Please don't make the same mistake as was made with the genocide in Rwanda."

Will the Church of England engage with Department for International Development and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to help fully address those grave concerns?

Dame Caroline Spelman: I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. In fact, on Monday, the Archbishop of Canterbury will brief members of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, as part of its inquiry on Nigeria. He knows the country extremely well, as he worked there, and has visited it as recently as October. He is deeply concerned about attacks on Christians and has urged our Government to help Nigeria to enforce security and promote reconciliation between people of different faiths.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The Rev. Steven Saxby organised for me an excellent briefing with Anglicans from the Philippines, where there are serious human rights abuses. Could the right hon. Lady ask the Church of England whether it is tackling that in a structured way?

Dame Caroline Spelman: One advantage of the size of the Anglican communion is that its reach is across all continents, and the persecution of Christians in all continents is a matter of great concern to the Church of England, as part of the Anglican communion. I will certainly look more closely into what is happening in the Philippines, and I thank the hon. Lady for that suggestion.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): I attempted to restrict the scope of a question to the holy lands and was summoned to the Table Office to change the offending words. It is not persecution, but does my right hon. Friend resent that secular agenda as much as I do?

Dame Caroline Spelman: That is almost a question for the Chair, rather than the Second Church Estates Commissioner. I am concerned about religious literacy and understanding better the Holy Land. I was fortunate to be able to make a visit with five Members of Parliament, led by the Speaker's Chaplain, Rose, to the Holy Land for the first time, to see for myself the plight of Christians there and the complexity of the issues in the Holy Land. I do not think we should baulk at calling it the Holy Land, for many of the world's faith regard it as such.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: What a delicious choice—I call Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Can the right hon. Lady outline whether she has had any discussions with the Home Office, to request that Asia Bibi and her family are offered asylum in the United Kingdom, and the outcome of those discussions?

Dame Caroline Spelman: I can give the hon. Gentleman reassurance, and I sympathise with his concern for Asia Bibi. The information we have is that we need to be extremely careful that we do not exacerbate risks to Asia Bibi and her family. The Prime Minister answered a question during PMQs about what the Foreign Office is doing and confirmed that the UK is in conversations with other Governments, including the Government of Pakistan, on how to make Asia and her family safe.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): We had an excellent debate this week on Nigeria, initiated by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). Will the right hon. Lady urge the Archbishop of Canterbury to visit another bedevilled part of the world, South Sudan? Although it is a Christian country, many Christians are being persecuted there.

Dame Caroline Spelman: The Archbishop of Canterbury is very alive to the situation in South Sudan. Every well-read Christian Member of Parliament surely must be. In my tenure as shadow International Development Secretary, I went to southern Sudan, and it is probably one of the most distressing places I have ever visited. The women there told me they had very little confidence of peace being secured, because they fear their men just like to fight.

Dean of Christ Church, Oxford

7. **John Howell** (Henley) (Con): What support the Church of England is providing to the Dean of Christ Church cathedral Oxford in the case brought against him by Christ Church college. [907932]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman): At this stage, there is little more that I can add to the written answer that I gave my hon. Friend on Monday. A formal tribunal process is under way, following the statutes of Christ Church, and that will enable the complaint made against the dean to be properly investigated.

John Howell: I have spoken to the Bishop of Oxford, and I am a little more reassured about the pastoral care that is being made available for the dean, but this raises the important question of why an Anglican cathedral is so much in the pocket of an Oxford college.

Dame Caroline Spelman: I can reassure the House that the Bishop of Oxford is giving pastoral support to the Dean, and I know that he went out of his way to speak to my hon. Friend. This is a very unusual case in the Church of England—the dean of a cathedral is at the same time the master of a college—but I must underline that the complaint against the Dean is an internal matter for the college, and neither the Church Commissioners nor the wider Church of England has any role in that process.

Christmas

8. **Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What steps the Church of England is taking to promote the message of Christmas. [907934]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman): I am so glad the hon. Lady has asked that question, as this Sunday is the first Sunday in Advent. We all look forward to Christmas. The Church of England reached over 6.8 million people with last year's Advent and Christmas campaign. This year, the Church has launched a Follow the Star campaign. Details of that can be found on the Church website, or indeed in hard copies made available through Church House Publishing.

Diana Johnson: I thank the right hon. Lady for that reply, and I endorse the importance of Follow the Star to advertise services and signpost the campaign that the Church is running. I say to the right hon. Lady, however, that universal credit is being rolled out in my constituency just before Christmas. I am really concerned about the rising number of people attending the food bank, and I am also concerned about rising levels of homelessness and loneliness in the community. Does she think the Church of England could do more to take practical steps to convey the Christmas message in our communities?

Dame Caroline Spelman: The hon. Lady enables me to give the answer I so much wanted to give to Question 9, which had to be withdrawn at short notice. The Church has surveyed the social action projects in its 16,000 parishes, and 33,000 social action projects are under way in precisely the kind of areas the hon. Lady mentions—food banks, night shelters for the homeless and debt counselling. Indeed, this is living out the message of Christmas to the needy.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): The message of Christmas is one of renewal and hope. Will my right hon. Friend bring a message of hope to people with autism in prison? It is essential that those who minister to them understand the condition. In the new year, will she look at ensuring that all prison chaplains are trained in autism? In that way, the Christmas message could be extended into 2019.

Dame Caroline Spelman: The message is that Christmas is for all, including inmates in prison. My right hon. Friend has campaigned so hard for those with autism. Our chaplains are given guidance on helping prison inmates with autism.

I must finish with a heart-warming story for the House, which perhaps those who read *The Guardian* will have spotted. The Dean of Salisbury cathedral provided stonemasons to a local prison who trained the inmates in how to fashion their own war memorial, and he inaugurated it in time for the Armistice. I just want to reassure the House that, for practical reasons, the number of chisels was counted on the way in and on the way out.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Many children will be in church over the Christmas period, particularly at events such as Christingle services. Does my right

hon. Friend agree that this is a great opportunity for the Church to spread the message to our young people in the hope that they will retain that message throughout their lives?

Dame Caroline Spelman: The Church of England has seen increasing attendance at its church services. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that crib services and Christingle services are very important for small people.

I would like to encourage you, Mr Speaker, to have a look at the Follow the Star campaign. It is different for a change: it does not start on the first day of Advent, but covers the 12 days of Christmas. When you and I have finished washing up after our Christmas lunches, we might sit down and reflect on the true meaning of Christmas and make sure that our children do get it.

Mr Speaker: I shall always profit from the right hon. Lady's counsels, and I solemnly commit to take that advice on Christmas day.

Withdrawal Agreement: Legal Advice

10.34 am

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office if he will make a statement on the publication of the Attorney General's legal advice on the proposed withdrawal agreement.

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): The Government recognise the legitimate desire of Members on all sides of the House to understand the withdrawal agreement and its legal effect. That is why my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster confirmed to the House on Tuesday 13 November that the Government will publish a full reasoned statement to set out their position on the legal effect of the withdrawal agreement. That is in addition to the material that the Government have already published, including, for example, a detailed explainer of the withdrawal agreement and a technical explanatory note on the Northern Ireland protocol. My right hon. and learned Friend the Attorney General will also make a statement to the House on Monday 3 December—the next sitting day—about the legal effect of the agreement, and he will answer questions from Members, I am sure in the fullest possible way.

Keir Starmer: Not good enough.

Mr Speaker, nobody who was present in the debate on 13 November, including the Solicitor General, could be in any doubt about what the House was asking for. During that debate I stated that

“the motion requires the publication of the final and full advice provided by the Attorney General to the Cabinet concerning the terms of any withdrawal agreement. This must be made available to all MPs. It is to be published after any withdrawal agreement is reached with the EU, but in good time to allow proper consideration before MPs are asked to vote on the deal.”—[*Official Report*, 13 November 2018; Vol. 649, c. 235.]

The motion was passed unanimously on those terms, and when it was passed, I made it clear that those were its terms.

It was perfectly clear to Ministers, including the Solicitor General who spoke at the end of the debate, that the House was not asking for a position paper or a summary of the Attorney General's advice. That was the offer made from the Dispatch Box during the debate, and it was roundly rejected, as the Solicitor General knows full well. The binding motion that was passed was for nothing less than for the full and final legal advice provided by the Attorney General. It is therefore wholly unacceptable, and frankly shows contempt for this House, for Ministers, including the Prime Minister at the Dispatch Box yesterday, now to pretend that the House was asking only for partial or qualified legal advice. If the Government are not willing to comply with the order of the House, why did they and the Solicitor General not vote against the motion?

In 12 days' time, this House will have to take the most important decision it has taken for a generation, and MPs are entitled to know the full legal consequences of the deal that the Prime Minister is asking them to support. That is why the order was made, and why it must be complied with. Throughout the Brexit process, the Government have repeatedly tried to sideline and

push Parliament away. If they now intend to ignore Parliament altogether, they will get into very deep water indeed. I urge the Solicitor General to think again and to comply with the order of the House.

The Solicitor General: With the greatest respect to the right hon. and learned Gentleman, his request is wholly premature—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Everybody will have a chance to contribute on this most important and solemn of matters, but just as the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) was heard in relative quiet, so must similar courtesy be extended to the Solicitor General. Everybody will get a chance to put his or her point of view—of that there need be no doubt.

The Solicitor General: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The Attorney General will come to the House on the next sitting day, and he will make a full statement and answer questions from hon. Members across the House. It might then be for the House to judge whether the Government have discharged their obligations consistent with the Humble Address, but not before.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Who needs legal advice to know a trap when they see one?

The Solicitor General: My right hon. Friend makes the important point that, ultimately, the decision for this House and the motions on which it will vote are political matters, and to try to dress them up in legalese and as legal matters does not help anyone.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I commend the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) on securing this urgent question. A dangerous pattern is developing here. First, the Government tried to avoid their obligations under a previous Humble Address to release their impact assessments, and on two instances, senior Conservative ex-Ministers were given guarantees by Ministers at the Dispatch Box, which they then claimed publicly had been broken. Now we see the Government trying to wriggle out of yet another binding decision of this House.

Mr Speaker, this is not the time or the place to re-run the discussion about whether it was a good idea for that motion on an Humble Address to have been passed. How ironic that the Government want to re-run a debate on something that has already been voted on—just think about that! This is not the time to discuss its merits. As has been said, if the Government did not want to comply with the instruction, they should have instructed their MPs to vote against it. The reason they did not was that they knew they would have lost the vote.

Does the Solicitor General accept the ruling of the Chair that this decision is binding on the Government? If so, when do the Government intend to comply with the instruction they have had from representatives of the sovereign citizens of these islands?

The Solicitor General: I am disappointed that the hon. Gentleman did not listen to the answer I gave. The Attorney General will be here on the next sitting day.

[*The Solicitor General*]

He will make a statement and answer questions. Then the hon. Gentleman and other right hon. and hon. Members can form a judgment on whether the motion that was carried by this House has been satisfied. My argument is that the Attorney General will meet the spirit and intention of the motion passed, but preserve the important constitutional convention relating to Law Officers' advice.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): The right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), the shadow Secretary of State, said during his speech:

"I wanted the Government to see the good sense in putting the legal position before the House, for all the exceptional reasons that have been set out".—[*Official Report*, 13 November 2018; Vol. 649, c. 194.]

Accepting that, is that not precisely what the Attorney General intends to do and will be able to do on Monday?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend, the Chair of the Justice Committee, is absolutely right. The right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) is more familiar than most with the position of the Law Officers and their role within the constitution. I would have expected him to do better.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The Solicitor General should be aware that I, and probably others in this House, have written to Mr Speaker asking whether this is a matter of contempt. I suspect we may find it easier to get 48 letters than others have found. Can the Solicitor General confirm whether the Government will fight any contempt proceedings? Has he identified who in the Government would be the subject of contempt proceedings? Does he agree that this latest snub to Parliament leaves Members of Parliament with a sneaking suspicion that when it comes to the vote on 11 December and any votes that come after, the Government may decide to play fast and loose with what is the normal procedure in this place?

The Solicitor General: The right hon. Gentleman asks me to speculate about matters that might not arise. There is no snub to Parliament. It is a wholly confected controversy that actually detracts from the real issues we should be debating and will be looking at next week.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): While the Opposition may wish to play fast and loose with the national interest, does my hon. and learned Friend agree that it would be wholly irresponsible to publish material which could or would damage the national interest?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is right to emphasise the national interest. It is rare for a Law Officer, in this case the Attorney General, to come to the House and make a statement of this nature. We accept that these are exceptionally important, unusual and unprecedented times. That is why he is doing it. Members will have the chance to grill him when he comes.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): The Solicitor General is repeating the offer that was made during the debate on 13 November and repeating what the

Prime Minister said yesterday, but that was not accepted by the House. The House unanimously adopted a binding resolution in the terms that the Opposition spokesperson has outlined, so why does the Solicitor General not listen and the Government start listening? This has been the problem all along. What is it that they have to hide?

The Solicitor General: May I assure the right hon. Gentleman that when the Attorney General comes here on Monday, he will be able to ask him questions and make sure he is properly examined on these issues? He will have that opportunity. This is not an instance where the Government seek to delay or hide; this is all about providing information at the right time ahead of the important debate that I know he will be playing an important part in.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Will my hon. and learned Friend agree that it is the role of the Government always to put the national interest at the heart of any decision?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend makes a simple but important point. If we start trying to subdivide the role of the Law Officers and create a rift in collective decision making, where will democratically accountable government end up?

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): In my experience, when someone smells a rat, it is usually a good idea to set a trap. The Solicitor General will be aware that the Prime Minister wants everybody in the House to make a sensible decision based on all the information available to us. Should we not, then, have the fullest possible legal advice in as timely a manner as possible if we are to arrive at a sensible decision?

The Solicitor General: I take the right hon. Gentleman's question with the seriousness it deserves. That is why the Attorney General is coming here on the next sitting day before we start the five-day debate—so that hon. Members have a chance not just to question him but to digest what he says, come to a judgment and make points appropriately, either in the debate or in other proceedings that might follow.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): I must confess that I remain as confused as I was on 13 November about precisely what is being requested. What differences are there between the position now and the position the Government were in when advice was provided concerning Iraq?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend, who is a former Government lawyer, will recall that the circumstances of the publication of the Iraq advice were dramatically different from the current circumstances. In brief, extracts from the then Attorney General's advice were leaked to the press during the 2005 election campaign, and in those exceptional circumstances, the then Labour Government took a collective decision that the Attorney General should publish the full text. That is the only time it has happened. It was an exceptional case that I do not think sets a precedent here.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Can the Solicitor General outline the legal implications of Northern Ireland entering into a customs union—including, to all intents

and purposes, a united Ireland—with no voice or vote for an indefinite period and without the mechanism of a border poll, as called for in the Belfast agreement?

The Solicitor General: I am happy to inform the hon. Gentleman that he can put that precise question to my right hon. and learned Friend on the next sitting day. If he does, I am sure he will get a full answer.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I, too, listened to the debate that afternoon and raised a number of concerns about the motion. My memory is that the shadow Secretary of State asked for full advice on the final deal and not all the advice given during the negotiations and that he actually corrected the motion from the Dispatch Box four times before it was voted on, as I pointed out in an intervention. Does the Solicitor General agree that the motion was incredibly unclear and inconsistent?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend's recollection is accurate, although to be fair to the right hon. and learned Gentleman, he sought to clarify or narrow the terms of reference of his application. I simply say to her what I said in that debate, which is that the Government will provide a full and clear legal position to the House and that it will then be a matter for the House to judge whether that is sufficient.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): If the Government knew they would take the position of not providing the full legal advice—and the Minister wound up that debate on 13 November—why did they not vote against the motion? [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. We cannot have people chuntering from a sedentary position, particularly when they have already spoken. We have heard the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford); we know what she wanted to say and we are most grateful to her for that. We do not need sedentary chuntering. It is not helpful and it is unseemly—stop it.

The Solicitor General: I am not going to speculate about votes that were held or not held. I know what the position of the House is. We are seeking to satisfy that through the appearance of the Attorney General on Monday.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): I welcome the news that the Attorney General will be coming before the House on Monday, but does my hon. and learned Friend share my concern about the precedent that this may set for publishing legal advice? Where would that leave legal privilege, the cornerstone of our legal justice system?

The Solicitor General: I do not intend to repeat the remarks that I made in the debate, but as I said, there are good reasons why there is a convention for Law Officers. It is not just for the convenience of lawyers; it is for the rule of law to stay at the heart of collective Cabinet decision making. I would have thought that everybody in this House would want that.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Let me refresh the memories of Government Members, who seem to have forgotten the following words:

“any legal advice in full, including that provided by the Attorney General, on the proposed withdrawal agreement”.

My constituents are entitled to have the will of the House met so that I can read those documents. What on earth has the Solicitor General got against those words and my constituents knowing that I am doing my job?

The Solicitor General: I think the hon. Lady was reading out the words of the motion, which were not the words adopted by the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer). He confined himself to a particular document that he wanted to see. Those are the terms of reference that he sought, and it does nobody any good to try to go back on what he said. A statement on the Government's legal position will be published on Monday, so it will not just be the Attorney General's words given here orally. Right hon. and hon. Members will have something in writing as well.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con): Does the Solicitor General agree that if Members have important questions about the Government's legal advice or the legal position, they will be able to find out the answers to those questions by asking the source of the Government's legal advice—the Attorney General—in this House? Does he further agree that this is about a very important constitutional principle? If all 6,500 pieces of legal advice are published, all official advice, not just legal, will start to be published and we will have a situation in which candid advice will no longer be given. It will not be written down and, whoever is in government, we will not have proper functioning of Government.

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that if Law Officers, and indeed civil servants, cannot provide candid advice in an unencumbered way, the quality of decision making will deteriorate, as will its transparency. That is deleterious to good government.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): But this is not normal government. This is an irrevocable vote, so given the importance of that vote, does the Solicitor General not agree that MPs are entitled to the full truth on behalf of the people they represent?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Lady will see on Monday a document setting out the Government's legal position. She will be able to question the senior Law Officer about that and then, in the debate, she will be able to make further points if she views the information that she has received as somehow insufficient. Knowing my right hon. and learned Friend the Attorney General, he will dilate at length if he is asked to.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): Does my hon. and learned Friend agree that if the information given by a lawyer to a client is to be made public in future, that information is likely to be much more caveated and cautious, and therefore less useful?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is right—the information becomes useless, actually, if that is the case. There are good reasons why privilege exists, but over and above that, there are constitutional reasons why the Law Officers' permission has to be sought if, first, the

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fact that advice might or might not have been given is to be disclosed, and secondly, the content of any such advice is to be disclosed.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): The Government will have discharged their duty to the House not when the Attorney General makes his statement, but when they publish the full and final legal advice that the House has requested and voted for. Is that not what he should do on Monday?

The Solicitor General: I ask the hon. Gentleman to look at the document that is published, to hear the Attorney General and to come to any view that he may think is appropriate after that.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I found some of the comments of the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) surprising, to say the least, given his former role as Director of Public Prosecutions. Does the Solicitor General share my concern at the precedent that the Government might be setting, by releasing legal advice in this instance, for the advice given by previous Directors of Public Prosecutions?

The Solicitor General: I am here to answer questions on behalf of the Law Officers. Although I superintend the Crown Prosecution Service, it is an independent body, and I think it would be inappropriate for me to comment on the content of any advice that it may give.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Given that the Government have already ridden roughshod over the Sewel convention in respect of the devolution settlement, what faith can we have that they will uphold its integrity on this occasion?

The Solicitor General: I am tempted to get into a debate with the hon. Gentleman about the first part of his question, which I am afraid is just wrong, but we are not riding roughshod over anyone. I have already explained what we are going to do: on the next sitting day, my right hon. and learned Friend the Attorney General will be here to answer questions.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): It is easy and cheap populism to make the demands that we have heard today, but is the reality that this would undermine the ability of the Solicitor General and the Attorney General to do their job now, and the ability of all their successors to serve future Governments as well?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend has put it eloquently. Populism is no substitute for responsible government or responsible opposition.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I do not see how a unanimous vote in the House could ever be seen as cheap populism. The House said unambiguously that it wanted the Attorney General's legal advice to be published in full. Given that the withdrawal agreement is looking increasingly like a burst ball, does the Solicitor General not think that ignoring the will of Parliament

and hiding behind the "national interest" excuse just adds to the public perception that this is a Government descending into chaos?

The Solicitor General: Some of us actually believe in talking up our country, rather than talking it down. I am fed up with the attitude of some Members who seem to revel in the idea that the House wants to connive in chaos, as opposed to stepping up to the plate and playing its responsible democratic role. The public are looking to us to make an important decision in two weeks' time; let us show them that we are worthy of it.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): It is absolutely right that we hold the Government to account. We are doing that now, and we will do it again on Monday with the Attorney General. However, does the Solicitor General share my unease about the undermining of core principles that are accepted by the whole country, such as client confidentiality?

The Solicitor General: It is very easy, in the eye of a storm, to cast caution to the winds and throw away sensible and well worked out convention. This is not the time for us to do that.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): May I express my sympathy for the Solicitor General, who has been sent out today to defend the indefensible and take one for the team? May I also say, however, that responsible government means respecting the will of the House? How on earth can the Government ask the House to support the withdrawal agreement if at the same time they show contempt for a previous major decision that the House has made?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Gentleman is a reasonable man and an honourable Member. I ask him to listen carefully to the Attorney General, to read the documents—as I know he will—and then to reach a judgment after the next sitting day, when he will hear in full the legal basis for the Government's decision.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): We know that the good negotiator never shows his hand. Does my hon. and learned Friend agree that it would not be appropriate to reveal the Government's legal advice while we are, in essence, still at the negotiating table, securing and protecting the national interest?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is right. We are in a continuing negotiation, and that is why the national interest really is at the heart of this.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): The Solicitor General has a wonderful Welsh gift for words, but may I remind him of what Disraeli once said?

"A majority is always better than the best repartee."

There was a majority—in fact, a unanimous vote in the House—in favour of a motion for a return, which is not a request for a statement but a request for information to be published with the protection of parliamentary privilege. It is the duty of the Government to publish that information following the decision of the House, but if they still do not want to do that, the Solicitor General has already said that they could do it voluntarily.

The full legal advice will come out eventually, and history will not look kindly on the Government, or on any members of the Government, if they have kept from the House relevant information within that legal advice.

The Solicitor General: The hon. Gentleman is a compatriot of mine and is no stranger to the wizardry of rhetoric. He reminds me of Disraeli's comment on Gladstone that at times he might be inebriated by the intoxication of his own verbosity—but not today. I take his point, but I will say this to him: I would be failing in my duty if I did not defend robustly the Law Officers convention. That is what I am doing today, and that is what I must continue to do.

Mr Speaker: The correct reference is “inebriated with the exuberance of his own verbosity”, but what I would say is that the Solicitor General is no more in a position to level that charge at the hon. Gentleman than I would be.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): I am very pleased that the Attorney General is coming before the House on Monday, but while I have the utmost respect for him, ultimately his advice is just that: advice. Is not the most important thing what the Government's interpretation and position is and what the Government are going to do?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is right to remind this House—[*Interruption.*] I see that my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) is with us. Perhaps I will say no more about—

Mr Speaker: Order. The right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings thinks that the Solicitor General's historical recollection is correct and that mine is at fault. He might be right, but in the end it is a fairly minor point in the great scheme of things.

The Solicitor General: *Hansard* will come to our rescue, I have no doubt, Mr Speaker.

Going back to the important point made by my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton), in the end this is a policy decision made by the Government after looking at a range of options. This is a matter of politics, and to try and dress it up in a way that would be unhelpful, inappropriate and, frankly, misleading to the public is not how we should conduct ourselves.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The Solicitor General has been pugnacious in his responses this morning, and it makes me wonder what he has to hide. We are about to make one of the momentous decisions Parliament has ever had to make on behalf of our country; surely we should have time to consider over the weekend the legal advice that the Government got?

The Solicitor General: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that when he hears the Attorney General and reads the documents on the next sitting day, he will have ample time between then and the vote, which will not be until 11 December, to assess the information, ask more questions about it, probe the Government and come to an informed view. That is what I want him and all hon. Members to have, and that is what they are going to get.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): I have the utmost respect for the Attorney General, but does the Solicitor General agree that if we went to Chancery Lane we could get another opinion that would completely contradict his own remarks?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend knows that the documentation—the withdrawal agreement and the future relationship document—is all out there in the ether for the public and for informed and, shall I say, less well informed commentators to make observations about. There is a plethora of opinion, some of it legal, out there, and my hon. Friend makes that point very well.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Solicitor General referred in an earlier answer to the legal advice that was published on the Iraq war, and he said that was exceptional. I think we are currently in more exceptional times than ever before, and publishing the full legal advice for all Members of this House to see before they cast their vote on a decision that is going to affect generations to come is absolutely vital.

The Solicitor General: The hon. Lady makes a proper point, but there is another important distinction to be drawn between today's scenario and the Iraq war. With regard to the Iraq war, a decision was made by Government as to whether or not to use armed force in another country. The legality or otherwise of that decision was clearly a material and key issue as to whether or not an action should be taken. This is now a different set of circumstances: a Government taking a policy decision based on a range of outcomes, with potential risks and outcomes that would result. It is wholly different. I do not think, with respect to the hon. Lady, that the precedent of Iraq is appropriate.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Is not maintaining the principle of legal privilege also essential to maintaining the confidence of every citizen in this country who seeks advice from a lawyer that they can expect the justice for which this country is globally renowned?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend, as a lawyer, knows that all too well. I have already explained the double importance of professional privilege and the constitutional centrality of the Law Officers' convention.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): This is commonly described as the most important decision that this House has made since the second world war. The Government refuse to publish the legal advice despite Parliament agreeing that they should do so, and they refuse to publish the economic analysis despite previously agreeing to do so. This is a blindfold Brexit with no clarity for our economy, our agriculture or our working rights. Does the Minister seriously expect us to vote for it blindfold?

The Solicitor General: I can assure the hon. Lady that she will not be voting for it blindfold. Whatever her final decision might be, she will be in a position, come the vote, to have heard the Attorney General, to have

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read the Government's position and to fully understand and appreciate the issues at stake. I know that she will do all that and make her decision.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): Despite the Welsh origins of the Solicitor General, does he agree that there is no wizardry in legal advice, that it is simply the accumulation of the collected knowledge of our culture, history and agreed norms, and that in many ways we can read all that in the press that we are seeing every day? We may seek legal advice in this place, but I have been given tons for free by every lawyer in the country, as far as I can tell. Does he therefore agree that the Attorney General's advice is relevant, but not essential?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend puts the context of all this admirably well.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Instead of expressing faux outrage from the Dispatch Box, the Solicitor General could have shown some backbone and voted against the motion. We have had more than two years of the UK Government telling us that no deal is better than a bad deal, but now suddenly the deal that is on the table is the only show in town and we are being told that no deal would be an unmitigated disaster. Given the Government's ineptitude over this entire process, how are we supposed to believe their position statement on impartial legal advice?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Gentleman talks about backbone. It is time for him and his colleagues to show some backbone and to back a deal that serves the interests of Scotland, Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom in a way that could not be achieved by any other Prime Minister.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): For the avoidance of doubt, will my hon. and learned Friend advise the House on what the role of the Attorney General is in advising the Government and this House?

The Solicitor General: As I think most hon. and right hon. Members know, the role of the Attorney General is to be the Government's chief legal adviser. He has a role in advising the Cabinet. He is not a member of the Cabinet but he attends Cabinet. The advice that might or might not be given can assist in collective Cabinet decision making. He is the lawyer, and his client is the Government. That lawyer-client relationship allows for

the lawyer to provide impartial and proper legal advice, unencumbered by political considerations. That is why the convention exists. That is why it must be maintained.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): The Solicitor General was in post at the time and will know the answer to this question. Did the Prime Minister ask the opinion of the Attorney General, as laid down under the clear requirements of the ministerial code, which insists that, in respect of critical legal considerations, all Ministers must ask the opinion of the Attorney General "in good time" before the considerations are implemented by the Cabinet? I ask that both in respect of the Chequers proposals on 6 July, when the Cabinet was clearly bounced, and in respect of the incompatibility of the withdrawal agreement with the withdrawal Act and the express repeal of the European Communities Act 1972, before the signature of the withdrawal agreement over the weekend?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend will know the answer that I must give, which is that the convention applies. I can neither confirm nor deny the position with regard to the Attorney General as to the issue that he raises.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I hope that the Solicitor General is correct in his interpretation of the Humble Address motion and the Government's response to it, but if he is wrong, the House might well bring proceedings of contempt against the Government, which is the most serious charge that the House can bring. When was the last time that a Government were held to be in contempt of the House of Commons?

The Solicitor General: I am not going to start speculating in reply to my hon. Friend's question. It would not be right of me; this is a matter for Parliament. I would like to think that people understand that my respect and support for this place know no equal.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Can my hon. and learned Friend confirm that, as every lawyer knows, advice depends on the quality of the questions sought? Can he therefore assure us that he or our right hon. and learned Friend the Attorney General will set out on Monday all the questions in respect of which advice has been given to the Government, so that we can be sure that all the right questions have been asked?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend knows our right hon. and learned Friend the Attorney General, and I can assure him that in response to any question he asks, he will get the most comprehensive of answers, for free.

Business of the House

11.11 am

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

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): The business for next week will be:

MONDAY 3 DECEMBER—Second Reading of the Crime (Overseas Production Orders) Bill [*Lords*].

TUESDAY 4 DECEMBER—Proceedings on a business motion relating to section 13(1)(b) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 followed by debate on section 13(1)(b) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 (day 1).

WEDNESDAY 5 DECEMBER—Continuation of debate on section 13(1)(b) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 (day 2).

THURSDAY 6 DECEMBER—Continuation of debate on section 13(1)(b) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 (day 3).

FRIDAY 7 DECEMBER—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the following week will include:

MONDAY 10 DECEMBER—Continuation of debate on section 13(1)(b) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 (day 4).

TUESDAY 11 DECEMBER—Conclusion of debate on section 13(1)(b) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 (day 5).

WEDNESDAY 12 DECEMBER—Consideration of Lords amendments.

THURSDAY 13 DECEMBER—General debate on public health model to reduce youth violence.

FRIDAY 14 DECEMBER—The House will not be sitting.

Colleagues will also wish to know that, subject to the progress of business, the House will rise for the Easter recess at the close of business on Thursday 4 April 2019 and return on Tuesday 23 April 2019.

Small Business Saturday reaches millions of customers and businesses every year. I encourage everyone out and about doing their Christmas shopping this weekend to support their local high streets, which do so much to keep our communities thriving. Also, Saturday is World AIDS Day. Over 100,000 people are living with HIV in the UK alone, and globally there are nearly 37 million people who have the virus. This is an opportunity for people worldwide to unite in the fight against HIV. Finally, may I wish everyone, in particular all our colleagues north of the border, a very happy St Andrew's Day for tomorrow?

Valerie Vaz: May I thank the Leader of the House and say "Hallelujah"? We are rising on my niece Anjali's birthday, so I will not forget that.

The Leader of the House has helpfully set out the timetable for the debate in the coming weeks—it is the first time that we have had two weeks for some time—but what chaos in the run-up to the debate. Let us start with the debate. After struggling to clarify what will happen on the business motion, could the Leader of the House finally agree that the Government have now conceded the recommendation in the Procedure Committee's report

that the Government take the amendments first before the Government's main motion? We have now heard from the Solicitor General, who is very excellent in his role, about the legal advice, but why does it take an urgent question to fulfil the will of Parliament? This is not about the legal advice on an everyday matter; it is of major constitutional significance to our future. The House has asked for the legal advice that was given to the Government. The Government have taken the legal advice and now they are saying that they will formulate that, along with every other advice, and give us the Government's legal position. That is not what was asked for.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) mentioned the motion and I will read it out again:

"that the following papers be laid before Parliament: any legal advice in full, including that provided by the Attorney General, on the proposed withdrawal agreement".

That is very narrow. It is not about everything that the Government need to do. So in my view, the Government are not interpreting the Humble Address as passed by the House. A position statement can exclude that part of the advice that states that the Government may or may not be acting appropriately, or the consequences of the way in which the Government act. We need clarity and transparency. This is in the national interest. We govern in the people's name, not in our own name.

And there is no economic analysis on what we are going to vote for. There seems to be an economic analysis on every other model, except the ones on the deal. If the Government are prepared to do that, which shows that we will be in a worse position unless we stay in the EU, the Government should publish the legal advice in full. Could the Leader of the House go back to the Cabinet and confirm today that, as a member of the Privy Council, she will follow the directions of Her Majesty and provide the legal advice, as requested? Otherwise the Government, like Zuckerberg, will just be treating Parliament with contempt. That is what is going to happen.

I turn the Leader of the House's attention to the statutory instruments. According to the Government's own deadline, as set out in the 25 October letter from the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris)—I do not think he is in the Chamber—they have until tomorrow to lay almost 50% of the Brexit SIs that they said they would lay in November. The Government have so far laid only 73 Brexit SIs in November, which is well below the 150 to 200 they said they would lay this month. We have had 55% of the time and only 22% of the SIs have been laid. Can the Leader of the House please say whether the Government will be on track to meet their own target?

In her statement on Monday, the Prime Minister said of her deal:

"It takes back control of our borders, and ends the free movement of people".—[*Official Report*, 26 November 2018; Vol. 650, c. 23.]

She said that right at the start, as one of the most important parts of the deal, yet can the Leader of the House say when the immigration White Paper will be published? The Prime Minister was asked and she could not respond. All we have had so far is the Migration Advisory Committee's report.

[Valerie Vaz]

The Prime Minister also said that she has a shopping list that is longer than the Opposition's six tests, but she failed to say that a growing number of British citizens are taking their shopping list to food banks. The Opposition have a shopping list of our own for how we want to transform society when we are in government, and ending child poverty is at the top. I hope that the Leader of the House will remind the Prime Minister that the Leader of the Opposition has written to her about the report of the United Nations representative, Professor Alston, on his visit to the UK. I know the Leader of the House will be interested, because Professor Alston mentioned Northamptonshire in his report. He described the Government's approach to social security as "punitive" and "mean-spirited" and he highlighted the hardships facing disabled people. That is why my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) wanted to remind us that yesterday was the United Nations International Day of Disabled Persons.

Welfare has been cut since 2010 and £28 billion has been cut from social security for disabled people. Disabled student's allowance has helped many students find their talent—rather than restricting it as the Government have done. The Government are asking students to stump up £200 before they even get DSA. When will the Government publish the evaluation of the impact of recent changes to DSA? It was due to report in late summer. The Leader of the House is a fan of "Game of Thrones." Now that winter is coming, can we have that evaluation report?

Last week I mentioned Harry Leslie Smith, who was not well. He has since died, and so has Baroness Trumpington. They were the world's oldest rebels. Let us hear what Harry Leslie Smith said:

"We have become enamoured by the escapism populist politics provides, where we can fit the blame of our woes on migrants or big institutions".

He also said:

"We have resisted the darkness that comes to societies that are decayed by their contempt of democracy",

whether outside or in this House. I want to mention those who have shone a light into the darkness, following Harry Leslie Smith, particularly those who won at the Political Studies Association awards on Tuesday: Amelia Gentleman, who shone the light in her work on Windrush; Carole Cadwalladr, who has shone the light into the darkness of our democracy; my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), who was politician of the year; and my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson), who was parliamentarian of the year. This House applauds and salutes them.

Andrea Leadsom: I am glad the hon. Lady is pleased that she gets to spend her niece's birthday with her when the House rises for Easter—that is excellent news. I am also delighted to join her in congratulating all those who won awards for their contribution to making our society a better place and in commemorating Harry Leslie Smith and Baroness Trumpington, both of whom made such a big impact in their contributions to society.

The hon. Lady asked about the recommendations of the Procedure Committee and whether the proposed business motion on the meaningful vote addresses them.

I can say that, yes, that is the case, in so far as time constraints and practicalities allow in both Houses. The Procedure Committee recommended that amendments should be taken before the main motion is considered and that there should be a minimum of five full days for debate, both of which are happening. The House should be pleased about that.

On the Humble Address, I want to reiterate that we absolutely recognise that there is a legitimate desire in Parliament, from Members in all parts, to understand the legal implications of the deal once it is finalised. The Government will make information available to all Members of the House; there will be a full reasoned position statement laying out the Government's legal position on the withdrawal agreement. Equally, the hon. Lady will know, as a lawyer herself, that it is a fundamental and long-standing principle of our system of government that Law Officers' advice is not published without their consent.

The hon. Lady asked about economic analysis on the deal. I am not entirely sure, but she seems to be suggesting that the economic analysis includes everything other than the deal that is on the table. That is not the case; the withdrawal agreement and political declaration economic analysis is, in fact, included in the analysis that has been put out by the Treasury. She asked about statutory instruments. She is right to say that as of 27 November, 185 Brexit SIs have been laid so far, with 79 so far in November. We expect a total of 120 to 130 by the end of this month. She is right to point out that that is a bit below the 150 to 200 figure outlined by the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris), in his letter to the sifting Committee. However, as I have tried to make clear at all times, we are getting a firm grip on secondary legislation, and I remain confident that we will get all of the secondary legislation that we need to do through in time for departure date. The number of SIs is below what we originally thought; we now think the total number could be up to 700, but I am confident we will remain in a good place to get all of that passed in time.

The hon. Lady made mention of the Prime Minister's shopping list. No doubt the Prime Minister is very busy at the moment and is paring her grocery shopping back to the bare limit, but the hon. Lady makes an important point about food banks. Everyone in this House pays tribute to those who contribute to the efforts of civic society to contribute to the food poor. People use food banks for many and varied reasons, and the Government are constantly reviewing research carried out by organisations, including great organisations such as the Trussell Trust, to add to our understanding of food bank use. However, I must point out to her that, in terms of where our society is, since 2010 there are 1 million fewer people in absolute poverty—it is at a record low; there are 300,000 fewer children in absolute poverty, which is another record low; and there are 500,000 fewer working-age adults in absolute poverty, which is a record low. Those are things we can be proud of. This is in addition to the amazing performance of our economy, with more than 3 million more jobs since 2010. That means more people with the security of a pay packet able to support their own family and an improving standard of living.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on relations between the Maldives and the United Kingdom? Following the defeat of President Gayoom in 2008, there have been endless arguments about the legitimacy of succeeding Presidents. Now that President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih has been elected emphatically, I hope that the Maldives will rejoin the Commonwealth and that we can restore full diplomatic relations with the country.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an excellent point. We were very pleased that our non-resident ambassador to the Maldives represented the UK at the presidential oath-of-office ceremony in Malé on 17 November. We certainly welcomed President Solih's announcement that his Government would commence steps to rejoin the Commonwealth. We also welcome his Government's announcement on the freeing of political prisoners and launching of investigations into corruption, fraud and money laundering. Under previous regimes, democratic freedoms were restricted, but we stand ready to work with the new Administration to improve on the situation.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week. Given that it is St Andrew's Day tomorrow, I say to you, Mr Speaker: lang may yer lum reek.

It is coming at last, a bit like Christmas without Santa or the festivities, and with everybody just that bit poorer: yes, Brexit vote day is almost here, with a generous five days to debate the so-called meaningful vote on the Government's Brexit deal, which has about as much chance of getting through as I have of becoming Lord Speaker or a Church of England bishop. It is already a diseased deal. Like the great Norwegian blue parrot, this is a deal that will not even be pining for the Norwegian fjords. It will not even be pining for a Norway-plus deal. This deal, like that great comic parrot of yore, has just about squawked its last and is about to go and meet its maker.

The only question is how we do all this. I am grateful to the Leader of the House for her response about how the votes are going to progress: the process will follow the Procedure Committee's recommendation that amendments are taken first. Will she confirm that it will not be a binary choice between the devil and the deep blue sea, and that an amended motion, if that is what the House wants, will be put to the House on 11 December? We need to know exactly what is going to be in line before we start the debate next week.

It now looks likely that the European Court of Justice—an institution so beloved of many of my Brexiter friends on the Government Benches—will judge that the UK and the Government can unilaterally halt article 50. Are we now, then, beginning to get to the stage at which we can start to abandon this madness and retain the living standards that we all enjoy and the access that we have to our friends in Europe?

Lastly, the Prime Minister is trailing round the country trying to drum up support for her already doomed deal. Yesterday, she was in Scotland, drumming up opposition to her deal: opposition to it in Scotland now stands at

almost 70%. Scotland has been ignored and disrespected for the two long years of this process, and the Government have not even started to address our concerns. In the next few days, we will consider this almost pointless debate about a meaningless vote for which the conclusion has already been reached. We on the Scottish National party Benches will never support any arrangement that makes our country poorer.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman alludes to that parrot, which he will remember had snuffed it. This parrot is the only one in the aviary, so it is worth serious consideration.

He says that there is no support for the deal in Scotland, so what about Bertie Armstrong, chief executive of the Scottish Fishermen's Federation, who says:

"The declaration gives the UK the power to assert its position as an independent Coastal State with full, unfettered sovereignty over our waters and natural resources"?

Perhaps the hon. Gentleman does not care too much about Scottish fishing.

How about the Scotch Whisky Association chief executive Karen Betts, who says:

"The provisions set out in the Withdrawal Agreement provide us with a credible foundation on which to build in the next phase of the negotiations, during which a number of critical issues remain to be resolved"?

Perhaps the hon. Gentleman does not care about Scottish whisky.

How about Liz Cameron, chief executive of Scottish Chambers of Commerce, who says:

"After two and a half years, business communities across Scotland and the UK, will welcome the Cabinet-backed draft Withdrawal Agreement"?

Perhaps he does not care about Scottish commerce.

Finally, how about the president of the National Farmers' Union Scotland, Andrew McCornick, who says:

"The draft Brexit Withdrawal Agreement, while not perfect"—

I certainly agree with that—

"will ensure that there are no hard barriers on the day we leave the European Union, and will allow trade in agricultural goods and UK food & drink to continue throughout the transition period largely as before."

It is superb news that United Kingdom businesses and people will be well served by this deal. It is the only parrot that is available to us, and parliamentarians need to get behind it.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Diabetes is a plague across our nation. A total of 3.7 million people suffer from it—numerous in each of our constituencies—and that number has doubled in the past 20 years. Together with its consequent medical conditions, diabetes is life-limiting and, for many, life-ending. Perhaps most shockingly of all, the number of children diagnosed with diabetes has grown to record levels. Will the Leader of the House allow a debate on the subject of diabetes? It would allow us to explore how it can be prevented, diagnosed more quickly and treated more effectively. Our Prime Minister, with typical fortitude and resolve, copes with diabetes. The deputy leader of the Labour party has boldly fought it off. A debate would allow us to explore how more people can deal with it, cope with it and defeat it.

Andrea Leadsom: I completely agree with my right hon. Friend that this is a terrible condition that is affecting growing numbers of people and, as he rightly points out, growing numbers of children. My own husband suffers from diabetes, and we know the Prime Minister suffers from it. Many people live with it on a day-to-day basis and it is a very, very serious problem for them. I would certainly welcome such a debate, and he might well like to seek a Westminster Hall debate in the near future so that all colleagues can discuss the condition.

Mr Speaker: I take this opportunity to acknowledge that the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) is now not merely a man of Lincolnshire; he is a knight of Lincolnshire. Try as I do, I can scarcely keep up with his status and achievements.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): The Backbench Business Committee is starting to feel like the Norwegian blue parrot. If it were not for the fact that it had been nailed to the perch, it would be pushing up daisies. To quote John Cleese, it would have “shuffled off” its mortal coil and gone to join the “choir invisible.”

We knew that we would not get Thursday 6 December, because this House will be discussing other matters that day, but the Committee was informed on Tuesday by some of its Conservative members that they had received communications from their own Chief Whip that the Committee would be allocated time on Thursday 13 December. Not being a body that is readily willing to dismiss the word of the Government Chief Whip, the Committee pre-allocated debates for that day, and we are now told, through the business statement today, that we will not get 13 December. By 13 December, it will be eight weeks since we have had Back-Bench time in this Chamber. I look forward to meeting the Leader of the House in early December to try to rectify this hiatus, but it is becoming overdue.

Andrea Leadsom: I am incredibly sympathetic to the hon. Gentleman. Let me make a brief comment about the report he gave about becoming aware of business from some Conservative members of the Committee. He will know that it is not unusual for Governments to make Members aware of likely business of constitutional importance or that require significant time commitments to try to be helpful to them. However, to be absolutely clear, that is always only provisional. The only time that business of this House is confirmed is on a Thursday morning at business questions in the Chamber, as it quite rightly should be. I fully understand his desire to ensure that his Committee has time to schedule its business in the Chamber. I am grateful to him for his letter and I look forward to meeting him in the near future to talk about his requirements. He will appreciate, however, that many hon. Members have been seeking a debate on the public health approach to serious violence for some time, so when it came to a choice with one day available, I had to prioritise the many competing demands and choose in favour of the significant problem of serious violence.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I understand that the police funding settlement for next year will be published next week, as will the local authority funding settlement, yet I see that there is no opportunity for a debate in the business to be transacted for the next

two weeks. Clearly, the decision on leaving the European Union is vital, but will my right hon. Friend find time for us to debate these very important issues, which are fundamental to the policing and local government of this country?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend makes a good point. He will appreciate that there is very important and time-constrained business over the next fortnight. We do, however, have Home Office questions on Monday 3 December, and I hope that he will take the opportunity to raise his concerns then.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab)
rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. It was a great pleasure for me to be able to present the hon. Lady her award, courtesy of the Political Studies Association, as Back Bencher of the year—a recognition of her extraordinarily diligent and effective parliamentary campaigning, specifically on the contaminated blood scandal. My sense was that that award to her was extraordinarily warmly received both at the dinner on Tuesday night and in many other quarters.

Diana Johnson: Thank you, Mr Speaker. When you presented the award to me, I thought you were trying very hard not to say, “She’s actually quite a bloody difficult woman and she’s not going to go away,” but I appreciated your remarks very much.

On Remembrance Sunday, BBC 2 broadcast the stunning Peter Jackson film, “They Shall Not Grow Old”, showing conditions on the frontline in world war one. I understand that the film was funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and the BBC. It is certain to become an important educational tool as we explain to the younger generations what happened in world war one. Unfortunately, it was only then on BBC iPlayer for seven days—as I understand it, because of the rights connected to the film. I wonder whether the Leader of the House might make representations to the Ministry of Defence, the Department for Education and the DCMS to see whether we can get the film back on BBC iPlayer, because it needs to be seen by as many members of the public as possible.

Andrea Leadsom: First, Mr Speaker, let me say that I share your delight at the hon. Lady’s award. She has certainly been a stalwart in this place, raising the issue of contaminated blood sufferers, and she has been absolutely right to do so. I totally value all the bloody difficult women in this place—and long may they continue to be so.

The hon. Lady typically raises a very important point in which all hon. Members will be interested. I would be happy to write to the DCMS on her behalf, but she will also be aware that we have DCMS questions on 13 December, and I recommend that she raise the matter then.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): As the Leader of the House is aware, Somerset is a blackspot for broadband. One of the problems is that a lot of the installers are being accused and blamed. The situation actually—this is the topic on which I

would like a debate—is that one land agent has been pushing farmers not to sign up until they get an awful lot of money for allowing wayleaves. The agent, Greenslade Taylor Hunt, has recently been done for price-fixing—a huge amount of money. Broadband is almost a right now. If we do not allow people to get it and we cannot use statutory powers to get it to isolated places such as Exmoor, we are failing in our duty. Can we have time to discuss this issue?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend will be aware that the Government are committed to full fibre connections for the majority of homes and businesses by 2025, with a nationwide full fibre network by 2033. However, I do share his concern about some rural areas. There are many rural areas in my own constituency where the signal simply drops out. I recommend that he raise his specific points at Local Government questions on 10 December.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Following on from the point about police funding raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), we in the Humberside police area have a particular problem with the pension contributions that the force may have to make, which could result in the loss of all our police community support officers. The Home Secretary was good enough to meet Humberside MPs earlier this week, but we could do with an opportunity to discuss the issue further. Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is right to raise this very important issue. He will be aware that we have provided the capacity for police and crime commissioners to access an extra £460 million this financial year. He will also be aware that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is determined to review the funding formula properly this year to make sure that police officers do have the resources that they need. We have Home Office questions on 3 December, and I encourage my hon. Friend to take the matter up there.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Earlier this month, two people were stabbed to death in my constituency, including a 15-year-old child. Locally we have seen cuts to the police, child and adolescent mental health services, schools and youth services. I very much welcome the general debate on youth violence, but can the Leader of the House confirm that Ministers from across Departments will attend that debate to ensure that we have joined-up, cross-departmental approach to youth violence?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises an incredibly important issue. I think that all our hearts go out to the victims of knife crime, particularly those young people who have died in such appalling circumstances. She will be aware that getting young people out of a life of crime leading to serious violence is both a priority for the Government and a core part of our serious violence strategy. That, as she will be aware, is precisely why I am giving Government time for this debate in a couple of weeks.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): May we have an urgent debate on the totally unacceptable lack of regulation of 16-plus children's homes? This really matters for two reasons. First, many vulnerable

children are in huge danger because they are not properly supervised and they run away a great many times. Secondly, there is a huge waste of police time going into finding these children, which means that our police officers are not available to other residents when they are needed.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is right to raise this very serious matter. The same legislation and regulations apply to provision for those over the age of 16, and we do expect local authorities to safeguard these children in the same way they would any looked-after child. It is for Ofsted to challenge those that are not meeting their duties. I hope he will welcome the fact that we are investing part of our £200 million children's social care innovation programme in projects in London, where demand for placements outstrips supply, to increase councils' capacity so that fewer children are placed far away from home. He might like to seek an Adjournment debate to raise the matters specific to his constituency and to get a response directly from Ministers.

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): It is welcome news that male suicide is at its lowest rate since records were first collected in 1981, but while this is encouraging, we cannot overlook the fact that there were still 4,382 male suicides registered last year. One such death is one too many. May we have a debate on what steps the Government, and indeed all of us, can take to further reduce the stigma around men's mental health and to encourage men to open up and seek help when they are struggling and when they are in despair?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising such a vital issue. She will be aware that the Government are investing significantly more—a record £12 billion—and are taking more action on mental health than any previous Government. In the Budget, the Chancellor announced that an additional £2 billion will go to funding mental health by 2023-24. For the first time, the NHS will be working towards standards for mental health that are just as ambitious as those for physical health. The hon. Lady might also be pleased to know that we have committed £1.8 million for the Samaritans helpline over the next four years, so that when people do want to talk, there is someone there to listen. It is an absolutely vital issue, and I know that all Members are committed to doing everything we can to solve the problem.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): In recent weeks, unfortunately, there have been a number of serious knife crimes in Crawley, including a murder. Even though I welcome the Sussex police and crime commissioner recruiting 200 extra officers and the Third Reading of the Offensive Weapons Bill last night, can we have a statement from the Home Secretary on county lines drug running? These incidents are all related to drug gangs from outside the constituency. I endorse what the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) requested.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises the appalling problem of the spike in serious violence related to county lines and, in particular, knife crime. Tackling county lines is a huge priority for the Government. Our serious violence strategy includes a range of actions to

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enhance our response to the issue. For example, we have established a new national county lines co-ordination centre, to enhance the intelligence picture and support cross-border efforts to tackle county lines. There is also funding for community projects, to encourage young people out of serious violence. I am sure my hon. Friend will want to take part in the debate we will have in two weeks' time.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Mr Speaker, I hope you will not mind if I thank the Leader of the House for securing a debate on tackling youth violence with a public health model. I have just one ask of that debate. Can we ensure that all the Ministers from all the relevant Departments are here to listen, if not respond, to the debate? That is a key point of the public health model and approach.

Andrea Leadsom: First, I would like to pay tribute to the hon. Lady for her superb pushing of this issue—she is absolutely right to have done that—and her excellent contribution on the radio this morning, which I know many Members heard. I take on board what she says and will try to ensure that as many Ministers as possible are here to hear at least the opening of the debate.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): In less than two weeks, the UK is due to attend the intergovernmental conference in Marrakesh, to adopt the global compact for safe, orderly and regular migration. Many of my constituents have emailed me to say they are concerned that signing the pact will encourage economic migration, reduce national sovereignty and weaken our border controls. With countries such as Switzerland and Italy refusing to sign until their Parliaments have debated the issue, and with allies such as the US, Israel and Australia refusing to participate, will the Government find time for a debate on that important matter before the pact is signed on our behalf?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an important matter. He is right to have a care to issues around the protection of refugees, but also the importance of the integrity of national borders. We have Foreign Office questions on Tuesday 4 December, and I recommend that he raise the matter then.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Ind): Early-day motions are a vital component of political expression for Back-Bench Members of this House and thus for our wider democracy. In recent times, however, the EDM service has been progressively diminished, such that new motions now disappear from listing in the blue pages very quickly, and there is no consolidated list of recent EDMs printed each week. Will the Leader of the House use her good offices to press the House authorities to restore the EDM service to its former strength and ensure its long-term future?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that issue. I am not aware of it, and I am certainly happy to look into it on his behalf.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): May we have a statement on the extent of the use of certificates of exemption under section 34 of the Freedom of

Information Act by Officers of the House and whether such exemptions could be used to stop disclosure of important issues such as bullying in this place?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises a very important issue. He will be aware that section 34 exemptions can be incredibly valuable in protecting free and open debate between advisers, Ministers and Members of Parliament. However, he is right to raise concerns about the proper use of such exemptions, and I encourage him to seek a Westminster Hall debate so that Members can share their views.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): On 5 November, a 98-year-old man was seriously assaulted in his home and remains in hospital following an aggravated burglary in my constituency. Since then, there have been subsequent burglaries and serious crimes committed in my constituency. Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate on police funding and the rise in crime nationally?

Andrea Leadsom: I am so sorry to hear about that. I am sure that was an appalling experience, and I am sure that all of us would want to send our best wishes to the hon. Gentleman's constituent.

The hon. Gentleman has raised again the problem of serious knife crime, and I think the whole House shares that concern. That is why we are going to have a debate in two weeks' time, and I do hope he will take part in it. As he will be aware, we have a serious violence taskforce. It is very clearly focused on trying to reduce the appalling incidents of knife crime, looking at prevention methods wherever possible to discourage young people from such an approach. In addition, I am sure he will welcome the fact that the Offensive Weapons Bill completed its stages in the House yesterday. We do therefore have some more measures that will prevent young people from accessing serious weapons that cause so much damage.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): The Dame Laura Cox report shone a spotlight on the need for transparency, honesty and openness in this place on issues that are of concern to Members across the House and, indeed, to the country as a whole. My right hon. Friend the Leader of the House will know that I have some residual concerns about the robustness and efficacy of the House of Commons Commission in dealing with these matters. I have described it in previous exchanges as a cross between the Magic Circle and the College of Cardinals. Will she guarantee a debate in Government time on the rules and terms of reference of the Commission to ensure that it is fit for purpose and meets the much higher bar of expectation—both in this place and in the country as a whole—of the standards now upon us?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an issue in which I know the House of Commons Commission itself has shown some interest. I believe it wishes to be as transparent and open as possible. Certainly, from very preliminary discussions about the Cox report, I believe that Dame Laura's view that serious reform is necessary has fallen on fertile ground. I think that we will be able to make further progress on that in due course.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

On Monday, I attended the launch of the GMB "Work to Stop Domestic Abuse" charter, and we heard some incredibly powerful testimonies from survivors of domestic abuse. The charter is an aide-mémoire to encourage employers to take action, including by offering paid leave to survivors and victims of domestic violence, offering policies and toolkits in the workplace, and empowering staff to take action and seek help if they are suffering domestic abuse. May we have a debate on how we can encourage other employers to take up this much needed charter?

Andrea Leadsom: First, I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for her work in this area. She is absolutely right that we need to do everything we can to protect people from domestic violence, and employers can certainly do a lot more. I too have been very interested in supporting campaigns that seek to have employers take a much stronger interest in this issue. She will be aware that the Government have carried out a consultation on a domestic violence Bill, and we will bring forward draft legislation soon. We have also committed funding of £100 million to services for preventing violence against women and girls, to support organisations that are tackling domestic violence and abuse, including £8 million to support children. We all agree that there is much more to be done, but I think we are all on the same side.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): We are about to embark next week on one of the most important debates that this House has ever had to undertake. We are going to have 32 hours of debate over the five days, which allows roughly four minutes per Back Bencher if every one of them wants to speak, allowing for the payroll vote. Through the Leader of the House, may I ask the usual channels to discuss the possibility of sitting until 10 pm on Tuesday and Wednesday next week and perhaps even sitting a little bit later on Thursday, as well as the possibility of a Friday sitting and of starting earlier on the following Monday? That could add at least 15 hours to the debate and allow Back Benchers to get more than a few minutes each. I have not even taken out the time for Front-Bench contributions in those calculations. The time for Back Benchers to speak in that debate will be very tight, so please could we consider doing that?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the business of the House motion proposal has been tabled and is available in today's remaining orders. The Government are determined to provide plenty of time for debate ahead of the meaningful vote on 11 December, and I hope colleagues will recognise that in providing five days of debate and specifying that the House should consider amendments ahead of the main question, they have sought to be helpful to the House. There will be a debate on the proceedings for the meaningful vote, during which the hon. Gentleman will be able to make his representations.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I am recruiting for a parliamentary researcher in Westminster, and I want that position to be open to applicants from all backgrounds and regions. An applicant from the greatest city in the world, Newcastle, was put off by the absence of any support for relocation to work here as a

member of staff, although such support is available for Members of Parliament. Does the Leader of the House agree that this place must be open to people from all backgrounds and regions as both members of staff and Members of Parliament, and may we have a debate on how to make that a reality?

Andrea Leadsom: I certainly agree that we want as diverse a range of candidates as possible to come forward to work in this place. The hon. Lady will be aware that through the working group on harassment and bullying we have done a lot to ensure that when people come to this place and start working here, they get the training and support they need, and all the help that they can use to enable their job to be successful. On the hon. Lady's specific point about help with the costs of relocating to Parliament, I am happy to discuss that with her separately if she would like to write to me.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): I am sure all parliamentarians agree that one of the most important pillars of a modern democracy is freedom of the press. There seems to be an exception, however, because yesterday on her visit to Scotland the Prime Minister refused one of our biggest newspapers access to a press event. Today, *The National* quite rightly ran a front page with a silhouette of the Prime Minister, and it has refused to cover the story. May we have an urgent statement from the Prime Minister to explain her reason for refusing access to *The National*, and to explain in this House the importance of a free press?

Andrea Leadsom: I am not aware of the particular situation that the hon. Gentleman describes, but during the past two weeks, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has spent more than nine and a half hours at the Dispatch Box, in the seat of our democracy in Parliament, taking questions from right hon. and hon. Members across the House who represent the interests of their constituents. To suggest that somehow she has not been accessible would be very, very short of the mark.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): A constituent was diagnosed with a glioma brain tumour in 2013, and she was given between three and five years to live. There is no treatment, but currently she is stable. She moved house and found a smart meter in place, and she has become extremely anxious and fearful about microwave radiation from that smart meter exacerbating the brain tumour. She went to British Gas and asked for it to be removed, but it refused, so she came to me. British Gas sent the most awful reply, basically refusing to remove the meter. May we have a debate about the responsibility of utility companies to consider people with serious medical conditions who have concerns and anxieties about issues such as smart meters, and to meet their consumer protection duties?

Andrea Leadsom: I am so sorry to hear about the illness of the hon. Lady's constituent, and I am glad that she turned to the hon. Lady to seek help. I am sure she will have dealt with the issue in her usual forthright way. She raises an important point, which is that private sector businesses and public sector services need to deal with the unique circumstances in which some of our constituents find themselves. I am sympathetic to

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her concerns, and I encourage her to seek either an Adjournment debate on that specific point, or a more general debate about consumer protection in Westminster Hall.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): On 14 November the Prime Minister told me in the Chamber that she is

“sure the Post Office is making decisions that it believes are right for local communities and to ensure that services are there where they are needed.”—[*Official Report*, 14 November 2018; Vol. 649, c. 310.]

It will come as no surprise to many that I disagree with the Prime Minister. May we have a debate in Government time to discuss Post Office decisions and their effect on our local communities?

Andrea Leadsom: I have to say to the hon. Lady that I am a big fan of post offices. In my constituency, their opening hours are far superior to those of banks. Where the “last bank in town” issue has been a problem in my constituency, the post office, which offers basic banking services for all the major retail banks, has stood them in good stead.

The hon. Lady will be aware that the Government have invested significant sums in Crown post offices and that they are not reducing, in aggregate, the availability of post office services to the public. Whenever the provision of services changes, the Post Office must consult widely. If the hon. Lady finds that that has not been her experience I encourage her to raise that in an Adjournment debate, so that she can discuss it directly with Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Ministers.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): The Leader of the House confirmed in her earlier remarks that the Attorney General could consent to the release of his advice to the Government on the Brexit deal if he deemed it expedient. Given the nature of the decision we are taking, is she not at all concerned that, should the full legal advice not be made available despite concerns about precedent, there is a real danger that history will look back at something that was not disclosed at the time and look very heavily at the decision taken by the Government?

Andrea Leadsom: As I said earlier, the Government will make available to all Members a full reasoned position statement laying out the Government’s legal position on the withdrawal agreement. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Attorney General is ready to assist further by making an oral statement on Monday. He will take questions from all Members in the normal way. I genuinely believe that will give all right hon. and hon. Members the opportunity to get the answers they are seeking.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): This is the busiest time of the year for our post offices. Our postal workers’ futures in York are being determined over a six-week period, closing on 28 December. Clearly postal workers are distracted, when they have to focus on serving us. This situation needs more than an Adjournment debate. It has impacted 74 post offices across the country, so may we have a full debate on the future of our Crown post offices?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady has raised the issue of post offices in York previously, and I absolutely commend her for doing so. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to all our hard-working postal workers, who are extremely busy at this time of year. I am sure a lot of us will be visiting them and expressing our gratitude more directly. She raises an important point, which was also raised by the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows). I encourage them both to seek a Westminster Hall debate, so that hon. Members can raise this issue directly with Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Ministers.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): As a product of the Catholic education system in Scotland, may I ask the Leader of the House to join me in celebrating the centenary of the Education Act 1918? This was the Act that saw Catholic schools transfer from diocesan control to state governance. The alumni of those schools have made an extraordinary academic, cultural, civic and social impact over the past century. I am looking forward to visiting my former school tomorrow, Turnbull High School, which, along with St Roch’s, All Saints, St Mungo’s, St Andrew’s and John Paul Academy, educates many of my young constituents. Will the Leader of the House hold a debate on the ways in which Catholic schools are good not just for Catholics but for the nation as a whole?

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Andrea Leadsom: I think the hon. Gentleman will have heard that resounding “Hear, hear” from the Government Benches. There is obviously a lot of support for his view. I am delighted to join him in marking the centenary of the Education Act 1918 and in congratulating all those schools in Scotland, which do so much to educate the next generation.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Today marks five years since the police helicopter crashed into the Clutha bar in Glasgow, killing 10 people, and Glasgow is preparing to mark it today. I would like to remember in this House those who were killed: Gary Arthur, Samuel McGhee, Colin Gibson, Robert Jenkins, Mark O’Prey, John McGarrigle, Joe Cusker, PC Kirsty Nelis, PC Tony Collins and the pilot, David Traill. My thoughts are with their families and those who were injured in the crash. Would the Leader of the House like to pay tribute to them as well?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises the tragic helicopter crash in Glasgow. All right hon. and hon. Members would want to send their condolences to the families and friends of all those who died, and we always hope and pray that such a thing never reoccurs. On this important anniversary, we send our very best wishes.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): To their credit, the Government have led on the reduction of modern slavery. The Modern Slavery Act 2015 and the announcement by the Home Office are welcome, but the Leader of the House will know that the noble Lord McColl’s Bill, the Modern Slavery (Victim Support) Bill, is currently languishing at the bottom of the list of private Members’ Bills on Fridays. Could I encourage her, through her offices, to use whatever mechanism might be available to her to allow the Bill to progress at least to Committee? Many Members across the House

would wish to support it, and I know that the Government, given their particular wording earlier in the year, would want to offer their support as well.

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising the importance of private Members' Bills. The Government certainly support the need for them and are very keen to ensure that progress is made. He will be aware that I have tabled a revised motion to give the House an additional six sitting Fridays for private Members' Bills and that the Opposition have tabled an amendment to that motion to reduce it back to five. I remain very keen for the House to have those additional days to debate private Members' Bills, and discussions continue through the usual channels.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): My constituent, James Potts, is married to a Thai national, but the immigration service has refused family visitor visas to his mother-in-law and sister-in-law. As there is no appeals process, their simply reapplying might lead to the same outcome. James has heart issues so it is difficult for him to travel to the other side of the world. With the best will in the world, if they did breach visa conditions, it would not be difficult to find them in Kilmarnock. Can we have a Government statement on why there is an automatic assumption that people will not return home and why there is no appeal process whereby MPs can assist their constituents?

Andrea Leadsom: I am extremely sympathetic to what the hon. Gentleman says. I have also had constituency cases where parents or relatives have wanted to visit but have been turned down on the ground that it is suspected that they might not go home afterwards. I recently had a success where a non-resident parent was able to come and visit, and I was sent some fabulous photos of the family reunion, so I am extremely sympathetic. I encourage him to raise this point directly at Home Office questions on 3 December.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The Leader of the House will be aware—because I ask her frequently about this—of my campaign to improve connectivity

across my constituency. This time, I am specifically concerned about the roll-out of broadband. The providers say that one issue with the geography of constituencies such as mine is that the rolling and sweeping valleys make connectivity very difficult. Could we have a debate on broadband roll-out, specifically in relation to the hardest-to-reach places, not just in rural areas but across valley communities?

Andrea Leadsom: Yes, the hon. Gentleman does occasionally raise this matter in business questions, and is absolutely right to do so. I must reiterate that I also suffer from a lack of broadband in my constituency. All of us with hard-to-reach places would sincerely sympathise with his constituents. We have DCMS questions on Thursday 13 December, and I encourage him to raise this directly with Ministers.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): A new report from the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom finds a deeply troubling rise in the amount of content in school textbooks in Saudi Arabia promoting hatred. These textbooks encourage violent and non-violent jihad against non-believers and espouse the death penalty for women who allegedly have an affair, as well as demonising Christians, Shi'a and Sufi Muslims, non-Muslims and critics of Islam. Such textbooks fuel hatred and violence in Saudi Arabia and abroad, as they consistently find their way into the hands of extremist groups such as Daesh. This increase in hateful content also raises serious questions about the Saudi Government's commitment to reform. Will the Leader of the House agree to a statement or debate on this issue?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a very important issue not just about the discrimination and persecution of people for their faith, or indeed, for not having a faith, but the way in which some of the extremist material then gets distorted and used by those who would become terror perpetrators. He is absolutely right to raise this issue. We have Home Office questions on Monday 3 December and Foreign Office questions on Tuesday 4 December, and I encourage him to raise it there.

Improving Education Standards

12.10 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): I beg to move,

That this House has considered improving education standards.

Since May 2010, the Government have been determined to drive up academic standards. Our overarching objective has been to ensure that every local school is a good school with a rigorous curriculum, higher standards of reading and maths, and with GCSE and A-level qualifications that are on a par with the qualifications used in the best performing countries in the world. Our drive has been to close the attainment gap between children from disadvantaged backgrounds and their more advantaged peers.

In 2010, just 66% of pupils were attending schools judged by Ofsted to be good or outstanding; today, that figure is 84%. We focused on improving behaviour in schools by clarifying the powers that teachers have in the classroom, by scrapping the absurd law that Labour had introduced requiring 24 hours' written notice for detention for a pupil, and we prevented headteachers' decisions over expulsions from being undermined by giving them the final say over the return of a pupil. We clamped down on poor attendance and increased the fines for parents who failed to send their children to school. We expanded the academies programme to allow any good school, including primary schools, to opt for the professional autonomy that comes with academisation, and we expedited the route to sponsored academy status for those schools that were seriously underperforming.

There are now over half a million pupils in sponsored academies rated good or outstanding—those schools typically had been chronically underperforming, so that means over half a million pupils receiving a better education. Such schools include Great Yarmouth High School, which was judged inadequate by Ofsted in 2016. It converted to sponsored academy status in 2017 and was taken over by the multi-academy Inspiration Trust with a new headteacher, Barry Smith. Within a year, the school had been transformed. In May this year, Nicholas Marshall, an academic from Sheffield Hallam University wrote:

“Numerous teachers and support staff alike mentioned that the standards of pupil behaviour in the predecessor school were appalling and dangerous and how they had felt threatened. This was not now the case.”

He went on to write:

“The support staff...recounted stories in the predecessor school of large groups of students running around the school and disrupting learning, with adults being treated with gross disrespect and threatened.”

That has all changed. Ofsted now reports that bullying has declined and that lessons take place in a calm and orderly environment.

In 2017, the predecessor school, Great Yarmouth High School, had a Progress 8 score of minus 0.57, in the bottom 12% of schools nationally, with only 6% of pupils achieving the EBacc at grade 4 and just 30% achieving a grade 4 or above in English and maths. Now, just a year after conversion to academy status, Great Yarmouth Charter Academy has 55% achieving a grade 4 or above in English and maths in its provisional GCSE results, and it intends that to rise further still.

At Downhills Primary School in Haringey in 2011, just 63% of pupils were achieving the expected standard in the old SATs in reading, writing and maths combined, compared with the national average at the time of 79%.¹ The school was judged inadequate, and in 2012, became a sponsored academy in the Harris Federation multi-academy trust. This move was bitterly opposed by the National Union of Teachers, but today, the school is judged as good by Ofsted, 78% of its pupils are achieving the expected standard in reading, writing and maths in the new more demanding SATS, compared with the national average of 61%, and 82% of its pupils are reaching the expected standard in the new reading SATs.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I agree with everything that the Minister is saying about the improvements that can come from moving to a multi-academy trust. What practical support do schools get from Government to make that transition, which can sometimes be quite difficult, including financially difficult for some?

Nick Gibb: My hon. Friend raises an important point. Grants are given to schools to help to fund the conversion process. About two thirds of secondary schools now have academy status and a significant proportion of primary schools—the figure is, I think, just under one third—have now converted to academy status.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): While the Minister is talking about the conversions to academy status, will he explain why he thinks it is fair that when schools that have a deficit in their overall funding or their budget convert to academy status, that deficit stays with the local authority, rather than going into the multi-academy trust chain? Often, that just produces an additional financial burden for local government.

Nick Gibb: The reasoning behind that decision is, of course, that the deficit arose during the period in which the school was under the control of the local authority. That is why the deficit remains with the local authority on conversion.

Gareth Snell: I thank the Minister for being so candid with his answer. Will he explain, therefore, why it is that when schools have a surplus in their revenue budgets, that money goes into the multi-academy trust chain rather than staying with the local authority, given that that surplus will also have arisen under local authority control?

Nick Gibb: The reason for that is twofold. First, the surplus is often working capital and secondly, the school may well have been saving money from their revenue funding to purchase a capital item or to build a science block, and so on, and it would be a pity for those plans not to go ahead simply because they were being converted to academy status.

In opposition, when we were developing our academies and free school policy, we also came to the view that the policy would lead to higher standards not just in academies and free schools, but in local authority maintained schools. Last year, 83% of pupils at St Bonaventure's Roman Catholic School were entered for the EBacc, up from just 33% in 2015. At St Paul's Church of England

1. [Official Report, 12 December 2018, Vol. 651, c. 2MC.]

Primary School in Staffordshire in 2014-15, only 50% of its pupils were reaching the expected standard in reading, but last year, that had risen to 87%. I am sure that I could find a lot of other examples of local authority schools that have improved their standards under this Government.

Of course, it does all begin with reading. Central to our reforms has been ensuring that all pupils are taught to read effectively. Pupils who are reading well by age five are six times more likely than their peers to be on track by age 11 in reading, and counter-intuitively, 11 times more likely to be on track in mathematics. For decades, there has been a significant body of evidence demonstrating that systematic phonics is the most effective method for teaching early reading. Phonics teaches children to associate letters with sounds, providing them with the code to unlock written English. Despite that evidence, our phonics reforms were initially met with opposition from some. They were dismissed by some critics as being a traditional approach. I make no apology for this, because phonics works. I pay particular tribute to the former Labour Mayor of Newham, Sir Robin Wales, who, in his independent way, promoted phonics and reading in Newham. Despite being an area of significant disadvantage, Newham now boasts the best phonics results in the country. Labour deselected Sir Robin as its mayoral candidate earlier this year.

In England, schools' phonics performance has significantly improved since we introduced the phonics screening check in 2012, when just 58% of six-year-olds correctly read at least 32 out of the 40 words in the check. Today that figure is 82%, which means that 163,000 more six-year-olds are on track to be fluent readers this year compared with 2012. In 2016, England achieved its highest ever score in the reading ability of nine-year-olds, moving from joint 10th to joint eighth in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study—PIRLS—rankings. This follows a greater focus on reading in the primary curriculum and a particular focus on phonics.

We need to go further, of course, so backed by £26 million of funding, we have selected 32 primary schools across the country to spread best practice in the teaching of phonics and reading. Our aim is for every primary school to be teaching children to read as effectively as the best, and I will not stop going on about phonics until this is achieved. Reading is the essential building block to a good, fulfilling and successful life.

We reformed the primary school national curriculum in 2014, restoring knowledge to its heart and raising expectations of what children should be taught, particularly in English and maths. Since 2011, the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their more affluent peers has narrowed in both primary and secondary schools in England.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): York is the worst-funded authority in the country, we have the widest attainment gap in the country, and our poorest schools in the most deprived areas have suffered the biggest cuts. How does the Minister correlate that evidence?

Nick Gibb: The Government are spending record amounts on our schools—£42.4 billion this year, rising to £43.5 billion next year—and the national funding formula ensures that deprivation and disadvantage are a priority in the additional needs element of the formula.

Rachael Maskell: I asked a specific question about York in the light of the evidence that I presented, and I should like the Minister to respond to it.

Nick Gibb: The national funding formula ensures that all areas of the country, including York, are funded on a fair basis. Pupils will receive the same amount wherever they go to school, on the basis of an initial single figure that is the same throughout the country. That represents about three quarters of the national funding formula. The other quarter is determined by the additional needs of the pupil, so a significant element of it is based on disadvantage, whether it relates to the income deprivation affecting children index, free school meals, low prior attainment, or a child who has English as an additional language. Where a particular area fits into the rankings of other local authorities will depend on the number of pupils with additional needs. That is a fair system. It should have been introduced when the Labour party was in office, but Labour left it to us to make a controversial decision to ensure that we have a fair funding system.

Rachael Maskell: Can the Minister explain how he proposes to close the attainment gap in York, which is the worst in the country, given that we also receive the worst funding?

Nick Gibb: It is our determination to ensure that every part of the country has higher levels of social mobility, and that every part of the country has high academic standards. We have 12 opportunity areas around the country where we are focusing extra resources and extra attention from our national campaigns to ensure that those areas improve their academic standards. We are also rolling out schemes such as the English hubs that I mentioned, which ensure that we spread best practice in the teaching of reading. We have maths hubs, which ensure that we spread best practice in the teaching of mathematics, and we are spreading best practice in the teaching of modern foreign languages. Wherever there is a gap in attainment, we take action to close that gap, and we take swift action to deal with schools—wherever they are—that are underperforming and not providing the quality of education that parents want and that we want for our young people.

Nigel Huddleston: I thank the Minister for giving way again. He is being generous with his time.

I wholeheartedly support not only the goals for improving standards, but the fairer funding formula. Schools in my constituency are funded in a similar way to those in the constituency of the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell). We really appreciate the efforts being made to improve school funding in my constituency, because it does make a difference, and I hope that they will be fully implemented very soon.

Nick Gibb: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his supportive comments. We are, in a transition period—or implementation period, if you like—allowing local authorities to determine the allocations to individual schools within a local authority area, both this year and next year and in 2020-21. However, the funding for those authorities is determined on a school-by-school, pupil-by-pupil basis to ensure that every authority is funded on the basis of the children in its area.

[Nick Gibb]

The Government have reformed GCSEs to put them on a par with the best in the world, and A-levels have been reformed to improve students' readiness for the demands of higher education. We have also introduced the English baccalaureate school performance measure to ensure that all pupils have the chance to create a solid academic foundation on which they can build their future. The EBacc is a specific measure consisting of GCSEs in English, maths, at least two sciences, history or geography, and a language. According to the Russell Group of universities, those are the subjects which, at A-level, open more doors to more degrees. They provide a sound basis for a variety of careers beyond the age of 16. They can enrich pupils' studies and give them a broad general knowledge that will enable them to participate in and contribute to society.

Confining the EBacc to seven or sometimes eight GCSEs also means that pupils have time to study other subjects, including the arts, music and technical disciplines. Indeed, the vast majority of pupils continue to take the opportunity to study further academic GCSEs or high-value, approved vocational qualifications at key stage 4 alongside EBacc subjects. Under this Government, the percentage of pupils taking the EBacc suite of core academic subjects in state-funded schools has risen from just 22% in 2010 to 38% in 2018. However, we want the percentage to rise further, with 75% starting to study the EBacc by 2022 and 90% by 2025.

Having a secure grasp of the basics of mathematics, including multiplication tables, is crucial for children's success in moving on to more complex mathematical reasoning. The national curriculum stipulates that children should be able to recall tables up to and including the 12 times table by the end of year 4. Next year we will introduce a new multiplication tables check in primary schools, to be taken by year 4 pupils, to ensure that every child knows their tables. That short on-screen check, which is easy to administer, will help teachers to identify pupils who may need more support in mastering their times tables, and will allow schools to benchmark their own performance against those of others.

Inspired by the success of the far east and building on the reformed national curriculum, we have established and funded a network of 35 maths hubs which are spreading evidence-based approaches to maths teaching through the teaching for mastery programme. We have invested a total of £76 million to extend the programme to 11,000 primary and secondary schools by the end of the current Parliament. The number of pupils taking maths A-level has risen for the past eight years, and it is now the single most popular choice. To encourage even more pupils to consider level 3 mathematics qualifications, we have launched the advanced mathematics support programme, giving schools an extra £600 per year for each additional pupil taking maths or further maths A-level or any level 3 mathematics qualification.

For the good of our economy, we need to equip more young people to pursue degrees and careers in the sciences, including computer science. We have already seen remarkable progress: entries to A-levels in science, technology, engineering and maths have increased by 23% since 2010. We are investing in programmes that improve science teaching, support teacher retention, and increase take-up in subjects such as physics. That includes

the network of science learning partnerships, which delivers continuing professional development through school-led hubs, and the stimulating physics network, which is helping schools to improve the take-up of A-level physics, especially by girls.

As a global trading nation, we need to raise the profile of languages, and we are determined to increase the number of students studying a language to GCSE. The proportion of pupils taking a foreign language in state-funded schools was 40% in 2010, and today it stands at 46%. We have introduced a package of measures to support language teaching, and to encourage more students to study modern foreign languages at GCSE and A-level. That includes the modern foreign languages pedagogy programme that I mentioned earlier, a mentoring pilot scheme and generous financial incentives, including scholarships and bursaries, to encourage more people to consider language teaching.

You may not have heard of the Mandarin excellence programme, Madam Deputy Speaker, but it is a hugely successful example of what can be achieved through targeted programmes. According to the CBI's education and skills annual report, which was published this month, education is the number one driver of productivity and economic prosperity. Mandarin Chinese boosts career opportunities: 37% of UK businesses cited Mandarin as useful to their business, up from just 28% in 2016. Our £10 million Mandarin excellence programme is on target to put at least 5,000 young people on track towards fluency in Mandarin Chinese by 2020. A total of 64 schools have joined the programme, and approximately 3,000 students are now participating. They study Mandarin for eight hours a week, spending four hours in class and four doing homework. The programme is proving hugely successful. At the end of each year the students take a hurdle test to ensure that they are progressing towards fluency, and they are all performing extremely well.

The EBacc may be at the heart of the curriculum, but it is not the whole curriculum. The Government believe that the EBacc should be studied as part of a broad and balanced curriculum, and that every child should experience a high-quality arts and cultural education throughout their time at school. To secure that breadth, each of dance, music, art and design, and drama are compulsory in the national curriculum from ages five to 14.

There are many examples of schools where the majority of pupils study the core academic curriculum while the arts continue to flourish. At Northampton School for Boys, for example, pupils take the EBacc but are also able to keep their options open in studying other subjects such as music, drama and art. Arts are promoted at the school with over 20 ensembles and choirs, and there are many extracurricular opportunities for pupils to experience a creative and varied arts programme.

We are also putting more money into arts education programmes—nearly half a billion pounds to fund a range of music and cultural programmes between 2016 and 2020; that is more than for any subject other than PE. The funding includes £300 million for our network of music education hubs. Just last month, the Arts Council published a report that showed that, through the hubs, over 700,000 children learnt to play instruments in class together last year.

As well as learning to play instruments, children should be taught to listen to music across a range of historical periods, genres, styles and traditions, including

the works of the great composers and musicians. That is why our Classical 100 resource produced by the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music, Classic FM and Decca is so important. Over 5,500 schools are already using—[*Interruption.*] I think that is on the list, so well done to the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane). Over 5,500 schools are already using this excellent resource, which is free for all primary schools and I encourage others to do the same.

A culture of good behaviour in schools is critical to enabling pupils to fulfil their potential. We are continuing to support schools to create disciplined and safe environments that allow pupils to be effectively taught. For some schools, standards of behaviour remain a challenge. Poor behaviour not only has a negative impact on pupils' education and wellbeing, but affects the experience of teachers in schools. That is why the Government commissioned Tom Bennett's review of effective behaviour, "Creating a culture", which highlights strategies that schools can deploy to design, build and maintain a school culture that prevents classroom disruption, maintains good discipline and promotes pupils' education. To make sure our work on behaviour is embedded in the system, we recently announced a £10 million investment to enable schools to share best practice on behaviour and classroom management.

All these reforms have been delivered against the background of a changing landscape in terms of the autonomy of schools themselves. Through academies and free schools, we have given our frontline professionals, local communities and parents more freedom and choice. Since 2010, the number of academies has grown from 200 to over 8,200 including free schools. More than a third of state-funded primary and secondary schools are now part of an academy trust. The reforms of the last eight years show that autonomy and freedom in the hands of excellent heads and outstanding teachers can deliver high-quality education.

Converting to become an academy is a positive choice made by hundreds of schools every year to give great teachers and heads the freedom to focus on what is best for their pupils. Academy status leads to a more dynamic and responsive education system by allowing schools to make decisions based on local need and the interests of their pupils. It allows high-performing schools to consolidate success and spread that success to other schools.

The figures speak for themselves. Some 65% of inspected sponsored academies whose predecessor schools were judged to be inadequate now have either good or outstanding Ofsted judgments. Around one in 10 sponsored academy predecessor schools were good or outstanding before they converted, compared with almost seven in 10 after they became an academy where an inspection has taken place.

Beaver Green Primary School in Ashford, Kent is a good example of how a school can be turned around. Judged as inadequate by Ofsted in 2013 and with a long history of underperformance, it became an academy in 2015 and last year was Ofsted-rated good in all areas, with the early years provision being rated as outstanding. Newfield Secondary School in Sheffield was rated as inadequate from 2006 until October 2010. But meaningful improvements began to take place when the school became an academy, and when it was inspected in March 2017, for the first time as an academy, it was judged as good. At its best, the multi-academy trust model can be

a powerful vehicle for improving schools. It allows high-performing schools to consolidate success and spread that excellence to other schools.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, among high-performing schools, that can include pupil referral units? There is an excellent pupil referral unit in my constituency called the Pavilion, and I would welcome my right hon. Friend's affirmation that these units can provide excellent education, which is not always recognised by the general public.

Nick Gibb: My right hon. Friend is right. We have published our vision document for alternative provision. We want the right pupils in the right provision. Like her, I can point to excellent examples of alternative provision. The London East Alternative Provision School in Tower Hamlets provides an ordered, calm environment where young people can get their education back on track, and half the pupils who attend that unit manage to achieve a GCSE in maths or English. The Wave Multi Academy Trust in Cornwall is a chain of alternative provision schools which provide an excellent second chance for young people who have lost their way sometimes in education. Since 2012, WISE Academies—a mainstream schools multi-academy trust in the north-east—has taken on nine sponsored academies, all of which previously had significant performance concerns. The trust reduced teacher workload through more efficient lesson planning and the creation of shared resources, and introduced new ways of teaching such as maths mastery techniques brought over from Singapore. That has contributed to every school that has been inspected since joining the trust being judged as good or outstanding.

This is a Government who for more than eight years have been unflinchingly driving up standards in schools with a reform programme that is already delivering more good schools, better-quality qualifications, children reading more fluently, improved mathematics, higher expectations, more control for teachers over pupil behaviour, and more than 800,000 new school places. Opposite we have the serried—or sparse, today—ranks of Labour MPs, whose party opposed our reforms every step of the way, opposed the phonics check and opposed the EBacc, which is giving opportunities of study to the most disadvantaged that are routinely enjoyed by the most advantaged. It is a Labour party that is the enemy of social mobility and the enemy of promise, and that in office presided over declining standards, grade inflation and a proliferation of qualifications that had little value in the jobs market. And it is a Labour Party that would scrap the free schools programme: a programme that led to the establishment of Dixons Trinity Academy, Bradford, which was eighth in the country last year for Progress 8 and 82% of whose pupils were entered for the EBacc; and the Harris Westminster School, which tells us that, with 40% of its pupils from a disadvantaged background, 18 pupils went to Oxbridge last year.

The contrast between the two parties has never been starker: improving education standards delivered by a Conservative Government; and low expectations and falling academic standards, the hallmark of Labour's approach to education.

12.38 pm

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): In the past fortnight, we have seen the most unstable period of government since the Maastricht rebellion of

[Mike Kane]

the early 1990s. Unlike that debacle, however, this Government cannot rely on their own MPs, or even Unionist MPs, to make up the numbers. Indeed, many of the Minister's colleagues have aired open mutiny directly to the Prime Minister in this Chamber; it is a piteous sight. So I was surprised to hear the Leader of the House announce last Thursday that there would be a general debate on improving education standards today. Thursday is normally reserved for Back-Bench business, but the Government do not want to hear any Back-Bench business at present.

This is an astonishing act of hubris: the Government have chosen to debate a subject for which they have shown nothing to show but failure over the past eight years. The right hon. Gentleman's colleague the Secretary of State for Education must know that the Government have failed in their duty to improve educational standards, because in July the Secretary of State conceded that too many teachers were overwhelmed by excessive workload and then pledged to do more to support teachers and said he was trying to squeeze more funding out of No. 11. What did teachers get in last month's Budget? The primary way of improving standards is to improve the quality of our teaching workforce and the relationship they have with their pupils, but there was no increase in school funding last month. Instead, budgets are set to fall again in the year ahead, and teachers did not see a proper pay rise. In fact, the majority of teachers will face another real-terms pay cut this year.

Nick Gibb: I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman was paying attention to the Budget, but £400 million of extra capital was given to schools to spend this year, and another £508 million was given to schools to fund the pay award over two years.

Mike Kane: The majority of teachers will face a real-terms pay cut. I will come on to the £400 million in just a moment.

In the Chancellor's words, all that the teachers got was a few "little extras". The Secretary of State was said to have winced when asked about the Chancellor's choice of words, which is not exactly the endorsement that one would expect from a Cabinet colleague. However, the Chancellor then doubled down by saying that the £400 million for "little extras" could buy

"a couple of whiteboards, or some laptop computers or something".

It is no wonder that the Secretary of State cringed.

I am sure that the Minister will remember his colleague, the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), now the Environment Secretary, saying that the measure of this Government's success would be how the country would perform in the PISA rankings. That is what the Government predicated their agenda on. However, the PISA rankings that followed showed that the UK had failed to make any substantial improvements. In fact, we slipped back down the rankings. That shows the Government's failure to improve standards on their own terms.

Nick Gibb: The children who were tested in those PISA rankings spent most of their education in schools under the last Labour Government.

Mike Kane: They certainly did, and much of the improvement came from 2010 when we identified resources for coasting schools before we left government. The Minister, who has no formal pedagogic training, has based today's debate on the back of a ConservativeHome article from a couple of weeks ago. He does not want experts to advise him. He has resisted the experts. He does not want to hear from our world-class universities and teaching institutions, which our competitors in the PISA rankings use to improve their education.

The Minister tells us that success and attainment in the primary school curriculum have gone up, but let us deconstruct that. All the international evidence produced over the past 30 years shows that interventions in the curriculum—and the Minister has had a few—and testing produce disruption to teaching and learning whereby results initially start low, rapidly improve as teachers and students learn what they need to do in order to do well in the tests, then tail off and plateau as this artificial improvement stops. This is known as teaching to the test. He can produce the statistics, but even Ofqual has recognised this problem as the "sawtooth effect". That is what happens when we change the curriculum.

The Minister talked about the primary test. It is one of the numerous directed tests placed on schools, and it is adding administrative burdens. He is trying to run 22,000 schools from Great Smith Street. Why? Artificially inflated test results say nothing about the real quality of teaching, learning and standards achieved. We are narrowing the curriculum to cramming for tests in maths and English. In examining terms, we are measuring the construct of test-taking rather than the real knowledge of maths and English, let alone all the other worthwhile school subjects such as music and drama that have been pulled out of the curriculum because of the narrowing of the focus of the curriculum in this country. This is happening because somebody without any pedagogical knowledge feels fit to direct schools in what they teach. Primary schools already teach multiplication, and we do not need more money to be wasted on testing it. We need more money to be spent on teaching it.

Let us address the Government's academies expansion and their free school programme. The Minister cited no evidence that any of their reforms have genuinely improved standards in schools or outcomes for pupils. In fact, more than 100 free schools that opened only in the last couple of years have now closed, wasting hundreds of millions of pounds in this failed programme.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con): I am enjoying the hon. Gentleman's speech very much. Why does he think that, according to the Progress 8 measure, free schools are now our top-performing type of school?

Mike Kane: The hon. Gentleman cannot have been listening to my answer about the disruption to the curriculum by new testing procedures. I have academic evidence from our major universities showing how the Minister came to that resolve and showing that he is wrong.

Neil O'Brien: I gently ask the hon. Gentleman at least to acknowledge that free schools are now, according to the Progress 8 measure, the highest-performing type of school in this country.

Mike Kane: There is no evidence whatsoever for that. We know that 100 free schools have opened and shut in the past few years. We had one free school in Bermondsey that cost £1 million over two years and attracted 60 pupils. The local authority begged for it not to be opened, but it cost £60,000 per pupil while it lasted. We could have sent those pupils to Eton for half the price, although let me say to my hon. Friends that I am not advocating sending anybody there at the moment. We have 100 schools, unbrokered, containing 700,000 children. The Government cannot get anywhere near enough sponsors for the academies. They have only the Church of England in the rural areas and the Co-op, the Churches and the faith schools. The Education Policy Institute has stated that

“large structural reforms, through the expansion of the academies programme and the introduction of free schools, have so far resulted in...no impact on overall attainment.”

That is a damning measure, after eight years of this Government.

An economical attitude to evidence is apparent from the Government’s claim that 1.9 million children are in schools that are rated good or outstanding. Many of those schools have not been Ofsteded for more than 10 years, and the claim does not take into account the fact that we now have more pupils in the system. This is a discredited statistic. The UK Statistics Authority and the independent Education Policy Institute have raised serious concerns about it. The claim does not account for increases in the school population, or for the number of pupils who are in schools that have not been inspected since before 2010. In other words, it does not give the full picture. Today, the Minister has a chance to correct the record. Are his colleagues, the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister, right to say that their policies have led to 1.9 million more children being educated in schools rated good or outstanding, or is the UK Statistics Authority right to say that they need to put that figure into context? I would be happy to give way to the Minister on this point.

Nick Gibb: I said in my speech that, in 2010, 66% of pupils were attending schools that were then graded good or outstanding. Today, 84% of pupils are attending schools that are graded good or outstanding. If we multiply that out, we get the 1.9 million figure that the hon. Gentleman has cited.

Mike Kane: There we have it. That at least provides some context, but it is not what the UK Statistics Authority, the Institute for Fiscal Studies or the Education Policy Institute have said. These are made-up figures from a Government who have run out of ideas for education.

The true hindrance to improving standards is austerity. After all, every area of education—from early years, where we have seen 1,000 Sure Start programmes cut, to schools to further and higher education—has seen massive cuts since the Conservative party came to power. Our analysis of figures produced by the independent Institute for Fiscal Studies shows that school budgets are £1.7 billion lower in real terms than they were five years ago.

Neil O’Brien: The hon. Gentleman continues to refer to early years cuts, which I find extraordinary, given that spending on early years will rise to a record £6 billion

by 2020 and given that we have introduced new things such as the 30 hours’ free childcare offer, tax-free childcare and the offer of free childcare for disadvantaged two-year-olds.

Mike Kane: There is a huge threat to maintained nursery schools, which we hear enough about from Government Members. The Government cut 1,000 Sure Start centres. The sure-fire way to achieve social mobility in our country is to make the best provision available for the youngest people in our society. We do not have that anymore; those Sure Start centres were cut. I will come to the impact of that on social mobility in a second.

Our analysis of the IFS figures shows a £1.7 billion cut in real terms. Government Members know it in their schools, too, because they talk to headteachers just as we do in our constituencies. To unpack that, these cuts, along with the impact of the public sector pay freeze and then the cap, have created a crisis in teacher recruitment and retention, which was not once referred to by the Minister today. The Government have subsequently missed the teacher recruitment and retention target for five successive years, and in the past two years, more teachers have left than have joined the profession.

Nick Gibb *rose*—

Mike Kane: For the third or fourth time, and following his speech, which went on for about 26 minutes, I give way to Minister.

Nick Gibb: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who has been extremely generous to me and my hon. Friends. I shall try to make this the last intervention. He might have missed the statistics that came out this morning, which showed that this year we recruited 8% more people, or over 2,000 more, into teacher training than we did in the previous year.

Mike Kane: Last year, we saw the number of teachers decline by 5,000. The Minister might come up with a statistic today, but teacher numbers are going down. Since 2011, a third of all teachers have left. I spoke to Teach First just the other day in a meeting. The current rate is one in, one out. Does the Minister bear no responsibility for the reforms, the pressures and the lack of pay rises that are the reason why so many great graduates and brilliant people are no longer training the future of our country but are leaving the profession? Does he bear no responsibility at all? Five thousand have left in one year.

Despite the noble effort of staff and teachers, schools are unable to deliver the high-quality education that children deserve because they simply do not have the funding to make ends meet, for either themselves or their schools. The Government’s own analysis has shown that teachers were around £4,000 worse off in 2016, compared with 2010, as a direct result of their policies on pay. Furthermore, the IFS has found that the promised pay rise will see the majority of teachers facing another real-terms pay cut.

Earlier this year, I was shocked to read a BBC article that reported that children were filling their pockets with food from school canteens because they were hungry. This is Tory Britain, 2018. These were children

[Mike Kane]

with greying skin. They were malnourished and afflicted with hunger. As a teacher, I know that schools cannot teach children properly if they are hungry in the classroom. That is happening in our country—one that now has 4.5 million children in poverty. That did not happen in a vacuum. Poverty is the grim and logical conclusion to austerity. Its effects are palpable, and its consequences can be irrevocable. If the Government truly want to see standards in education rise, they must do the logical thing and truly end austerity once and for all.

12.53 pm

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I think this is the first time, and it will no doubt be the last, that I have been called to speak first in a debate after the Front Benchers. It is a great honour to do so. I thank the Minister and the shadow Minister for their speeches. Both made important points. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Minister, who is a great example of the importance of sticking at a job through many years. I just wish that politics would allow highly capable people to do that in other posts, rather than being changed after six months just when they begin to get going. I pay tribute to him for all that he has done in his role over most of the last eight and a half years.

I also pay tribute to the teachers, teaching assistants, support staff and all who work in the schools, further education colleges and other educational institutions, including training providers, in my constituency of Stafford. They do a wonderful job day in, day out. That is often not recognised, and although I will not single out any particular schools in my constituency—some are outstanding and some are good—I want to say to all who work in all of them that they have my thanks and the support of my constituents.

I also want to thank governors, who do a very difficult job. I have been a governor of two different schools, one overseas and one in this country. I know how much work my colleagues on the governing body at the time put in week in, week out. I also join the shadow Minister in paying tribute to the Church of England, Catholic and other faith schools around the country, which provide a large percentage of the education in our country, particularly at primary but also at secondary level. Long may that continue.

I am not an expert in education in the slightest. However, I try to listen to educators, employers and others for whom education is so important. I want to start with a quotation—not quite word for word—from a major employer in the city of Birmingham who I happened to hear speaking at a meeting we held there a couple of months ago, which I was chairing. This was a major employer, employing tens of thousands of people, who said that the quality of the young people coming for interview in Birmingham, where the headquarters had recently been moved, was much higher in terms of educational standards than it had been a number of years before. They were work-ready, they wanted to do the jobs, and he was proud to be able to employ them.

That was nothing to do with those individuals; it was due to the background of improving standards in the education they had received at school and university. I do not want to say that that is due to any particular Government. Clearly there has been more than one

Government in that period—a Labour, a coalition and a Conservative Government. However, I pay tribute to all those who have enabled those young people to get into a position where they can apply for and get into jobs in a well respected company and be appreciated for that by the chief executive. Let us begin on that positive note, and I am sure that that experience is replicated throughout the country.

Let me turn to the finances of schooling. The Library says that my constituency of Stafford has seen a fall in cash terms over the four years to 2017 of just under £300 per pupil. Clearly we have seen a rise for 2018-19, and I welcome the new funding formula, which I will talk about a little, but that shows the pressure that schools have been under. We were more than £400 per pupil below both the regional west midlands average and the English average for schools in 2017-18. I fully accept that there has to be a difference in funding in certain areas that have higher needs and costs, particularly in London and other conurbations. The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) talked about the gap in her constituency, as others have for theirs, including my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston). However, a more than £400 per pupil difference between Stafford and the average—not the highest, but the average—is too much. It is not acceptable that we have such a major discrepancy, which has been going on for decades, between the lowest-funded and not the highest-funded but the average across England.

That obviously comes at a time when costs are going up, and those costs are common to all schools, whether it is the cost of pensions, the cost of employer national insurance contributions or other costs. We have to remember that the vast majority of costs for schools and education institutions are payroll-related costs, which tend to be similar across the country. I credit the Government for recognising that and for their aim to have fairer funding for schools across the country, which I welcome, but it has to come at a time when overall resources are rising, because we do not want to be put in a position where Peter is robbed to pay Paul; we want to be in a position where the gap narrows on a rising tide.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): What does the hon. Gentleman think about having a hard funding formula? Does he agree there could be problems in having an entirely national hard funding formula that does not allow any discretion for local authorities with slight variations in need? It would be impossible for any Government to set a national funding formula that could truly adapt to reflect every single school in our country.

Jeremy Lefroy: The hon. Lady makes a fair point. I am a pragmatist. I accept that schools in Stafford will receive less than schools in London, Birmingham or Stoke-on-Trent, but it should not be that much less. I accept that there are variations across the country that need to be taken into account, and that we cannot have an absolute hard and fast rule, but I also recognise the problems the Government face, because 650 MPs will be claiming to have special circumstances. We need to have some rules somewhere, but we also need some flexibility. Given that we all pay tax and national insurance at the same rate, certainly in England, it seems similar to the situation with healthcare. By the way, the discrepancies in healthcare are much, much greater—

my clinical commissioning group has a discrepancy of £400 per head compared with some of the highest-funded CCGs in the country, and that is on a much lower level per head than education, so the percentage discrepancy is much greater. There should not be huge discrepancies in funding for public services. There will be discrepancies, but they must be modest and moderate.

I recognise the additional pressures that teachers and schools currently face, and I want to mention areas other than finance, because it is not all about money. The pressures include, for instance, the pressure of social media both on teachers and on students and pupils in schools and colleges. Teachers are sometimes anonymously attacked through social media, and they have to put up with stuff that we in this House are perhaps used to, but that they should not have to put up with in any way, shape or form.

I am glad that some schools in my constituency have taken to banning smartphones, and I think that ban should be universal in schools. President Macron, whom the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs quoted in French earlier this morning, has a very good policy in which he proposes to ban smartphones from primary and middle schools in France. I think all schools should consider such a ban.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman might be aware that in recent weeks I have been leading an inquiry with the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) into social media and its impact on young people's mental health. One of the things coming out of that inquiry is that many teachers have no training on how to use social media and on how young people interact with it. Parents and outside social groups also do not understand it. Does the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) agree there is a need for teacher training programmes, whether in Wales, Scotland, England or Northern Ireland, to focus on giving some sort of lessons in how trainee teachers can use social media for good, and how they can tackle some of the problems that social media causes in schools, too?

Jeremy Lefroy: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman. He is absolutely right. Some of us here could do with training in the use of social media, because some of the things that colleagues on both sides of the House—I will not mention any names—tweet or say on social media are, frankly, outrageous and do not improve the quality of debate, but that is just my personal opinion. I would like us all to be a bit more positive. If teachers want to look for training, they should not look to the House of Commons to learn how to use social media unless we improve our own standards. I would welcome the approach he suggests, and perhaps the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills could address that in her response.

Funding for 16 to 19 education has been particularly squeezed over the past few years. My right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), the Chair of the Select Committee on Education, said in a letter to the Chancellor of the Exchequer a couple of months ago:

“It cannot be right that a funding ‘dip’ exists for students between the ages of 16 and 18, only to rise again in higher education. Successive governments have failed to give further education the recognition it deserves for the role”

it plays in addressing our problem with productivity—or words to that effect. He is absolutely right.

Young people of 16 to 19 are moving into the next stage of their life, and it is vital that there is no let-up in preparing them for an incredibly challenging, demanding world. The world is full of opportunities, but people need to have the skills and the background to take up those opportunities.

Emma Hardy: I echo what the hon. Gentleman is saying, and I give him my wholehearted support. I am pleased that the Minister for Apprenticeship and Skills is now sitting on the Front Bench, because she knows how important and how desperately underfunded we feel further education to be. We had hoped for more from the recent Treasury announcement, and all I can ask is that she keep pressing the Treasury to fund our further education colleges properly.

Jeremy Lefroy: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for mentioning that. I also give credit to the Minister, because I know how much she engaged with me and other colleagues on Newcastle and Stafford Colleges Group earlier this year when we had a particular problem with apprenticeships, which has been largely solved thanks to the work of the colleges and the Department. I thank her for her support.

There was a survey of sixth-form colleges in October 2017. Emails from the Government to us Back Benchers say that surveys are rarely designed to be helpful. However, in this case, even if the survey is not entirely accurate it makes some extremely important points. For instance, 50% of colleges that responded said they had dropped courses in modern foreign languages. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards for what he said about foreign languages, which are vital. I was not aware of the Mandarin programme, and I will have to see how many of my local schools, if any, have taken it up. I am a passionate supporter of the teaching of modern foreign languages, especially as we move into an interesting time in the coming years.

Thirty-four per cent. of respondents had dropped courses in STEM subjects, and 67% had reduced student support services, which are incredibly important, particularly for the 16 to 19 age group, in which people are under quite a lot of pressure, not least from social media. Seventy-seven per cent. were teaching students in larger classes, and I could go on. There were clearly pressures, and I know my right hon. Friend the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills, who has responsibility for further education, will be looking hard at that survey and no doubt engaging with the sixth-form colleges and further education colleges to see how these matters can be addressed.

I feel passionately about readiness for work and soft skills, which are vital for our country's future and our young people's future. I have the honour of chairing the international Parliamentary Network on the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, and I met the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) a few months ago to ask him whether he would mind editing a book on the future of work, an area in which he has a lot of expertise. He did so, and we launched the book at the World Bank meetings in Indonesia at the beginning of last month and here in Parliament a couple of weeks ago.

The book's examples from around the world, whether from Singapore, South Korea or Argentina, clearly show that everybody is facing this issue of the future

[Jeremy Lefroy]

of work. There are huge changes coming up, whether through artificial intelligence or the next generation of technology, and we have to prepare our young people not necessarily for those individual skills—skills and techniques move on—but for the ability to change and to accept the need to retrain. They need flexibility in the way they think about the future. That has to start not when people have left school, college or university, but at primary school. It does not have to start too early, but perhaps in year 6 and moving on into year 7. Many schools and colleges are trying to do that work, but they need support; they need recognition for that in the curriculum. Readiness for work is vital.

Let me mention one small step we have taken in Stafford. With some friends and colleagues, I started a schools debating competition a couple of years ago, whereby schools and colleges can come to the House of Commons to compete against each other in a friendly, competitive manner. We are very pleased with the results. One thing young people have said to me is that it gives them much greater confidence to speak in public.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): I commend what my hon. Friend is saying and the work he is doing, because I am his next-door neighbour, and Stafford and Stone run together in a lot of these matters. We are both fighting hard to get the best possible standards for our constituents.

Jeremy Lefroy: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about that. Clearly, some of my constituents go to schools in his constituency and vice versa. I have experience of the issues faced by rural schools, including small ones, but he has much more experience of that than I do.

Emma Hardy: Let me say what a pleasure it is hearing a debate in which I agree with what a Government Member is saying—I thank the hon. Gentleman for that. I echo what he was saying about the importance of debating, and I invite him to join my all-party group on oracy. Will he again endorse the recommendations of “Bercow: Ten Years On” for improving speech and language throughout our schools?

Jeremy Lefroy: I would be happy to do so. I cannot claim I would add much to it, but perhaps I would learn a lot from it.

I am going to conclude, because I have detained the House for long enough, but I wish to make two final points. First, as has been mentioned, out-of-school activities, whether conducted by teachers or by others, are essential. We could be talking about clubs, which have been given a hard time in the past few years, but in my constituency are now largely run by churches and other voluntary organisations. We could be talking about sports clubs—we have some excellent sports clubs in my constituency. We could be talking about music and drama—I have some excellent youth theatre groups in my constituency. We could be talking about outdoor activities, which I have great passion for, having run a Duke of Edinburgh’s award scheme for a number of years in London, or about young enterprise. That is just to mention a few, but they are essential. Whether they are conducted within schools or outside them, by teachers or by others who are committed to young people, we have to ensure that they are supported.

Unless young people have those opportunities—all young people, including those whose parents find it difficult to take them, and not just those whose parents want them to go—they will miss out on so much in this great country of ours. I am fortunate to live in Staffordshire, where, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) knows, we are within an hour or two of some of the most beautiful countryside on earth. Indeed, we live among some of it, let alone within an hour or two of it. [Interruption.] My hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Amanda Milling) is looking at me and wants to me to mention Cannock Chase, so of course I will. It is beautiful, and a lot of outdoor activities take place there.

The final point I wish to make is a serious one about exclusions from school. There has been a sharp rise in Staffordshire and, I believe, in other parts of the country. I can understand why that happens—schools and teachers are under a lot of pressure, and if they find that young people are being disruptive for whatever reason, including pressures at home, excluding them becomes an option that, if not easy, is perhaps easier than it has been in the past. First, I do not believe it is right that schools should be put in that position, and I am not blaming the schools for it. Secondly, it is putting a great deal of pressure on pupil referral units and other places, including parents at home.

I ask the Minister to address that point. I ask her to look at the issue of exclusions nationally and ensure that when Ofsted assesses pupil referral units, it ensures that they are not judged against standards they find impossible to maintain. In Staffordshire, we have pupil referral units that are being asked to provide more and more time per pupil, and I fully agree with that, but they are being asked to do so with limited resources. That results in more antisocial behaviour. In Stafford, it has resulted in attacks on teachers, who are being put into danger. As a result, they have to take action, which means reducing the time per pupil again, then they get attacked by Ofsted by not having sufficient time per pupil. I would like the Government to look into that, because it is a very serious issue. I am not sure whether it is peculiar to Staffordshire, or whether it happens across the country—

Emma Hardy indicated assent.

Jeremy Lefroy: The hon. Lady makes it clear that it is happening elsewhere in the country.

I want to end on an optimistic and positive note. Again, I wish to thank all those involved in education across the country for all they do, day in, day out. They do it with great spirit and humour and sensitivity. They invest in the future of our young people, who are the future of this country.

1.15 pm

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): I agreed with what the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) said about exclusions, which I will touch on more later in my speech. Some Members may know that when I speak in the Chamber, I tend to speak about youth violence and I will be doing that in this debate because education is very much at the heart of the solutions to this. There is no doubt that some of the funding cuts have proven difficult in terms of tackling youth violence. In particular, it has put pressures on those working in education. I want to focus some of my points on that.

Improving education standards is a good thing, but it is not just about improving grades or about increasing the number of young people who go to university—although, obviously, that is a good thing. It has to be about ensuring that our schools develop our young people and present them with all the opportunities and skills for the future that they so desperately need and thus reducing the likelihood that they will ever be involved in violence. Schools are at the forefront of tackling youth violence. We do lots of school intervention programmes that say, “Don’t carry a knife as you’re more likely to be stabbed”, but we know that that message is not quite working. It is not quite getting through to them, because they are still carrying knives and getting involved in youth violence. We need to make sure we give them far more positive messages and training that says, “You are the future doctors, nurses, politicians. You can be what you want to be.” We need to have that, and the fear of losing it in the future, as the reason why they are too terrified to carry a knife.

The Minister may be aware of the recent research by *The BMJ* showing that children under 16 are at the highest risk of being stabbed on their way home from school. That backs up what the police, youth workers and teachers have been saying to me for years. I thoroughly believe that as policy makers we have a responsibility to intervene where we can. For example, could we consider keeping our kids in school until 6 pm, staggering their leaving hours or making sure we have youth workers in schools during those times, given that we have such convincing evidence before us? I asked tons of questions on this in the past, but the Departments do not actually hold this information. Perhaps the Government should look at that seriously in order to make sure we really can analyse it.

Other measures could help keep young people safe while they are at school. Over the summer, the Youth Violence Commission published its interim report. I urge the Minister to read it if she has not had a chance to do so yet. It takes only about 30 minutes and it is written in a brief way. If she is keen to read a lot more, she can look on the website, which also has a ton of information.

One of our recommendations was to attach a dedicated police officer to every school in the country. The idea was not to police our kids in school; it was very much about building trust between police and young people. We know that there has been a breakdown in the relationship between young people and the police, but if they see a police officer in school—they might even play football with the police officer—that relationship will start to build. Hopefully, they will feel able to speak to police officers if in future they have worries or troubles. When we went to schools that had dedicated police officers who did have that relationship with young people, many of those young people wanted to go on and become police officers in future, and quite often they were from backgrounds that we would not traditionally think would mean they would want to join the police.

The Youth Violence Commission recommends a long-term aspiration to have zero exclusions from mainstream education. We cannot ignore the link between school exclusion and social exclusion: once children are permanently excluded, it is very difficult for them to move back to mainstream education. Once in a pupil referral unit, a child has a very low chance of achieving

five good GCSEs. PRUs have often been called pipelines to prison, which is hardly surprising when more than half the current prison population were excluded while at school. Worryingly, exclusions are on the rise, having increased by at least 40% in the past three years. When we know that something is not working, why are we still doing it? Why do we not invest the money from the PRUs and put that into school early intervention programmes? We should speak to primary school headteachers about who they see as the vulnerable children who could perhaps do with that wrap-around love, care and support, be it from nurses or peer role models. Why are we not investing the money at that point to provide support for our young people?

Education standards are part of the problem. The Government’s narrow focus on improving grades has led to schools quietly off-rolling students in attempts to improve their overall results. As part of their work to improve education standards, I hope that the Government consider our rising exclusions problem. In fact, is it not time that the Government entirely reviewed the merits of implementing a zero-exclusions policy across the board?

When the commission was carrying out our research, we consulted young people across the UK, and the same issues with the curriculum were raised with us consistently. Young people told us they wished that basic life skills—from how to write a CV to how to budget and how they might apply for a mortgage—were taught in school. Indeed, when we teach some of these life skills, we can also teach basic maths and literacy and other parts of the curriculum.

Many employers look for social media skills in new recruits, so that they can promote their business or reach out to new audiences, so why not start teaching social media at school? Not only could these lessons help young people to become more employable, but social media is often pointed to as the reason for violence flaring up between young people, so lessons could also focus on keeping young people safe online in a way that is relevant to the platforms they use. When I met a number of young people, some children in that conversation did not know how to hide their location—ghosting on Snapchat. One child taught another child, who had been followed and beaten up because their location had been known, how to hide it. With that knowledge, they could hide their location, which was incredibly valuable.

We need an overhaul of how careers advice is delivered in schools, ensuring that diverse role models and relevant work placements are on offer for young people. The serious shortage of diverse role models involved in careers programmes must be addressed. Young students of colour and working-class students need to see people like them in a range of different job roles. They need to know these options are available to them, too. Perhaps we could consider diversity in our history and literature syllabus. History lessons can sometimes feel like most of the people worth learning about were white, rich or male. Is it not time that the curriculum reflected the true diversity of our history?

We need more emphasis on high-quality sex and relationship classes. Primary school students should be taught what healthy and unhealthy relationships look like, to build resilience from a young age. A diverse curriculum is so important. The Government have left cash-strapped schools with no option but to cut creative

[Vicky Foxcroft]

subjects from the curriculum. Art, drama and music should not be seen as nice but unnecessary. These subjects are equally important to a well-rounded education.

I think of my own background: I did not get any A to Cs when I was at school, for a multitude of reasons that I will not go into. But I then studied at college, where I did a BTEC in performing arts—some would say that is a natural thing for someone who becomes a politician, but hey-ho—and went on to do drama and business at university. My arts education did not just teach me about the creative subjects; I was taught about history, problem solving and team work, and it got me excited about learning and education.

I could go on. There is so much that I could say about how I think schools could play a greater role in tackling youth violence. But for schools to start truly playing a greater role, there needs to be much more dedicated funding. There needs to be funding for the arts and funding for school nurses and mental health support. There needs to be funding for school police officers and funding for special educational needs. The Government have claimed that austerity is over, but we are seeing no evidence of this on the ground. It will take years to reverse the impacts of the Government austerity agenda.

If we are to try to start to do something and truly look at how we can reduce violence, we must work with and listen to teachers, young people and parents, and all the different agencies that come into contact with young people. In short, we must seek to deliver a public health approach, diagnose the problem, and treat the disease. We need joined-up working among everyone who comes into contact with young people. I welcome the announcement today of a debate on Thursday 13 December on the public health approach to tackling youth violence. I hope that the Minister and her team will come to that debate and at least listen to the contributions, if not report back on it.

1.27 pm

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con): One thing we can do to improve standards in schools is to stamp out bullying. I wish to start by talking about an incident in Huddersfield involving a young Syrian refugee, Jamal, and the appalling bullying that he has suffered. Members from all parties will have been appalled by what they have seen. I was particularly appalled because it happened literally two minutes' walk from where I grew up. I encourage the Minister, in her winding-up speech, to talk a little about that incident and about what the Government are doing to stamp out bullying. I shall come back to the point about order in schools, which is really important. When I saw the video, I was reminded of too much of the disorder that I saw in schools when I was growing up there. It is the same kids and the same problem, and it is important for the agenda of improving standards in education. The one positive thing that I can report is that since the news of this appalling incident went online, people have raised more than £100,000 for the family in a crowdfunding campaign. Some other good things have happened, such as the Huddersfield Town goalkeeper inviting Jamal to a match. A lot of people are coming together to demonstrate that people in this country are not idiots and are actually kind to refugees and welcome them here.

Much of my speech will be about some of the things that we could change or do differently in education, and I shall start with some positive things. I wish to pay tribute to some important people in the Labour party who have driven the agenda in respect of improving school standards. I pay particular tribute to Andrew Adonis, whose magnificent book on reforming England's education is an absolute must-read. I was reminded of that book the other day when I read a piece by an education academic slating an unnamed school in, I think, London. This school, it is rumoured online, is Mossbourne Academy, which was used by Andrew Adonis as an example par excellence of what Labour's academies agenda had achieved. The school, Hackney Downs, had been a failure factory—a disaster area—for working-class kids for generations and it was turned into one of the highest performing schools in the country. This cowardly academic attack on the school, which is not named so the school cannot respond, is full of cod-Marxist jargon. It slates a school that has clearly turned around the lives of thousands and thousands of working-class kids and given them many more opportunities than they would otherwise have had. It was just an appalling piece for Cambridge University to have published.

Let me turn to some of the positives in the education reform agenda. The proportion of pupils in good or outstanding schools, which has already been mentioned, has increased from 66% to 86% since 2010. Good things such as the national fair funding formula have been introduced. In my Leicestershire constituency that is particularly welcome as, historically, it has been very underfunded. Total school funding is going up twice as fast as the national average over the next two years—the first two years of the formula—which is very welcome.

Mike Kane: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Neil O'Brien: Of course, I will give way to the hon. Gentleman, as he was so generous in giving way to me.

Mike Kane: I was really kind to the hon. Gentleman the other day when he had forgotten his pass and I let him through one of the doors, but I do not think that he was so kind to me in the debate just now. On that point, will he explain why Leicestershire County Council and schools across the board there are suffering £8.9 million of cuts—that is £104 per pupil since 2015?

Neil O'Brien: I will always be grateful to the hon. Gentleman for opening doors for me. He did ask who I worked for, and I was pleased to say, "The people of Harborough, Oadby and Wigston." When MPs start to look younger, perhaps it is a sign that one is becoming more mature and statesmanlike. As I said, school funding is going up in Leicestershire, and going up twice as fast as the national average, which is hugely welcome.

The early years agenda has not been neglected. We will have spent a record £6 billion by 2020, covering: the 30 hours free offer, which will be very helpful to many people, the tax-free childcare and, particularly, that extra free childcare for disadvantaged two-year-olds.

In addition to those headline reforms, there have been many other less visible, but hugely important improvements in our schools. One of them has already been mentioned. I believe that it was an important and positive reform when the Government ended the right of appeal against exclusion because that helped to

protect teachers and helps those pupils who want to get on and learn from disruption and violence. I have every sympathy with Labour Members who say that we must improve pupil referral units. I started my contribution by talking about bullying and order in our schools. However, I hope that the Government will not backslide and do anything to weaken schools' ability to maintain order.

I had a lot of sympathy with some of the comments of the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) and of my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy). We must improve provision for those who could be in a pipeline towards prison. I have visited prisons and worked with the homeless. It is absolutely true that some of these people's careers begin with school exclusion. However, this must not come at the expense of increasing disorder for those who want to learn. Young people do have agency and need to behave responsibly. I am afraid that I do not agree with the idea of a zero exclusions policy, or taking away schools' freedom to exclude altogether.

Another important reform that is perhaps less visible—

Emma Hardy: I think that the hon. Gentleman may have misinterpreted what my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) said. We can have zero exclusions through exploring other policies such as managed moves, or using equality or tenanted provision. Zero exclusions does not necessarily mean that the pupil has to stay in that school. It means that they are not excluded and pushed out of the school system altogether.

Neil O'Brien: I thank the hon. Lady for clarifying that point. My concern is that the goal will quickly lead to a number of policies, some of which she has just alluded to, which bog down schools' ability to act quickly on disorder and which gum up the works. I sense that that is something about which we disagree but I take her point.

One positive development in recent years has been the growth of low-stakes testing—things such as year 1 phonics screening, which enables us to spot problems early and nip them in the bud. That is one other reason that this country's performance on primary school reading in the international tables is going up. We are bringing in those kinds of tests. Likewise, the proportion of pupils in the new and improved SATS who are achieving the expected standard in reading, writing and maths has gone up from 54% in 2016 to 64% now. That is a really good example of our teachers and our pupils rising to the challenge when a lot of opponents said that that would be too hard for kids to do.

Another positive development has been ending grade inflation and restoring rigour to our exams. I do not mean to make a partisan point here, but the number of pupils getting three As at A-level doubled under Labour. I do not think that anybody could credibly claim that that was all down to real improvement. There was grade inflation and a drift away from the most hard academic subjects, with the proportion of pupils doing the EBacc at GCSE falling from half in 1997 to 22% in 2010. Therefore, we had a drift away from the most difficult academic subjects and a move towards things such as the computer driving licence, which, because of comparative tables, were scoring huge numbers of points in GCSE

league tables, but in fact were not valuable qualifications. I do not think that the hon. Lady would agree with that approach.

Emma Hardy: I just wondered what the hon. Gentleman's opinion is on the subjects that are used in the EBacc and whether he thought that it would be crucial for the Government to look again at including perhaps design and technology, considering the comments that the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) made earlier about artificial intelligence, the fourth industrial revolution and the changes to society. Does he not think that perhaps the subjects chosen for the EBacc were chosen on ideological grounds by the Minister, rather than, actually, on what subjects our children need to face an uncertain future?

Neil O'Brien: That was an important intervention from the hon. Lady. I do not agree that those subjects were chosen on ideological grounds. Funnily enough, when we look at the longitudinal earnings and outcomes data, those kind of hard sciences and subjects are the ones that are important gateways to the professions, which will lead to higher earnings. On her point about design and technology, if we were to look again at the subjects and include something else, that would be one of the first things that I would consider.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a comprehensive speech. He seems to be focusing a lot on England though. Obviously, this is the United Kingdom Parliament and improving educational standards is especially important in Scotland, where our international standards, particularly in maths and science, are falling. We are falling in the international tables, whereas other parts of the UK are rising. It would be interesting to hear—perhaps he will come on to this shortly—why he thinks that is and why Scotland is being left behind, while the rest of the UK is taking a step forward.

Neil O'Brien: I thank my hon. Friend for that important intervention. I was going to come on to that, but I will deal with it now. Education, and the quality of Scotland's education system, was Scotland's pride and joy. This is one of the important things that everyone in the country feels very strongly about. I am from Huddersfield, and all of the rest of my family are from Glasgow, so it is something that we all care about. Not having some of new Labour's reform agenda in Scotland is one reason why school standards in Scotland have gone off the boil. The other problem, of course, is that because of the decisions on higher education funding of the Scottish National party Government—unfortunately there is no one here from the SNP to represent them—pupils from more deprived areas are now twice as likely to go to university if they are in England than if they are in Scotland. That is a radical unfairness in our country caused by the policies of the SNP Government.

Let me just finish the point about rigour. I will say something which Labour Members may agree with. We can restore rigour—we have done that and it is an important move—without having to have terminal exams. I am quite a supporter of modular exams. Young people's mental health is an increasingly important issue. Many young people I meet in schools feel strongly about it. There is not necessarily a connection between high

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standards in exams and terminal exams. I understand that there are pedagogical arguments for terminal exams, but there are also good arguments for modular ones as well.

One important reform—this is important in the context of improving teacher recruitment and teacher numbers; I am glad that there are 10,000 more teachers than there were in 2010—is to stop Ofsted being excessively overbearing. When I was the chair of governors at a London primary school, I was struck by the way in which everybody was being socialised into jumping every time Ofsted changed some tick box and we were all chasing around after Ofsted. There was a complaint from the Labour Front Bench earlier about some schools not being inspected particularly often by Ofsted. That is part of an approach that focuses on places where there are problems and does not hassle teachers unnecessarily with inspections that do not need to happen. I agree with the Government's move towards assessing school improvement on progress, data and outcomes, rather than trying to reach into schools with occasional inspections every three years, as if that were the way to drive school improvement. The way towards school improvement is to have high-performing, multi-academy trusts; I will return to that point soon.

I disagree with Opposition Front Benchers about free schools. According to recent data, they are our highest-performing schools on the Progress 8 measure, phonics and key stage 1. One of the important things about free schools is that they allow innovation into our system, and those innovations can be quite different and from different pedagogies. For example, School 21—set up by new Labour adviser Peter Hyman—has a huge focus on oracy, which the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) mentioned earlier. That is an interesting innovation. It is a high-performing school from one angle. Michaela Community School, set up by Katharine Birbalsingh, is also a brilliantly high-performing free school that is bringing new ideas into the education agenda, with a strong emphasis on order and discipline. This shows that we can achieve high results in different ways. Free schools have let lots of new ideas into the system that can then percolate through to other schools.

Emma Hardy: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there should have been greater checks and a more rigorous look at who was applying for free schools in different areas and the level of need? Although he mentioned School 21, of which I am aware, there are many other free schools—as my hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) mentioned—where the money has just been wasted because the schools were not needed or wanted in the first place. Although the hon. Gentleman can point to some successes, surely he agrees that we need a much more rigorous process of assessing free schools and whether they should be built in the first place if this policy is to continue.

Neil O'Brien: I always look for points of agreement, rather than points of disagreement.

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): You were caught out.

Neil O'Brien: I always look for points of agreement, but the hon. Gentleman is free to shout, “You were caught out”, from a sedentary position. Let me reach over the heads of the chuntering Opposition Front Benchers to say I agree with the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle that we must have a good look at all proposals for different types of schools, where they are to be located, where the need is greatest and so on. However, I caution the hon. Lady against the attentions of Her Majesty's Treasury, where I used to work, because there is always the temptation to say, “We don't need any new schools. Experimentation is expensive, so let's just push more people into low-performing schools and keep schools going that are not working.” She will not be surprised to learn that I do not entirely agree with her point on this.

One of the most important changes in our school system is the growth of multi-academy trusts. Some people talk about them as chains, as if schools are supermarkets or part of the market economy, but I think of them as families of schools. I am grateful and glad that Robert Smyth Academy—a school in my constituency that had some problems because of the move from three tiers to two—is now part of a brilliantly high-performing multi-academy trust and has a new, amazing and incredibly dynamic headteacher. I am confident, because of the experience of replicating success, that that school will also be a success.

We have always had miracle schools, super-heads and flashes of inspiration in the school system, but one of the new and exciting things about multi-academy trusts is that those successes are now being replicated at scale. I hope that the Government will push a sort of industrial policy for schools. Let us get behind high-performing multi-academy trusts, think about their geographic distribution around the country and help the best chains to expand in areas of the north and midlands, which are lagging behind in school outcomes.

Of course, this debate goes beyond schools. FE and sixth-form colleges have already been mentioned. If it is acceptable to the House, while we have the education cognoscenti here, I would love to pay tribute to Dr Kevin Conway, who sadly died too young—[*Interruption.*] I am so sorry.

Mike Kane: The hon. Gentleman is making a strong and honourable point about a really good thinker in education. I hope this intervention will give him time to regroup and get back to his speech.

Neil O'Brien: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman; he held the door open for me earlier this week, and has done so again verbally today.

Kevin Conway was a guy who turned around Greenhead College—the college I attended—in Huddersfield, which had been rather underperforming. He was a great and totally uncompromising individual who achieved amazing things in my sixth-form college and transformed the lives of generations of people who grew up in Huddersfield.

Luke Graham: My hon. Friend is making a fantastic point about great thinkers in education. Earlier this week, I went to a YouTube event where I was able to see the rapping teacher, who is now getting about 4 million hits a week on some of his online content, which is helping students across the United Kingdom and

internationally to make progress and improve their grade results—something that I am sure my hon. Friend would welcome.

Neil O'Brien: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for intervening in such a friendly way. The rapping teacher is clearly able to speak in whole finished paragraphs, while I am barely able to articulate a sentence.

I really just wanted to say that Kevin Conway was an inspiration to me and really did amazing things for the town of Huddersfield—the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) was briefly here a moment ago, but has had to go—through his uncompromising approach. He did not have an ideological approach; it was just an insistence on very high standards. Through that great work, he really did change the lives of a lot of people.

Let us move on from the debacle of my attempt to pay tribute to my old principal to a point of policy and boring stuff that I can talk about without welling up. When one visits technical colleges, one always sees the potential. I was in South Leicestershire College just the other day visiting the public services class—the wonderful young people who are going to go off and become firefighters and police officers.

The Government should look again at the whole issue of GCSE resits in FE colleges, because the move to FE and a more work-like environment—I particularly like apprenticeships, but FE is also an important part of the mix—is such an important part of the process for young people who perhaps did not get on with school. These people may have felt like it was not for them and that they were not achieving. The thought behind it was right—that everyone needs a basic grounding in English and maths—but I increasingly think that the GCSE is just not the right thing. Almost everybody who fails it a first time goes on to fail it a second time, and that is very discouraging for young people. It is not the right qualification to ask them to do. Instead, we should look at offering some kind of “maths and English for the citizen” type of qualification.

Emma Hardy: I wholeheartedly agree with the hon. Gentleman's point about GCSE resits. Does he agree with me about the need to look again at functional skills qualifications in FE colleges, which offer a similar level of understanding in maths and English but, as he said, are taught in a different, more vocational way that is suitable for the children attending FE?

Neil O'Brien: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, as she has managed to put the point that I was trying to make more clearly than I was able to.

Opposition Members and my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford have already touched on the issue of funding for sixth-form colleges. Clearly, there is a very odd shape of funding—there is this drop-off at sixth form. On the productivity in our schools and the bad consequences of that, I think sixth-form colleges are actually our most efficient type of school. They achieve the highest results, even though they do not benefit from the £1 billion a year internal transfer within schools as school sixth forms do. It is sort of obvious why they are so effective: instead of having an A-level class with two people in it, there are classes with 30 kids in them, like the classes in the college that I attended. If we changed funding for sixth-form colleges and that stage

of education more generally, it would help to level the playing field, and I think we would see a lot more sixth-form colleges.

I have probably detained the House too long already, but if it is acceptable to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will mention two last things. We have already touched on the issue of smartphones and social media. There is so much potential to improve education. I know that the new Minister at the Department is passionate and is pushing the exciting things that are going on in edu-tech. But it also has the potential to disrupt and cause problems in our classrooms. I am a strong supporter of the idea already mentioned and the work that is going on in the Science and Technology Committee on the effect of smartphones and social media on young people's mental health. I am a strong supporter of having a national campaign to limit and control the use of smartphones in class. There is an excellent London School of Economics study based on a randomised control trial that shows that there is a substantive increase in GCSE performance in schools that introduced a ban on smartphones in class. I agree with the Government that we should not have a one-size-fits-all national policy—I do not think we should do exactly what France has done—but I would love to see a national campaign to help schools to put in lockers and to adopt other policies to get smartphones out of the classroom, because they can be distracting in class and they are also sometimes distracting at home. Children arrive at school tired because they have been on a Snapchat streaks feature until 1 o'clock in the morning. There is lots of bad practice by our social media companies which are aiming to addict and to take up young people's attention.

I think that I have covered all the things I wanted to cover in my speech. I am incredibly grateful to the various hon. Members who helped me to get through it.

1.50 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien). I enjoyed so much of his speech, especially the passionate and kind tribute he paid to his principal. I think that everyone in the House found that extremely moving. He was clearly an inspirational man, so I thank the hon. Gentleman for that. Sadly, I do not know if we are going to continue to agree as I make the rest of my speech—but we started well.

Back in 2011, when I saw the school system that the coalition Government were creating, I remember standing at a rally and asking the question, “In this brave new world of the educational system that the Government are creating, what happens to the children no school wants?” The combination of a high-stakes accountability system and reduced school funding has created a perverse incentive for schools to off-roll and discourage certain children from attending mainstream schools. Parents of children with special educational needs and disabilities are in despair. I am quite sure that every hon. Member here has had parents in their constituency surgery giving them the same story. Some parents are forced into spending thousands of pounds trying to get the resources promised them in their education, health and care plans.

As evidenced by the recent Barnardo's report, our excluded, or off-rolled, children are vulnerable to becoming involved in criminal activity, or to being exploited or groomed. This is the true educational legacy of the

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coalition Government. They wasted billions on ideologically driven pet academy projects, a school curriculum that does not meet the needs of all our children, an accountability system that has destroyed teaching careers and has no way of recognising or valuing inclusive schools, and a school system that fails too many of our most vulnerable children.

Although I am happy to stand here and talk about improving school standards, I will focus on the forgotten children and evaluate what standard of schooling they are getting. For Members who are not aware of this, let me quote the Ofsted definition of off-rolling:

“The practice of removing a pupil from the school roll without a formal, permanent exclusion or by encouraging a parent to remove their child from the school roll, when the removal is primarily in the interests of the school rather than in the best interests of the pupil.”

I have been reading reports about this. Some of the suggested reasons for the rise in off-rolling include unintended incentives through school performance measures such as Progress 8 to remove lower-performing pupils from a school’s score and financial pressures on schools incentivising the removal of some children from the school roll. As I know from having been a teacher, it requires more resource to teach and help to develop children who are not performing as well as others than it does to teach a child who is very quick and understands things very easily.

Our Education Committee report—a cross-party report—said in its recommendations:

“An unfortunate and unintended consequence of the Government’s strong focus on school standards has led to school environments and practices that have resulted in disadvantaged children being disproportionately excluded, which includes a curriculum with a lack of focus on developing pupils’ social and economic capital. There appears to be a lack of moral accountability on the part of many schools and no incentive to, or deterrent to not, retain pupils who could be classed as difficult or challenging.”

That is, let us be honest, a diplomatic way of saying that off-rolling has been caused by the coalition Government’s changes to education since 2010.

We are talking about improving school standards, so let us look at what standard of education these children get—the ones who are kicked out of schools and not wanted. What happens to them? Research by Education Datalab published in January 2017 stated that

“outcomes for all groups of pupils who leave the roll of a mainstream school are poor, with only around 1% of children who leave to state alternative provision or a special school, and 29% of those who leave to a university technical college (UTC) or studio school, achieving five good GCSEs...there exists a previously unidentified group of nearly 20,000 children who leave the rolls of mainstream secondary schools to a range of other destinations for whom outcomes are also very poor, with only 6% recorded as achieving five good GCSEs”.

Who are the children being off-rolled? Ofsted says—it is not Labour saying this:

“Children with special educational needs, children eligible for free school meals, children looked after, and some minority ethnic groups are all more likely to leave their school.”

These children—our neediest children—are being failed by the system that this Government introduced, but there are signs of a fight-back by the profession.

I pay credit to the Association of School and College Leaders, which has recently established the Ethical Leadership Commission as the beginning of a process

to articulate the ethical values that should underpin the UK’s education leaders. I call on the Government to do everything they can to support this and to look again at how the accountability measures can be changed to reward inclusive schools and heads who are genuinely trying to do the right thing.

We have looked at off-rolled children, so now let us look at improving school standards for children with special educational needs and disabilities. What happens to them? The Education Committee, on which I serve, is currently doing an enquiry into SEND, and we have heard powerful evidence from our witnesses. This is what one parent told us:

“I quickly understood the bigger picture, which was that I was dealing with a dysfunctional system of rationing in which the central criterion was which parents could push the hardest. Because I am a reasonably well-educated and well-resourced person who can read nine pages of text and spew out an approximation of them in two minutes...I could just about play the system successfully.”

Good for him, and he got the resources that his son needs, but what about all the children with special educational needs and disabilities whose parents do not know how to fight the system? What happens to them? How much support do they get? They are failed, excluded or encouraged to leave—that is what happens to them.

We cannot have a debate about improving school standards without also talking about funding, because funding matters. Only this week, the Headteachers Roundtable came to give evidence to the Education Committee. One of them, Laura McNerney, said, “Schools cannot afford to be inclusive.” She argued that restricted funding means that schools cannot afford crucial pastoral support for their children, and this is one of the main drivers behind exclusions. I do not think that schools have suddenly become crueler or teachers have suddenly become more unkind, but I know as a teacher that if I have 30 children in my class, I have problem behaviour with one or two of them and I have no resource in the rest of the school to support me with them, of course I am not going to want those children in my classroom.

We should be saying to schools, “Here are the resources to provide the pastoral support. Here are the resources to help those children deal with anger through anger management to enable them to stay in a mainstream setting.” These are the people who have gone, because when the funding cuts bite, schools cannot take away the teacher in front of the children in the classroom, so what do they do? I know that this happens in every constituency around the country—although I accept, looking at the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham), that I do not know as much about Scotland. Pastoral support and teaching assistants go—that is what happens.

On 6 September this year, the National Association of Head Teachers published the results of a survey on SEND funding. Only 2% of respondents said that the top-up funding they received was sufficient to meet individual education, health and care plans or statements for pupils with SEND—just 2% got enough money to support children with special needs in their schools—and 94% said they were finding it harder to resource the support required than they did two years ago.

Katie Moore, the principal of Fullbrook School in the Chancellor’s constituency, recently gave an interview, because the Chancellor had visited her school and she wanted to talk about the impact of the cuts. She said:

“He saw on his visit to Fullbrook that we are desperate for enough money to support the basics”—

let alone the children with SEND—

“of our students’ curriculum and the fundamentals of a good education, not just what he described as ‘little extras’. We need an increase to ongoing core funding that addresses the cost of teachers and support staff. We need to close the funding gap left by the 8% real-terms cuts over the last five years that schools in his constituency and around the country are unable to meet.”

It is impossible to discuss improving school standards without addressing the basic need for increased funding of our schools. I want to pay tribute to the brave headteachers who have taken part in the “Worth Less?” campaign for more funding for their pupils. I was involved in the demonstrations back in 2011 with other teachers against what was happening to my profession, so I know that it is unprecedented for headteachers to march on Downing Street. Two thousand of them came, and they did not come waving banners and placards or blowing whistles, although part of me wishes they did. They came to simply ask the Government, “Give us enough money for our schools.”

Luke Graham: The hon. Lady says that those protests were unprecedented, but they have also been happening in Glasgow, where the pay award for teachers and headteachers is seen as insufficient. This is not a particular problem in her part of the United Kingdom, but right across it.

Emma Hardy: I would always argue for more funding for schools right across the United Kingdom, and the hon. Gentleman would have my support in arguing for that.

Let us look at what some schools that do not have the staffing resources are doing. If there is a problematic pupil in a classroom and a school does not have the resources—the pastoral support, the anger management and all the people I have mentioned—to deal with them, what does the school do? I am sure colleagues across the House know about the increasing use of isolation rooms for extended periods. I believe that this is partly fuelled by the need for a cheap solution to problematic behaviour. Schools do not have the resources to address the causes of the behaviour, so they treat the symptoms.

Even if we think, “Those kids deserve it. Put them in isolation—it’s good for them,” or some other macho comment that comes out from the Government every now and again, we surely cannot believe that these children are getting any kind of quality educational experience. In fact, the evidence shows that they are being given generic online resources instead of equivalent work, so while these children are in isolation, they might as well not be in school at all. They are missing weeks of learning. How will that help them? How will that improve schools standards?

I want to conclude by saying that it does not have to be this way. With adequate funding and local authority resourcing, local experts could come into schools and provide the crucial services that local authorities used to offer. I hope the hon. Member for Harborough agrees with me. All the specialists who are needed—speech therapists, educational psychologists, education welfare officers, school social workers; I could go on—could be provided at local authority level, to come into schools and support every child.

We could also look at reducing the demand for education, health and care plans by providing school-level support. I know from our Education Committee inquiry that one of the reasons parents are so desperate to get EHC plans is that they see it as a passport to accessing the funding and resourcing they need, but if we gave schools the money to start with, parents would not need to drag themselves to a tribunal and spend thousands of pounds trying to fight the system. They would have what their child needs in the school right there and then.

Fundamentally, we need to reform our accountability measures. We need to look at how we as a society can say to schools that include all children in their area, “We reward and recognise that you’re doing that, and we think it’s a good thing” because the current system does not. We should also get rid of the £6,000 notional funding for SEND and enable schools to have the money from the very beginning, rather than make them spend that first £6,000.

When I am told that education standards are improving, as I was when I sat and listened to the Minister for half an hour at the beginning of the debate, my challenge is: include all the children—add them all in. Let us look at every single one of them. How good does our system look if we include all the children who have been excluded, all the children who have been off-rolled, all the children in alternative provision and all the children who have been electively home-educated? Let us put them all in the mix—now tell me the coalition Government have done a good job.

If we want to improve education standards for all pupils, we need to break with the coalition’s ideology of the past and create and reward inclusive schools that are well-funded, well-resourced to provide the necessary support for all pupils and with the curriculum flexibility to adapt to every child’s need. We have the answer to the question I asked in 2011. The children that no school wants are rejected, marginalised, failed and left vulnerable to criminal activity. We reap what we sow, and it is time to change.

2.5 pm

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): It is a pleasure to take part in a debate on such an important issue and to follow the powerful speech made by the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy).

I would like to start by praising the hard work of teachers, governors and support staff in schools in my constituency. I am deeply grateful for the work they do. As I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) agrees, we are very lucky in the borough of Barnet to have some of the best state schools in the country. I particularly commend Totteridge Academy, which I visited recently for its democracy day. I am always hugely impressed by the students I meet in schools in my constituency, including Totteridge Academy, which had an immensely successful democracy day, engaging students in a range of activities to encourage participation in politics.

I welcome the expansion of school places in Barnet as part of the Government’s delivery of around 800,000 more school places—the biggest expansion for well over 30 years. I very much agree that providing the best education for children and young people is a huge engine of social mobility. Great educational opportunities

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are essential if we are to give young people the chance to get on in life and make a success of their lives. A good education is crucial. That means that raising standards in education and improving schools are vital parts of delivering social justice and social mobility.

It is welcome that there are now so many more children—1.9 million—studying in good or outstanding schools than eight years ago, when the Conservatives returned to office. Under the last Labour Government, England slipped down the international league tables in reading, maths and science, but that trend has been reversed, as shown by a number of international benchmarks. For example, the progress in international reading literacy study shows that pupils in England are now outperforming their peers in many countries, including Canada, Australia and the United States.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making an important point about how crucial it is that there are opportunities for our young in schools, more and more of which are rated good or outstanding. Does she agree that that can happen in areas that are described as deprived? Robinswood Primary Academy, Tredworth Junior School, Finlay Community School and Coney Hill Community Primary School in my constituency are all great examples of outstanding primary schools in difficult areas. With the right leadership and the right support from Government, it can be done.

Theresa Villiers: My hon. Friend makes a strong point. One of the impressive aspects of the improvements in education over recent years is that so many of them have been seen in areas with high levels of deprivation. The improvement of schools in London is an important illustration of that, with schools supporting children from diverse backgrounds and, in some instances, very disadvantaged backgrounds. They have been some of the really striking success stories of recent years. As he says, it is absolutely possible, indeed essential, to ensure that improvements in schools and school standards deliver for those communities.

Emma Hardy: I am sure the right hon. Lady is just about to recognise the work that was done under the previous Labour Government called the London challenge, which encouraged and supported heads working together. I agree that that led to a fundamental change and improvement in education outcomes for pupils living in London.

Theresa Villiers: There were aspects of the Labour Government's approach to education with which I did not agree, but I agree that they did have some real success. That was at its most obvious in many of the London boroughs, so the hon. Lady makes a fair point about that project.

One of the main reasons for the improvement in school standards in recent years is the emphasis that the Conservatives have put on ensuring that children are taught to read using the most effective methods. Thanks to the hard work of teachers and the Government's drive for phonics, the results of the phonics screening test introduced in 2012 have improved significantly.

As we have already heard in today's debate, efforts have been made to tackle grade inflation. In the Blair-Brown years, employer and university confidence in the school

exam system was eroded. The reforms made by this Government and their coalition predecessor to make GCSEs and A-levels tougher and more rigorous are bearing fruit. The exams are now more stretching for students, ensuring that they have a better grounding for further study or indeed for life in the workplace. I for one particularly welcome the increased focus on good spelling and grammar, which I think are important life skills for any young person.

The striking improvement in schools over recent years means that state schools are now beginning to catch up with the independent sector, as acknowledged in evidence cited by Professor Alan Smithers, director of the centre for education and employment research at the University of Buckingham. Even more importantly, the attainment gap between children from disadvantaged backgrounds and other students has closed by 10% since 2010.

It is important to highlight that an effective way of improving standards in schools is to ensure that we have the best possible early years education. Delivering high-quality early years and pre-school education can play an incredibly positive role in improving educational standards in schools, but also in delivering social mobility and opportunity. Research demonstrates that if children fall behind in the early years, many simply never catch up. Their life chances can be permanently blighted by being held back at that early stage.

I would always urge Ministers to have a strong focus on helping parents access the highest-quality affordable early years education and support. The reformed early years foundation stage profile will have an important role to play in that. I hope the Minister will update the House on progress on that initiative when she sums up the debate.

Emma Hardy: I wholeheartedly agree with the right hon. Lady about the importance of early years education, and I hope she will agree with me about the importance of maintained nursery provision and maintained nursery schools. Will she urge the Government to make sure that any reforms they introduce do not have a negative effect on what is proven to be a very successful way of helping our youngest children?

Theresa Villiers: The hon. Lady anticipates something I am going to come on to—I am going to talk about the maintained nursery sector.

Across the board in early years provision, we need to ensure that we provide the best training and professional development opportunities for people working in the sector, to increase their ability to support children's early speech and language development. While considering the important issue of early years, I would like to look at the issues involving the maintained nursery school sector. There are a number of maintained nursery schools in my constituency, which are grouped into the Barnet Early Years Alliance. As the Minister and others in the Chamber will know, when the early years national funding formula was introduced in 2017, the Government agreed to maintain level funding for maintained nursery schools up until 2019-20, through a block of supplementary funding of about £59 million a year. However, there is currently no certainty after 2020, which leaves the maintained nursery schools sector unable to plan and budget for the future, so its status is uncertain.

As the hon. Lady has just done, I emphasise that many maintained nursery schools deliver excellent education, including those in BEYA in my constituency. It is important for the Government to ensure that they find a new sustainable role for maintained sector nursery schools as centres of excellence and training. I know that work has been undertaken on this, but we are getting to the stage when decisions need to be made about the future status of these schools. I urge the Minister to consider that, as well, in responding to my remarks. We are getting perilously close to the point at which funding for the maintained sector is due to come to an end, and we need to ensure that we have a settled future for these schools.

I turn to vocational education and training. For many decades, successive Governments have tried to improve technical education, but I think we would all acknowledge that they have had pretty mixed results. For example, the Wolf review concluded that when Labour was in power at least 350,000 young people were let down by courses that had “little or no labour market value.”

I think we would all agree that delivering excellence in technical education is crucial for any modern economy to be successful, but somehow this prize seems to have eluded us in this country.

I very much hope that the T-levels programme, which this Government are pioneering, will mark a turning point. The investment in these new qualifications runs to hundreds of millions, and I welcome that. I urge the Government to do everything they can to ensure that these new qualifications become high-quality, credible and successful alternatives to the traditional academic path in education. One of the most important tasks for our education system as a whole is to ensure that we provide the opportunity for young people to take on technical education and thrive as a result.

Richard Graham: I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend about the importance of vocational education. Does she agree with me that while we have had terrific success in driving up the number of people in our constituents who are taking on apprenticeships, the bulk of this work is being done through further education colleges, which since 2010 have in effect had two cuts and a freeze? The recent increases to their teachers’ pay and pensions are not covered by the Treasury; they have to meet those costs themselves. Does she agree that it would be very helpful if the Minister addressed this issue, which I believe is one of underfunding in our further education colleges?

Theresa Villiers: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend that the further education sector is crucial, as we have already heard in the debate, and we need to make sure that it has the resources it needs. I am sure the Minister will have taken on board the points that he has made, and I hope she will respond to them in her concluding remarks.

My hon. Friend is right that further education colleges, working alongside employers, are playing an important role in the delivery of apprenticeships, which is another reason why it is an important sector. I will close by saying a few words about apprenticeships, because they are so crucial in giving young people the skills they need to get on in life. About 3 million have been delivered since 2010, and we need to keep up that record in the future.

There is general acknowledgment that the apprenticeship levy has had some teething problems, and I very much hope that the changes announced in the recent Budget will help to remedy them and give more young people the chance to participate in an apprenticeship. However, apprenticeships have been a real success story. They have become longer and better, and they include more off-the-job training to complement the learning that takes place in the workplace; hence the role for the further education sector that my hon. Friend has just highlighted.

Emma Hardy: Again, I agree with the right hon. Lady about the importance of apprenticeships. The Education Committee recently did an inquiry into apprenticeships, and one thing that came out of that—I would like to know her thoughts on it—was the need for greater regulation to ensure that young apprentices are not exploited or paid less than the apprenticeship minimum wage. Does she agree that although many fantastic employers are doing the right thing, there should be greater regulation to ensure that everyone who does an apprenticeship has a high-quality learning experience?

Theresa Villiers: I agree that a successful apprenticeships programme is not just about quantity; it is also about quality, and we must ensure consistency in the training that comes with an apprenticeship. I would be delighted to read the report to which the hon. Lady refers. There probably is a case for stricter regulation in that area—the Minister will also have heard that point—and we must ensure good quality control so that young people thrive as a result of apprenticeships and are not in any sense exploited.

Richard Graham: This is a very interesting point. Those of us who have had apprentices, as I have for the past seven years, know that the minimum apprenticeship wage is exactly that—a minimum—and the vast majority of people will pay significantly more. My right hon. Friend was right to mention the number of employers with which some further education colleges engage on apprenticeships. I was amazed to hear the other day that Gloucestershire College is now working with 1,112 employers. I think the Minister visited that college last year, and she will be interested to hear that it has just launched a cyber-security apprenticeship, which is a further example of innovation by that sector. Does my right hon. Friend agree that there is no limit to how many new types of apprenticeship we can continue to create when there is demand in the workplace?

Theresa Villiers: I certainly agree with that last point, and I welcome the apprenticeship in cyber-security to which my hon. Friend referred. I am a member of the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, and we recently published a report that highlighted big skills gaps in cyber-security, so I am pleased that Gloucestershire College is helping to fill those gaps.

My hon. Friend emphasises the role of the further education sector, but we must also recognise the great potential for the higher education and university sectors regarding apprenticeships. Middlesex University, near my constituency, is pioneering degree apprenticeships that combine the academic and technical in an innovative new form that could appeal to many young people. Apprenticeships deliver the combined benefit of broadening

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opportunities for young people while also improving the skills base for our economy to make us more competitive in the global race for jobs and investment.

Emma Hardy: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Theresa Villiers: I think I will conclude my remarks now.

A successful apprenticeships programme is vital for a thriving economy. If we are to be serious about social mobility and social justice, as I believe Members in all parts of the House are, and about ensuring that everyone can go as far as their talents and hard work will take them, and if we want to make this a country that works for everyone, the subject that we are debating is crucial. To give children in this country the best start in life we need excellent schools, great teaching, rigorous exams and the best technical education we can offer. I will be working to ensure that we achieve all those goals, and I urge the Government to do the same.

2.23 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) and to hear contributions from other Members about improving education standards across the whole United Kingdom. The Minister has responsibility only for England and Wales, but I wish to put on the record in *Hansard* some of the excellent education achievements from Northern Ireland. Although the Minister does not have direct responsibility for the improvements we are seeking, I still wish to put my points on the record.

It will not be a secret in this House that this is another great day on which I am proud to hail from Northern Ireland and be the Member of Parliament for Strangford. I also wish to put on the record my thanks to all the principals, teachers, care staff and kitchen staff, and all those who work in the schools and education system in my constituency and across Northern Ireland, with all its collective and different strands, including state schools, integrated schools, or the Catholic-controlled maintained schools. They are all doing an excellent job, as indeed are the faith schools.

On days like this, I am able completely to dispel the label that is often attached to those of us from Northern Ireland. Earlier the Minister referred to languages, and yesterday in the Jubilee Room near Westminster Hall, there was a modern languages event held by the Open World Research Initiative. Queen's University Belfast was represented at that event, as were some other universities, and it is important to realise the importance of languages and how they can open up the world and provide opportunities and jobs for students.

This year, again, results in Northern Ireland outstripped those on the mainland and, with respect, in recent years students from Northern Ireland have outperformed their counterparts in England and Wales. In 2017, for instance, A* or A grades were achieved by more than three in 10—30.4%—of Northern Ireland entries. There have been big changes to A-levels in England with reduced or no coursework in some subjects, and exams alone determining results. AS-levels no longer count towards the final A-level grade in England. That is not the case in Northern Ireland, where AS-level results still count towards the final A-level grade. More than three-quarters

of A-levels in Northern Ireland are taken through the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations & Assessment, and the rest of the entries are taken through a variety of English and Welsh exam boards.

Exam results this year have been excellent, and I declare an interest as one of the governors in a school in my constituency, Glastry College. Its results were excellent, as were many results across my constituency and Northern Ireland. The number of A* to C grades rose by just under 1% to 81.1%, around one in 10 entries received the top A* grade, and 85.1% of entries from girls achieved A* to C grades. The proportion of entries from boys achieving those grades was slightly lower at 76.9%. There was also a significant rise of almost 5% in the number of girls taking science, technology, engineering and maths—other Members have mentioned that point in their contributions. We were greatly encouraged by the interest shown in those STEM subjects, which now account for 43% of all GCSE entries. A total of 8.4% of entries from boys resulted in an A* grade, compared with 8% for girls. Again, that is a vast improvement and step forward.

Girls in Northern Ireland still outperform boys overall, although the gap is closing. The percentage of entries achieving A* or A grades remained unchanged from last year at 30.4%, but the overall A* to E pass rate at A-level in Northern Ireland decreased slightly to 98.2%. Those are significant figures that show that the education system in Northern Ireland has achieved much. We could, however, perhaps do more when it comes to improving educational standards, and I will outline why.

In Northern Ireland the grades are great, but it is difficult to see how long that can continue without an Education Minister in the Northern Ireland Assembly, which is not currently functioning as it should. We need someone to step up and step in. Our schools are massively struggling with budget cuts—a cut of £40,000 for a small country school means the loss of a teacher, which is the death knell for any small school. Teachers are increasingly attempting to source and buy their own resources so that their pupils have the necessary learning tools. The Northern Ireland Affairs Committee is carrying out an inquiry into education and health in Northern Ireland, because those are two of the most pertinent and important social issues at this moment. A doctor is not expected to purchase morphine, so why are teachers buying craft items out of their own pockets? That is happening in schools across Northern Ireland. It might be happening elsewhere as well—I suspect it is.

I was proud and yet annoyed that in one small local school, Carrickmannon Primary School, the teachers and parent-teacher association bag packed on a Saturday to raise money for a new computer whiteboard that could not be sourced from the education authorities because the monies are not there. I am proud because of the school spirit that saw teachers giving up more of their free time to pack people's bags out of a love for their school, yet annoyed that the school was in such dire straits that it had no option other than to ask the local community for help. Again, these are some of the things that are happening.

It is absurd that the school had to do that. There is a pot of funding for other purposes such as allowing children to go on cross-community school trips, yet they come back to schools with wonky chairs and

no glue. We need someone in place at Stormont to review budgets and allocate funding appropriately. Failing that, if the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland could take some time out—I say this with respect; she is not in her place—of her propaganda tour of Northern Ireland businesses to address this issue, I would be intensely appreciative. I know with certainty that every parent in Northern Ireland would be incredibly grateful, too, if we could find ourselves with an education system that can transcend the financial cuts.

The education authority has analysed the financial position of about 1,000 schools for 2018-19. Its figures show that 446 schools are projected to be in the red in 2018. Let us be clear that that is not due to any mismanagement or frivolous spending. The Northern Ireland Audit Office has said that school budgets have been reduced by 10% in real terms over the past five years, so how can they be expected to continue to meet the budget while improving education standards? That is what this debate is about. I have boasted and bragged over our results in Northern Ireland, but I know with certainty that this cannot continue in underfunded schools—this disgrace must be addressed.

We must all acknowledge—other hon. Members have referred to this—that school is about more than grades. It is about life experience and helping children to find out what they are good at and can excel at. It is about encouraging them to do better, making their minds work creatively and initiating their abilities. It is about granting a child a love of music through free lessons that their parents could never afford to provide. It is about encouraging children to be active with after-school sports clubs by providing equipment and teaching skills. These are the things that build character and personality for the jobs they will have in the future. All that is affected by budget cuts. One of my local schools has had to stop employing its music teacher and the after-school programme due to lack of funding. I feel intensely frustrated when I see something good having to stop. Teachers are already not paid for additional work, such as replacing whiteboards and buying craft materials to make learning interesting. Now schools are being forced to cut teachers or make them take on even more responsibilities. Something has got to give and my fear is that it will be educational standards and the quality we have to offer. Considering the results we have in Northern Ireland, it would be a terrible pity if we in any way inhibit them.

The results show that Northern Ireland has the best—I say this with respect to the Minister and to every right hon. and hon. Member in the Chamber—education system in whole of the UK.

Theresa Villiers: There is much debate and commentary about the divisions in education in Northern Ireland. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one positive recent development in schools in Northern Ireland is the concept of the shared school, where different types of schools work closely together from across the traditional divide?

Jim Shannon: I thank the right hon. Lady for that intervention. She has knowledge of Northern Ireland. As I said earlier, I am on the board of governors for Glastry College. The college works alongside St Columba's in Portaferry, the Catholic maintained school, the Strangford Integrated College in Strangford, and other grammar

schools in Bangor and Newtownards. They come together to put on classes that they would not otherwise be able to hold individually because of the cost. There are a lot of examples of that kind of working. I know about them personally in my constituency and I know they exist across the whole of Northern Ireland.

I believe Northern Ireland has the best education system in the whole of the United Kingdom. That will not continue without funding and a capable Minister to oversee it. Stormont may be silent, but the hon. Member for Strangford will not be silent when it comes to speaking up for our education system, whether in this House or elsewhere. We need help and we need attention, and we need it now before we lose the potential of a generation of children. They could suffer as a result of what is happening.

Northern Ireland education is not the responsibility of the Minister on the Front Bench. As a devolved matter, it is not the direct responsibility of this House. However, I ask the Minister to speak to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and the Education permanent secretary in Northern Ireland to save the education of my grandchildren and every other child in Northern Ireland.

2.34 pm

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

I welcome this debate as it gives me the opportunity to comment on school standards and how, in the London Borough of Barnet, they are being affected by the number of school places and the ability of headteachers to attract qualified teachers. I am particularly pleased that my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) is in her place. My hon. Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer) has had to leave for a Whips' meeting, but he said he would attend this debate so he could hear what was said, particularly about Barnet.

It is fundamentally a given that we need teachers to undertake the teaching in our schools, and we need places and spaces in which to teach our children. I think it is a given that we can all agree on that point. I want to focus on those two areas, which both impact directly on school standards. My constituency of Hendon lies within the London Borough of Barnet. As the education provider, Barnet Council has established its strategic vision of education:

“Resilient schools, resilient communities: we want Barnet to be the most successful place for high quality education where excellent school standards result in all children achieving their best, being safe and happy and able to progress to become successful adults.”

Usually, I do not buy into woolly mission statements, but in this case the council has got it absolutely right. It has established what that vision looks like: a shared mission to ensure that every child attends a good or outstanding school. Once again, I think everyone here can agree with that. That is a sensible and laudable ambition.

Barnet is different from some local authorities in that the attainment and progress of children in Barnet schools is within the top 10% nationally, and that the progress of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable pupils is accelerated in order to close the gap between them and their peers. Some may say that Barnet and Hendon are a rich part of London, but I would say that, economically,

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it is very diverse. I have areas where people certainly live in £1 million houses. In other areas, however, the median income is very low. We therefore educate a wide range of children from different social classes. For Barnet to do that is already a great achievement.

Along with the need to focus on the attainment and progress of all pupils and deliver the strategy, there has to be sufficient provision in the borough for all children and young people. The provision needs to be of the highest quality both in terms of school buildings and teachers. The Minister was kind enough to see me on the latter point several months ago and is therefore aware that this is a significant problem in my constituency and in the constituencies of my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet and my hon. Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green. Indeed, it is a problem across much of London, where teacher recruitment and retention is a major challenge due to high housing and living costs.

Many schools, such as Colindale primary in my constituency, which has been rated as good by Ofsted under the leadership of Lucy Rogers, rely on teachers from Commonwealth countries such as Australia, New Zealand and Canada. They invest time and money in these teachers only to lose them because they cannot reach the points required for a tier 2 visa. I also brought this point to the Minister's attention. Schools are then either left struggling with less than a full complement of teachers or buying in services from agencies, which is very expensive. However good the teachers may be, teaching and learning inevitably become disjointed and inconsistent, and the ultimate result is a fall in standards.

The Minister said in his opening remarks that more money has been invested in schools to promote standards. This is correct, but the amount per pupil has actually declined, because of the increased number of pupils on roll. Schools in my constituency, and indeed all those in the London Borough of Barnet, face an additional issue, which is the formula that allows additional resources for so-called inner-London boroughs. This anachronistic financial mechanism ensures that Barking and Dagenham, Brent, Camden, City of London, Ealing, Greenwich, Hackney, Hammersmith and Fulham, Haringey, Islington, Kensington and Chelsea, Lambeth, Lewisham, Merton, Newham, Southwark, Tower Hamlets, Wandsworth and Westminster all receive a greater amount of resources, which allows their schools to make additional payments to their teachers. This ensures that teaching is more financially attractive in inner-London schools. Consequently, schools in Hendon are in direct competition with schools in neighbouring boroughs such as Camden and Brent, which are better funded and so able to pay higher salaries.

The NASUWT website advises that a newly qualified teacher at an inner-London school should receive a starting salary of £28,660, compared with £26,662 for a school in Hendon, which is a difference of £1,998. If a newly qualified teacher is offered a position at two schools, one in an inner-London borough and one in an outer-London borough, it is pretty obvious which one they will choose. I presume that the inner and outer-London designation is a legacy of the old Inner London Education Authority, but I gently suggest to the Minister that, 28 years after its wise abolition, it is time to abolish

these designations. People living in one part of London pay the same costs as those in another, while all face the disproportionate cost of living in London compared with the rest of the country. Schools across London, including mine in Colindale, can have 15 or more languages spoken by pupils, so it is no longer an issue for inner-London schools only, and many of the issues that bedevilled the ILEA have now spread to outer-London boroughs.

Under this Government, the number of teachers has not kept pace with increasing pupil numbers. The number of pupils per qualified teacher has increased from 17.8 five years ago to 18.7 last year. Most worryingly, the recruitment of initial teacher trainees has been below target in each year since 2012, with wide variations across subjects. In addition, the numbers of full-time teacher vacancies and temporarily filled posts have both risen since 2011. Overall, pupil numbers are expected to continue rising, with the number of secondary school pupils projected to increase by 15% between 2018 and 2025.

That brings me to my second point: school places. Two years ago, the BBC reported on a projection of school places based on a population bulge. It showed that the primary population was 4.5 million and predicted it would rise to 4.68 million by 2020, when it would stabilise. It suggested, however, that the next big increase would be in secondary schools, where the population was projected to rise from 2.76 million pupils to 3.04 million in 2020 and then 3.33 million in 2025. This is a particular problem in the London Borough of Barnet. The previous Labour Government prioritised secondary schools through the Building Schools for the Future programme but left us in Barnet to ensure the provision of schools places under our own primary schools capital investment programme.

It was left to my hon. Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green and I, as leader and deputy leader of the council respectively, to resolve the issue. We did this through PSCIP, an innovative programme whereby we released land for residential development while investing the resources raised into the schools programme. I was fortunate to end up being the cabinet member overseeing the projects, and I was proud to oversee the construction of several schools, including Fairway, Orion, Parkfield and Broadfields in Hendon, as well as receiving Beit Shvidler into the voluntary aided sector.

It is important to note that the programme has ensured that since 2009 more than 9,000 additional permanent school places have been established in the London Borough of Barnet. That is as a result of central and local government investment. Barnet is now one of London's most populous boroughs and has ambitious plans to grow further through the regeneration of areas such as Brent Cross, Colindale and West Hendon. It is also appropriate to note that of these 9,000 places 4,751 have been introduced in the Hendon constituency. I am very proud of that and pay tribute to the work of my hon. Friend and the current council leader, Richard Cornelius, for their work.

In order to maintain standards, we must ensure that every child attends a good or outstanding school, and so must continue this work in my constituency. It may be parochial, but I am keen to acknowledge for the record the hard work done in the last decade. In four wards—Colindale, West Hendon, Burnt Oak and Hendon—investment in the schools of Colindale, Orion, Blessed Dominic, St Mary's and St John's, Menorah

Foundation, St Joseph's and the Watling Park Free School is meeting current demand. That said, a shortfall is likely to emerge again this year as new housing is completed in the Colindale area. In the Hale, Mill Hill and Edgware wards, additional places have been provided at Broadfields, Beit Shvidler, Etz Chaim, Millbrook Park and the London Academy, and we hope that there is enough capacity in those schools to achieve the necessary provision for local children.

The success in the primary schools sector is now filtering through into the secondary schools. St Mary's and St John's in Hendon expanded provision last year, but St James's Catholic High School and Mill Hill have had to offer a bulge class, which is not in the best interests of the schools in the longer term. It is predicted by the local authority that from next year until 2023, with no new school provision, we will be looking at a shortfall of 429 places next year, 406 the following year, 540 the year after, and 680 in 2023.

Fortunately, St James's Catholic High School has expanded by two forms of entry and Saracens High School is due to open in Colindale, so they will alleviate some of the problems, but I make a plea to the Minister. The Government have approved Compton Free School's application to open a new sixth-form entry in Barnet, but the Department for Education has not identified a site. On the request and advice of Mill Hill councillor Val Duschinsky, I propose that the site being vacated at the Jehovah Witness Kingdom Hall on the Ridgeway in Mill Hill be considered as suitable.

In my maiden speech, I spoke about aspiration and said that if aspirations were not raised, the local people would be on a downward trajectory. It has already been said how education provides social mobility. I certainly agree. We must ensure the best possible school provision in places such as Barnet if we are to achieve the social mobility we want to see across the country, and although the Government have made good progress, having raised the figure from 66% to 84%, we need to ensure that that work continues and that no child is left behind.

I genuinely appreciate the work of teachers and all those employed in the education sector. One of the best things about being MP for Hendon is visiting its schools, not only engaging in things such as the Schools Meal Week and Democracy Week, as I did recently, but hearing what children want to do with their lives. As a child, I never had a single good teacher—I cannot recall a single good teacher—but rather than feeling resentful, I want to ensure that the pupils and young people in my area have good teachers and schools, and good life chances.

2.46 pm

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): It is a great pleasure and privilege not just to follow the hon. Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) but to praise the high standard of the speeches from Back Benchers and, indeed, from my hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane)—we will come to the Schools Minister shortly.

The hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) gave a thoughtful speech covering a wide range of areas. He was right to talk about the pressure from social media on teachers and students, 16-to-19 funding and soft skills—I prefer to call them enabling skills, because I have found that if we talk to officials and others about

soft skills, they put us down the register a bit. However, I entirely agree with everything he said, including about readiness for work, although it would have been easier for many schools if the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, when he was Education Secretary, had not scrapped the key stage 4 obligation on work experience as part of the curriculum.

I want to praise my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft), who cannot be in her place because she has a meeting with the Children's Commissioner, but who made a passionate speech about the importance of tackling school violence. She talked about staggering hours in schools and the involvement of the police. From my experience in Blackpool, I can say only that the more we can get the police involved with young people out of school as well as in it, the more we will be doing the right sorts of things. She, too, talked about social media pitfalls.

The hon. Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien) rightly referred to the horrific incident in Huddersfield. He then talked about the importance of quick early interventions and I agree with him, but I do not always think that that means reaching for the test; it often means reaching for a decent teacher. I also want to praise—I am sure the whole House will agree—the poignant tribute that he paid to his principal. The hon. Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) said that he did not have a single good teacher, but I think that most of us can remember, from some stage in our life, somebody who got that spark going, so all credit to the hon. Member for Harborough for that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) made a very powerful speech about the strong attachments and perverse incentives for schools to off-roll, and we heard that from others as well. She rightly raised the issue of SEN and disabilities. Incidentally, I have concerns in my constituency about the issue of off-rolling with regard to pupil referral units, as I am sure that many other hon. Members here do. She also mentioned, very importantly, pastoral support for teaching assistants.

The right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) talked about the importance of having opportunities for teaching language skills. She talked about the maintained nurseries sector and mentioned Middlesex University in the context of degree apprenticeships. A couple of weeks ago, I was fortunate enough to go to the Skills Show, at the same time as the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills, and I bumped into the people from Middlesex University, who of course brought their robot to the Education Committee. We were told by one or two members of the Committee that he had made more sense than some of the other people who had come before them previously.

Richard Graham: Just to go from robots back to excluded pupils for one second, does the hon. Gentleman agree that a really feasible quick fix on this would be to ensure that, if schools exclude pupils, they should be responsible for their results at the end of the year? Does he not agree that that would result in a sharp reduction?

Gordon Marsden: I hear what the hon. Gentleman has to say, but the fact is that we know that 10,000 people are off-rolled. At this stage in the proceedings, I think that we need to bell the cat, but I take his point.

[Gordon Marsden]

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) rightly drew attention to the different system in Northern Ireland, including the results in secondary school qualifications, and his concerns about small schools having to buy basic materials.

Finally, the hon. Member for Hendon talked about the diverse nature of his constituency and, very interestingly, about outer-London issues and tier 2 visas. I had the privilege of living in Golders Green for two years as a postgraduate. I am not sure whether that is in his constituency, but it is very near it, so I understand what he said about the difference between the Brent Cross and west Hendon areas, and I know, even after a long period, that those differences remain.

Educational standards are a priority across all ages and all sectors. They are not made in a day, but young people must be able to have a good start in life. That is why we need to focus on those early years, yet this Government have a hugely patchy record in that area. I am afraid that the Schools Minister did not even mention early years in his speech. My colleagues the shadow Education Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), and my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spennings Dale (Tracy Brabin) have tirelessly argued against this Government's record. Research by the Sutton Trust shows that over 1,000 Sure Start centres have been lost since 2010. More centres are operating on a part-time basis and the number of services has fallen. Parents are paying the price for that and for the Government underfunding the 30-hour offer. According to the Pre-school Learning Alliance, only around one third of childcare providers are delivering 30-hour places completely free.

On Sure Starts, in my constituency in Blackpool, where we have had huge cuts in local government funding, we have had to bear the brunt of this. I remember a Sure Start in Mereside where I met a young woman three times: the first time, she was using the Sure Start; the second time, she had graduated to being an assistant at the Sure Start; and the third time, she was training to be a primary school teacher. That sort of progression has been lost in the hollowing out of Sure Starts by the Government.

Emma Hardy: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Gordon Marsden: No, I will not, I am afraid, because I am very short of time. If standards are rising for the cohorts that the Government have talked about, some of that is significantly down to the achievement of the Labour Government before 2010, not to a succession of post-2010 Tory-led Governments that have savaged Sure Starts, while undermining their funding and purpose at every turn. They have done the same with further education colleges.

The financial position of the colleges over the past 10 years, as the Association of Colleges tells us, is that they have had to deal with an average funding cut of 30%, while costs have increased dramatically. Funding for students aged 16 to 18 has been cut by 8% in real terms since 2010. It is entirely right that the chief inspector of Ofsted, writing to the Public Accounts Committee, said the other week:

“My strong view is that the government should use the forthcoming spending review to increase the base rate for 16 to 18 funding.”
Cash has led directly to falling standards in FE.

As we know, the position is similar in other areas. Funding for sixth-form colleges, for example, was subject to deep cuts in 2011 and 2013, and the national funding rate for 16 to 17-year-olds remains frozen at £4,000. I have seen these problems in my own area. The fantastic Blackpool Sixth Form College, which has done brilliant work in the 20-odd years for which I have been the local MP, has also felt the chill wind of the Government's deliberate policies on austerity. It has had to cut Business and Technology Education Council courses, and wonders, rather sceptically, about T-levels. At the same time, however, it has managed to maintain variety, and outstanding classical civilisation courses are delivered by an outstanding teacher, Peter Wright.

The same applies to higher education. Universities UK says in a briefing that it sent to me for this debate that it estimates from the media reports of the Government's review that the cut in tuition fees would lead, without replacement, to “significant cuts in universities”. However, this is not just about cuts, but about the other moves that are being suggested. There are concerns about varying fee levels. The Chancellor seems keen to introduce STEM fees, which increase the disincentive for many disadvantaged students, ignoring the fact that many arts and humanities degrees, especially the creative ones, are expensive because of the techniques and equipment required.

The Government have been very negligent in relation to English as a second language, which has not been mentioned much this afternoon. We need ESOL because there are established black and minority ethnic communities in the UK who need it, EU citizens who have come here and who need it and refugees who need it. The Government have talked the talk, but they have not walked the walk. They have not put the funds behind the Casey review, and that is one of the biggest issues that we have.

While all this is going on, we are waiting for details of the Government's shared prosperity fund, which is supposed to come to the rescue of further and adult education, among other services, following the withdrawal of funds from the European social fund and the European regional development fund. However, there is no sign of it. All that we have are two sentences, one in the Conservative party manifesto and the other in a Tory party conference speech.

Let me touch briefly on adult education, about which I feel very strongly because I taught as a part-time course tutor for the Open University for 20 years. There has been a huge decline in the number of adults accessing education over the past decade and in the number of adults aged 21 and over can access higher education. That is affecting the Open University, Birkbeck and the Workers Educational Association, and, sadly, many higher education institutions have closed, including the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education. Yet we know that we will need the skills of older people—and, indeed, their life chances—post Brexit, given the economic challenges and the fourth industrial revolution.

These warnings are not new—they featured in Sandy Leach's review in 2008—but they have been made all the more urgent by the Government's abject failure to help existing workforces to upskill and retrain. The situation demands money, a strategy and a longitudinal vision comparable to that of David Blunkett's “The Learning Age”. For all their rhetoric and modest initiatives,

the Government do not have any of that. We are thinking towards the 2030s with our planned national education service.

I have said on a number of occasions that the worlds of higher and further education—with online and digital lifelong learning, which requires more enabling skills as well as rapidly acquired ones—are converging faster than people in Whitehall expect. That is why we will establish a lifelong learning commission to meet those challenges. That new world will come, but the crucial question is this: will we in the UK be leaders in that process, or the mere recipients of technologies and systems evolved in north America or south-east Asia? We owe it to all our generations, from seven to 70, to rise to that challenge, but unfortunately the Government are not doing that at the moment.

2.59 pm

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton): I, too, want to pay tribute to some of the speakers in this debate. I must mention the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), because she is so passionate about this subject that she could have had the whole debate to herself. I also thank my right hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards for opening the debate and setting out all the things we are doing to improve education in schools. I completely reject what the Opposition said. While the Schools Minister and I have different responsibilities in education, we have a shared aim to improve quality and have high standards. I pay tribute to all those who contributed to the debate, and it is clear that everybody has a passion for education and a desire for this county to set high standards of education at every level and to keep on raising those standards.

Let me reiterate some of the improvements that there have been. The phonics screening check has increased since its introduction from 58% success in 2012 to 82% in 2018; that is a 24% improvement. Between 2016 and 2018 the proportion of pupils reaching the expected standards has risen from 66% to 75% in reading tests and from 70% to 76% in maths. *[Interruption.]* Opposition Members do not like hearing this stuff. Critically, the gap between disadvantaged pupils and others in secondary schools narrowed by 10% between 2011 and 2017.

My right hon. Friend the Schools Minister opened the debate by talking about many of those figures and commenting on the impact of the improvements in teaching and learning. I pay tribute to King's College in my constituency, which has made a massive improvement. In the words of Ofsted,

“staff have transformed the atmosphere in the school through raising expectations of pupils' behaviour.”

Principal Alastair McKenzie should rightly, along with the staff, be proud of what he has achieved. My hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien) mentioned the need for good behaviour and order in schools, and King's College shows what can be done when schools put their mind to that.

I praise my right hon. Friend the Schools Minister for the work he has done, and I say to those on the Opposition Front Bench that no one is better read in teaching methods. Against considerable opposition, he has driven ahead, because he, like me, knows that young people and children deserve nothing less.

I am fully aware of the funding pressures in FE. Opposition Members mentioned austerity as if it just dropped on us from the sky; it came upon us as a result of the financial crisis, and Conservative Members do not want our children and grandchildren to be burdened with paying back the debt that Opposition Members would rack up.

The results in FE are very good. Some 82% of colleges are outstanding or good, and the proportion of good or outstanding general colleges has increased from 69% to 76% over the last year, while 83% of sixth-form colleges and 80% of independent learning providers are outstanding or good. Of learners who completed FE courses in 2014-15, 58% got jobs and 22% went into further learning. Some 90% of 16 to 19-year-olds completing level 3 courses at sixth-form colleges and 86% completing level 3 courses at other FE colleges went on to further learning or sustained employment.

The figures are good, but I know that there are significant funding pressures in the FE sector. My hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) raised that point, and he, like me, will continue to raise the critical role that FE plays in improving social mobility, giving younger people a chance and older people a second or even third chance. FE plays a critical role in productivity and improving social mobility, and I am sure hon. Members will not hesitate to highlight that to the Chancellor.

I want to mention two things that are behind many of the reforms we have made in apprenticeships and technical education. The Richard review in 2012 said that apprenticeships should be redefined, that the focus should be on their outcome, that they should recognise industry standards and that it should be clearly set out what apprentices should know. It also stated that apprenticeships should be meaningful and relevant for employers, that apprentices should have achieved a level 2 or 3 in English and maths before they can complete their apprenticeship, be it in functional skills or at GCSE, and that some off-site learning was essential, with a minimum duration of a year. We have ensured all those things.

Apprenticeships are available to all, at every level from level 2 to level 7, with 20% of the learning off the job and a meaningful assessment at the end, which gives apprentices a currency that they can take to future employers. It is critical that we get them right. In fact, there is a tsunami of apprenticeships coming. I recently visited an NHS trust that is now spending 20% of its levy, and it will be spending its levy out by 2020. That is the way we can get the skills this country needs and give young people—and, indeed, older people—the opportunities they need.

I also want to mention the Wolf review, which made a number of findings and conclusions regarding vocational and technical education. Those findings have largely guided many of the reforms, along with the work that Lord Sainsbury has done. It is vital that we take this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to get technical education right. The introduction of T-levels will be critical to ensuring that we have technical qualifications that are on a par with academic qualifications. I have mentioned the contribution of Lord Sainsbury, which, along with the work of the Gatsby Foundation, has guided much of our work on the forthcoming T-levels. As I said, this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for change.

[Anne Milton]

I want to mention a number of the contributions that have been made today. My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) never misses an opportunity to praise those working in the public sector. He mentioned exclusions, and I know that a review is being led by Edward Timpson, who spent a long time as a Minister in the Department for Education. That review will be reporting in the new year. The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle made many contributions, and I know that she will use every opportunity to raise the issue of further education funding. Her college has been through a difficult time, but it has had considerable financial support. The bit that frequently gets missed is the £330 million that we spend on supporting the FE sector. There is more to come down the line, and that funding is critical to getting colleges such as hers back on track.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harborough raised a terrible incident of bullying in his constituency. Hearing about it today bears no relation to how terrible the impact is when we watch it online. Relationships and sex education and personal, social, health and economic education have a role to play, and he also mentioned the role of behaviour in schools in young people's lives. That is indeed critical, as are many other issues.

My hon. Friend was appropriately moved by those who have turned around the lives of young people. I have the best job in the Government, because I spend my life doing things like attending the national apprenticeship awards, which I did last night, and hearing stories of young people who have turned their lives around—who have had that second, third or fourth chance and have got an apprenticeship and some qualifications so that they can start a life that they never would have thought possible when they left school.

The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle also paid considerable attention to off-rolling, and I know that my right hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards would be happy to meet her to talk about that. He was not present in the Chamber at the time, and I am sure that she would like a more detailed conversation.

The hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) was absolutely right to say that education is at the heart of so much. As a former Public Health Minister, I know that education correlates more closely to health than to many other things. She also mentioned crime, and we have much to do in that area. We have a project running in five cities, including Leicester, the west midlands, Manchester, Leeds and London. I have been listening to the details of the work that is being done down in Bristol, which has been brilliant in increasing diversity and turning young people away from crime.

In closing, I must mention a couple of issues briefly. We all face a world, politicians as much as anybody else, in which our lives are dominated by social media. It is not only the children who are affected; the problems that teachers face are not dissimilar to those facing their pupils. A number of Departments are working to ensure that the impact of social media on all our lives is reduced, because its adverse effects on mental health and the stresses it brings are truly dreadful in some instances.

I must also mention the role of WorldSkills. You might not be familiar with it, Mr Deputy Speaker; I suggest you go to the website. WorldSkills sees 50 or 60 countries competing in a similar number of disciplines, with some of the national winners coming from our devolved Administrations. I am particularly disappointed that the Scottish Government are not going to contribute financially to WorldSkills, particularly bearing in mind the success of some of the young people in Scotland.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) highlighted the successful performance of young people and the improvement of many. Like me, she sat on the Opposition Benches during the Blair and Brown years, when performance most certainly did not match the words that we heard from the then Government—there was nothing on further education or technical education, just a lot of political rhetoric, I am afraid.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) raised some of the issues around teacher recruitment. I know that the Schools Minister would be happy to meet him again, but he is right that social mobility is at the heart of why we need good-quality education.

I do not blame the current Opposition Front Benchers—they possibly were not involved at the time, and I am much older than many of them—but I do blame the Labour party of all those decades ago for how we saw children's education sacrificed to pursue political ideology. I remember—[*Interruption.*] Opposition Members say it is nonsense. I remember the Inner London Education Authority, which banned punctuation, banned grammar, banned capital letters and refused to let the police into schools. All of us on the Conservative Benches involved in education—I also give considerable praise to our officials in the Department—want to make sure that, wherever someone comes from and whoever they know, everybody gets the chance to get on in life that they deserve. We will never cease in our mission to make changes, refine what we are doing and take on political rhetoric and ideology to make sure that young people get the education that they deserve.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered improving education standards.

PETITION

College Funding

3.13 pm

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): With impeccable timing, I trust you will agree, Mr Deputy Speaker, after a debate like that, I rise to present a petition organised and promoted by Charlotte Jones and Laura Whitcher of Brockenhurst College in my constituency, an outstanding further education college, on the funding differential that has developed between schools and FE colleges. Instead of the usual few introductory remarks, I simply place on the record a quotation from Amanda Spielman, Ofsted's chief inspector, who wrote to the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee recently saying:

“While it is true to say that spending per pupil in primary and secondary schools has increased significantly in real terms since the early 1990s, the same is not true for further education and skills (FES) spending. I have expressed my concerns before, based

on our inspection evidence, that the real-term cuts to FES funding are affecting the sustainability and quality of FES provision. My strong view is that the government should use the forthcoming spending review to increase the base rate for 16 to 18 funding.”

The petition states:

The petition of the students at Brockenhurst College in the New Forest East constituency,

Declares that college funding must be urgently increased to sustainable levels, including immediate parity with recently announced increases to school funding, which will give all students a fair chance, give college staff fair pay and provide the high quality skills the country needs post-Brexit; further that funding for colleges has been cut almost by 30% in the last 10 years causing a significant reduction in the resources available for teaching and support of sixth formers in schools and colleges; potentially restricted course choice; fewer adults in learning; pressures on staff pay and workload; and further that an online Parliamentary petition on this matter received 40,000 signatures in its first week and now stands at 58,000.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Department of Education, together with her Majesty's Treasury to increase at the earliest opportunity funding for colleges to fair and sustainable levels.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002286]

HIV and World AIDS Day

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

3.16 pm

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): On 1 December 1988, we observed the first World AIDS Day. It was created as an international day to raise awareness of the AIDS pandemic caused by the spread of HIV and to mourn those who had died from the disease. In two days' time, we mark its 30th anniversary, and this event gives us pause to reflect on how far we have come and to remember those we have lost.

Such events are also deeply personal to me, because next year I will be marking an anniversary of my own—10 years since I became HIV-positive. It has been a long journey from the fear of acceptance to today and, hopefully, advocacy, knowing that my treatment keeps me healthy and protects any partner that I may have.

When you are first diagnosed, you get that call from the clinic and they just say, “You need to come in.” They do not tell you the details, and you know immediately that something is wrong. All the different worst-case scenarios flash through your mind, and of course, being a sexually active young man, HIV is one of them. Going in, you kind of know that something is wrong and it might well be serious, but at the same time you are working out all the ways that this is just some joke, some technical error, some tiny thing they are going to tell you that you will be laughing about later. You try to imagine the ways you are going to get out of this, and then in that NHS room, with those cream carpets and the plastic seating we all know, they tell you, and it hits you like a wall. Although you have prepared yourself for it in your mind, nothing quite prepares you for when they say those words. I remember looking up at that ceiling—those false ceilings you get—and wishing that one of the tiles would rip away and it would suck me up, and that I would wake up and it would all be a dream and all be over.

But, of course, the reality is that that is not what happens. Instead, you walk out of that room and, even with all the greatest support and advice that they offer, you feel totally numb. You have a million things running through your mind and, at the same time, a sense of absolute nothingness.

I have decided to make this announcement and speech today, because earlier this year I was at an awards ceremony in Brighton. I had nominated Gary Pargeter, who for a number of years has been running a local club for people living with HIV called Lunch Positive. He had won the award and people were coming up to talk about how important the project was and how brave he had been to talk about his HIV status, and I felt like, “I am watching someone who has done inspiring work, and I am proud to have nominated him, but I have not told anyone else in this room that I am HIV positive, too.” Just like so many who attend Lunch Positive, I am lucky because the medication means I will not get sick and I cannot transmit HIV. I felt that if Gary and so many others can talk openly about it, then so should I.

The second reason I wanted to have this debate today is because we are genuinely on the cusp of eradicating new HIV transmissions in this country. Figures today

[Lloyd Russell-Moyle]

show that we are already, in parts of this country, halting the rates of HIV diagnosis, but we are at a fork in the road and I worry that we might be starting to head in the wrong direction, with £700 million of cuts to public health having been made between 2014 and 2017. We are not investing in the universal roll-out of PrEP—Pre-exposure prophylaxis—the pill that prevents HIV. So it is important for me politically to speak out.

Finally, I wanted to be able to stand here in this place and say to those who are living with HIV that their status does not define them and we can be whoever we want to be, and to say to those who have not been tested, perhaps out of fear, that it is better to live in knowledge than to die in fear. HIV in this country is no longer the death sentence it once was. A recent study led by the University of Bristol found that due to the advances in HIV treatment, people living with HIV can expect to live a near normal life. The improvement in survival rates for people with HIV is one of the greatest success stories of recent times. What was once considered a terminal disease is now seen as a manageable condition. Yet this information has not changed the narrative, which is still, sadly, framed in those scare campaigns of the tombstones of the 1980s. So much of LGBT culture also is marked by this spectre of HIV, which has led to an incredible sense of fear about the disease.

In that hospital room, and in the days and weeks that followed, I had to come to terms with that fear myself. I am a HIV-positive man, but because I have been taking the right medication for several years I am what the NHS calls “HIV-positive undetectable”. That means not only can HIV not be detected in my system and so I do not get sick, but I cannot transmit HIV to someone else. As the virus lie undetectable and dormant in my body, my medication ensures that the virus does not reactivate, does not progress and cannot be passed on. That is why the NHS says “undetectable equals untransmittable”. UNAIDS highlights three large studies conducted between 2007 and 2016 of HIV transmissions among thousands of couples where one partner was positive and the other was negative. In those studies there was not a single case of sexual transmission of HIV from a positive undetectable person to a HIV-negative partner. It is safer to have sex with someone who is HIV-positive undetectable than with someone who does not know their status, because undetectable equals untransmittable.

Understanding that I was unable to transmit HIV sexually has been life-changing, too. I went from thinking that I would never have a HIV-negative partner, or that if I had sex with someone, I could pass this on, to knowing that I can live a normal life and that any partner I have is totally protected. I cannot transmit HIV to my sexual partner, I have a perfectly healthy life, so my announcement here today should go totally unnoticed—

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): My hon. Friend is being immensely courageous in what he is doing today. I, for one, am sure that his bravery will reduce the stigma and the fear of so many living in our country and beyond.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I thank my hon. Friend for that. He is right to say that my name will help those people, and it might appear in tomorrow’s newspapers

as a result of my being the first MP to declare themselves HIV-positive in this Chamber and the second, after only Chris Smith, to openly live with HIV as an MP.

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): I just want to say what a typical gesture of my hon. Friend this is and how proud of him we all are.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Perhaps foolishly, to gauge what the public reaction might be like, I went on social media to read some of the comments on recent HIV news stories. One does not have to scroll down far to find comments like:

“Anyone with HIV who has sex should be tried for murder”,
or

“fags getting what they deserve”,

or “disgusting lifestyle choice”. Now, most of the people behind such comments will be homophobes who are weaponising HIV to attack LGBT people. If it was not HIV, they would find something else, because they are haters and they are not pleasant people.

But HIV stigma is not just a symptom of homophobes. Even the most well-meaning people can perpetuate HIV stigma. It takes many shapes. It can be believing that HIV and AIDS are always associated with a death sentence. It can be thinking that HIV is transmitted only through sex. It is thinking that HIV infections are the result of some personal or moral fault. It can be believing inaccurate information about how HIV is transmitted, which in turn creates irrational behaviour and misconceptions about personal risk.

Before I was diagnosed, I myself perpetuated some of those stigmas, so it is not without judgment that I ask people to reflect; it is a genuine ask that we begin to think, talk and act differently when it comes to HIV. That is even harder when there is a taboo about talking about sex, which means that stigma is often compounded, thereby creating a more risky environment because people do not seek the treatment that they need.

The Sussex Beacon in my constituency is one of only two residential care facilities in the country for people living with HIV. It originally started as a hospice in the 1990s, when three to four people died there each week. Fortunately, end-of-life care is now a rare occurrence at the Beacon, and today most of its support services are utilised by people with HIV from marginalised groups who face a big stigma. Older people diagnosed late, women, black and ethnic minorities—all these groups are disproportionately affected by stigma and rely on the good work of the Sussex Beacon and other charities like it. But their funding is being reduced.

Yesterday, I was lucky enough to get a photo with Stiggy the Stigmasaurus at the Martin Fisher Foundation, as part of the foundation’s campaign to make HIV stigma history. I hope that Members who could not be there yesterday will be able to join me in that pledge going forward. Stigma causes a treatable disease to become life-threatening, because of the impact on an individual’s mental health and their access to medication. No person diagnosed with HIV today should feel any less able than anyone else to thrive and enjoy life because of their status.

Stigma is not just a UK problem; it is a global one. Fifteen years ago, 200,000 people around the world were receiving treatment for HIV. Today, the number is 22 million, but we still have 15 million more who need access to regular medicine.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, may I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing his personal story to the House today? I mean that very much. I also wish him continued good health and that he continues to prosper, as he quite clearly is doing.

I mentioned to him before the debate that I wanted to intervene, and I wish to bring to his attention the Elim church in my constituency. The church has an HIV programme in Swaziland, which has the highest levels of HIV in the world. Every year, the children from a choir group come over. Every one of them is HIV-positive, but every one of them is surviving today because of the medication that is available. If the medication is there, we can do lots of things, save lives and give opportunity. Among many churches and individuals around the world, there is a lot of good will to help.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: That is quite right.

We are making progress on treatment, but when it comes to stigma we still have so much further to go. Last week, I was in Kenya with the International Development Committee and met a HIV-positive mother of eight children from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Although she was on medication, she had suffered such abuse that she was forced to flee the DRC and now lives in a refugee camp. Because of the prejudice and violence that she faced as a result of her status, she was forced to leave without her children, and she knows not of their future.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. He is making an absolutely brilliant and historic speech. I am very grateful that he mentioned my good friend, Chris Smith, who very bravely told the world in 1984 that he was gay and proud of it, and we are proud of Chris for doing that. I am also pleased that my hon. Friend has brought up the international context, where there are appalling levels of prejudice and abuse against HIV-positive people and against the LGBT community of many countries around the world. We just need to send out a message from this House of Commons that this country has changed its attitudes. We have done a great deal medically to help people. We need to ensure that the rest of the world understands that we can do the same in every other country. We have to close our minds to prejudice and open up our minds to human rights and justice for people all across the globe.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I thank my right hon. Friend for his intervention, and I totally agree with him. There are some countries in the world I may now struggle to travel to because of this announcement. It is important that we continue to make international efforts. I do not have time to talk about all the international aspects here. I commend the work of the HIV/AIDS Alliance and plan to come back to this House in future months to talk about its ENDAIDS 2030 Festival, which is really important.

Turning back to the UK, it is the case not just that HIV is treatable, but that it is preventable with one tablet a day. A person can prevent themselves from contracting HIV with pre-exposure prophylaxis. PrEP is revolutionising the fight against HIV transmissions. It has an almost 100% success rate, a higher rate than condoms, in the prevention of HIV, and it is just one pill. We expect this pill to be soon available as a generic

drug and, according to the NHS's own analysis, it could save the health service £1 billion in preventing HIV transmissions for future generations. Astoundingly, however, the only way to access PrEP in England is through a limited trial. This is not a medical trial—those have been done and approved. This is not about financing—we know the cost. This trial, as far as I can see, is about delaying the roll-out of PrEP in England because someone meddling in the Ministry thinks that they know better than doctors when it comes to people's health. It seems to me that this trial is more concerned about what a person does between the sheets than the health of the nation. Despite being just one year into this three-year trial, 3,000 additional places have already had to be added, and it looks like the 13,000 places will run out early next year. England now lags behind all the other nations in the UK as the only country with capped PrEP access on the NHS. There are two years to go until this trial ends, yet people cannot get immediate access to PrEP, with many clinics now having long waiting lists, and some completely full.

We know that there are cases of young men who have sought out this prevention pill and have been turned away because the clinics cannot accommodate them, and they have subsequently become HIV-positive. Those men now have to live with HIV and everything associated with it because of the misguided morality of this decision. Let us make no mistake: these are not isolated cases. The longer this Government wait to roll out PrEP properly, the more people will be diagnosed.

Will the Minister intervene to ensure that PrEP is made routinely available on the NHS in England—just like his Government have already done with Northern Ireland with direct rule, just like the Scottish Government have done, and just like a Labour Government have done in Wales? Failing that, will he at least uncap the trial to ensure that those trying to access the drug can do so? Will he reverse public health cuts, including those in sexual health, so that the Government meet demand, including that of people affected by HIV, otherwise we seriously risk undoing the really good progress that we have all made?

Just today, the latest Public Health England statistics show that the UK has met its UN AIDS target of 90-90-90, ahead of 2020, which was the date. This is amazing progress, with 92% of people living with HIV diagnosed, 98% on treatment and 97% with undetectable viral load, meaning that they cannot pass it on.

At the Terrence Higgins Trust World AIDS Day reception earlier this week, I am told that the Minister hinted that the Government were considering bolstering their ambition on HIV to committing to reaching zero new HIV transmissions by 2030. In the light of today's statistics, now is the time to seize that opportunity of reaching zero new HIV infections and be a true global leader. Can the Minister provide details of how the UK Government plan to end HIV infections and what timescale they will commit to?

At present, one young person every day is still diagnosed with HIV and young people continue to suffer some of the worst sexual health outcomes. We cannot be complicit on this. Will the Minister agree to work with the Department for Education to ensure that relationship and sex education guidance has a strong focus on not only HIV prevention, but anti-HIV stigma? Will the Minister also liaise with Department for International Development colleagues

[Lloyd Russell-Moyle]

to ensure that research funding is increased so that we can make huge gains in scientific breakthroughs to eradicate this disease globally?

In two days' time, on World AIDS Day, I will stand with my community to mourn the losses of those who have died of AIDS. I will do so at the Brighton AIDS memorial—the only such dedicated public memorial in the country. I will stand there in the knowledge that I will live a life that so many could not. I am able to do that because of the people who have come before me: the people who have fought and lost their lives, and the people who stood up and had their lives changed. We owe it to these people to beat the disease—something we have the power to do. I hope that future generations will look at HIV in the same way that we look at smallpox and polio, as diseases that were once killers but can now be eradicated.

LGBT people often talk about coming out as something that you constantly have to do to new neighbours, friends and work colleagues. You could say the same about your HIV status. I have spent many nervous moments deciding whether to tell new friends and acquaintances about my status. The lump forms in your throat and your heart flutters, and you finally kind of blurt it out and hopefully move on. Well, Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like to thank you for giving me this platform to do just that. I thank my friends, family and colleagues for supporting me. I also thank the Terrence Higgins Trust for all its work and the support it has given me in preparing for this debate.

We have the ability to end new HIV transmissions, as well as to end stigma and discrimination—not only here, but globally. I hope we can all make that our mission. [*Applause.*]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): We should not clap in the House, but I understand why people have. That was a very brave and moving speech, which will give hope to a lot of people around the world. I should also say that I broke with convention today by allowing an Opposition Front-Bench Member to speak in the Adjournment debate. Please be reassured that this is not the norm; it is a one-off.

3.38 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): As chair of the all-party group on HIV and AIDS, may I first offer a whole hearted tribute to the bravery, courage and example of my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle)? He has not only shared with us his own very personal experiences in such a clear and honest way that will have an impact in this country and globally; he has also—I would expect nothing less from him—not shied away from the fact that HIV is political. He has mentioned many of the issues still faced by those living with HIV in this country and around the globe, including stigma, discrimination and a lack of access to services. If any message goes out from here today, it should be that we need to continue the fight and end this by 2030, and we can end it. After the example that my hon. Friend has shown today, I am all the more confident that we will do so.

I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend on behalf of other vice-chairs who wanted to be here but could not—Baroness Barker, Lord Black, and my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South (Dr Williams)—and who are incredibly proud of what he has done today.

As my hon. Friend said, the situation has dramatically transformed since the first World Aids Day 30 years ago. I remember coming to these issues while working in the international development sector for World Vision, Oxfam and others, and I look back at some of the horrific statistics, particularly on young people orphaned or made vulnerable, on those living with HIV and on those dying from AIDS. We saw this as an unreachable mountain that could not be overcome. The progress that has been made over the past 15 years is remarkable, but we must not have a slipping back in that progress.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I would like to express, on my own behalf and that of my SNP colleagues who cannot be here, our commendation for the incredibly powerful and moving testimony that the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) has given. The hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) is absolutely correct that that speech will be heard not just here, and not just across this country, but around the world. It provides an opportunity to tackle the stigma that is still associated with HIV in so many parts of the world and that prevents people seeking the treatment, or even the diagnosis, that they need, despite all the opportunities and all the funding that is provided. There has to be a change of mindset as well. So we are thoroughly behind what we are hearing today.

Stephen Doughty: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and completely agree with what he has said.

As my hon. Friend said, access to antiretroviral treatments has revolutionised both treatment and prevention. That has enabled many HIV-positive people to achieve viral suppression where the level of HIV in the blood is so low that it is undetectable and, crucially—we have to emphasise this—untransmittable to others. U=U—undetectable equals untransmittable—is one of the messages that must ring loud and clear from his speech and from this House. It has transformed the medical understanding of HIV from a fatal and emergency disease to one that is chronic and manageable, and where people can live long, happy, healthy lives.

But we must recognise the challenges that exist, particularly internationally, among the world's 36.9 million people living with HIV. That is still a huge figure. One in four remain unaware of their HIV status. Among those who have tested HIV-positive, 21% globally do not have access to treatment and, of those who have access to antiretroviral treatment, 19% have not yet achieved viral suppression.

I want to turn briefly to some of the key challenges that we face in the UK, which my hon. Friend laid out. Forty-one per cent. of people are still diagnosed late and one in eight people living with HIV do not know their status. In October, we held an event here where we heard from a lady who preferred not to use her real name who had been diagnosed with HIV in her late 50s. She had been left with lifelong physical complications and, tragically, suffered a mental health breakdown

because of the extreme stress caused by the diagnosis, the lack of support, the fear, the stigma and the discrimination that she thought she would experience. Holding back tears, she told that room full of strangers that she had been unable to share her HIV status with her friends or family. That shows the courage of the example set by my hon. Friend today. Unfortunately, there are still many people out there, including many I know, who would not have the confidence to do this or even to share their status in private circumstances. We have to turn that around and end the stigma and discrimination.

I absolutely endorse what my hon. Friend said about PrEP. It is simply extraordinary that we are still waiting for the English NHS to make this routinely available. People have told me this week that they want to access PrEP and cannot do so. That simply cannot be the right way forward, from a purely public health point of view, from a rights point of view, and from a cost point of view. In all respects, it is wrong. I hope that the Minister can give us some positive news on that and that we will see the progress that we have seen in the other nations. I pay tribute, as my hon. Friend did, to our Labour Health Secretary in Wales who has shown quite a lot of political and practical leadership, as a Minister, on this issue.

I was disappointed when we had the Department of Health and Social Care prevention strategy last month. There is much in there for us all to agree with, while it failed to mention sexual health at all. That was a huge disappointment because there is a huge amount in the strategy that very much applies to the agenda that we have been talking about today. I hope that the Minister can explain what the Department is going to do to ensure sexual health and HIV prevention are at the heart of that prevention strategy for the NHS overall. I also emphasise what my hon. Friend said about demand for sexual health services rising and the challenges facing particular communities, whether the BME community, the LGBT community, young people, sex workers or injecting drug users. Sometimes we shy away from talking about unfashionable and difficult topics in this House, but we need to have honest and frank conversations if we are going to end HIV and AIDS in this country.

Globally, there are still 15 million people who are not accessing treatment because of inadequate health systems and funding, discriminatory laws, stigma and discrimination, and colonial-era laws that ensure that people do not get the treatment they need. The UK needs to lead the way in ending HIV stigma for good and supporting these programmes through the work of the Department for International Development.

I pay tribute to the Minister of State, Department for International Development, the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), who announced at the AIDS conference in Amsterdam an increase in funding for the Robert Carr Fund, for which so many of us have campaigned, and support for civil society organisations to support key populations.

It was inspiring yesterday to hear from not only a young female AIDS activist from Zimbabwe called Audrey, but two former Presidents—the former President of Botswana, Festus Mogae, and the former President of Mozambique, Joaquim Chissano. President Mogae spoke to us in a way that I did not expect. He spoke about all the things that we know we need to do to

tackle HIV, but he stood up as a former African leader and said, “We need to address the needs of the LGBT population, the needs of the trans population, the needs of sex workers and the needs of injecting drug users.” That sent an incredibly strong signal to leaders across Africa and the world that we must talk about these issues and take action on them, and I hope the UK will continue to provide that crucial support.

I pay tribute again to my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown for his courage and bravery and the message that it sends. I hope the Minister will have some hopeful words for us about the situation in the UK. I want to end by thanking all the organisations that do so much to support our APPG’s work, including the Terrence Higgins Trust, the National AIDS Trust, the International HIV/AIDS Alliance, STOPAIDS, Youth Stop AIDS, the British Association for Sexual Health and HIV and so many more. I thank all the organisations that are active in our communities and, I am sorry to say, are filling the gaps left by cuts to provision. They are out there making the case, supporting people living with HIV and taking us all down the road to ending this epidemic by 2030.

3.46 pm

Emma Dent Coad (Kensington) (Lab): I would like to commend all those who have spoken, and particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) for his bravery in speaking out in this place. I am sure his speech will be heard around the country.

As a graduate of the 1980s London club scene, I know that I had a narrow escape from contracting HIV. I remember the stories in the early ’80s coming from San Francisco about people dying from minor ailments such as flu. It was originally thought to be something to do with taking too much amyl nitrite, or poppers. Eventually the virus was identified, but it was too late for some. Quite a few of my friends became ill, and we had many funerals in the mid-’80s.

I remember the London Lighthouse project opening just down the road from my house, and Diana, Princess of Wales, came to open it. She did a huge amount to disperse the stigma. We will never forget the photograph of her holding hands with an HIV/AIDS sufferer, which made people think again about how we contract AIDS and showed pure compassion for people who were ill.

I was careful, but before I had my children, I had an HIV test. The results took an agonising two weeks. I was fine. I know that people diagnosed with HIV now live long and healthy lives with the treatment currently available, but I hear anecdotally that, because of that, some people are not being sufficiently careful with their health. Two weeks ago, I took the test again in my local hospital, having been asked to do so as part of the campaign. It now takes two minutes—you get the result immediately. Nobody needs to risk contracting HIV, but if anybody does, I recommend that they spend those two minutes to save their lives and those of their loved ones.

Thangam Debonnaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I want to add my support for the campaign that my hon. Friend mentioned. I too did that. I think those working for the Terrence Higgins Trust referred to it as “pricking the finger”, or some quite naughty expression, when it suggested that I could show that it is not that difficult

[Thangam Debbonaire]

and does not take that long, and there is counselling and support around it. I recommend that any Member who has not already taken the plunge does so and shows HIV/AIDS the finger. I thank her for raising that.

Emma Dent Coad: Absolutely. I recommend that everybody does so. It literally takes two minutes.

I would like to finish by saying that, as regards ending the stigma, my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown has made a very powerful statement. This is your Diana moment.

3.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine): That was an unexpected but lovely thing for the hon. Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) to say at the end of her speech. I believe “Give HIV the finger” is the expression that the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) was looking for. Wow! Madam Deputy Speaker, you have just taken over in the Chair, and you have missed a treat. I suggest that you watch it back later. Let me, as it says in my brief, congratulate the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) on securing the debate. Obviously, I share his passion for the topic, but I did not know what he was going to say until we spoke just before the debate, and even then I did not know how he was going to say it and the extent to which he was going to put so much of the personal into it.

The turnout of the hon. Gentleman’s friends and colleagues around him for his speech was a testament to its power and to how much they obviously think of him. Clapping is not right in the Chamber, but even I did clap after his speech. I do not like to clap in the Chamber or in church, but I have done one of them. The look on his face when his colleagues were all standing up and clapping him was wonderful. If I had thought to do so, I would have stood up and taken a photo for him, because it will be a nice moment for him. [Interruption.] No, Madam Deputy Speaker, you are not at all happy about that. I have gone too far. Edit that bit out, *Hansard*.

It was an incredible speech and it was a very brave thing to do. Following the debate that had just taken place on education—we were here for the winding-up speeches—which got a little political at times, the Adjournment debate has once again shown that it is Parliament’s best kept secret. It is where all the good things go on, and this was certainly a good thing.

As the hon. Gentleman reminded us, World AIDS Day is 30 years old this year. We had a wonderful reception in Speaker’s House on Tuesday night, with the Terrence Higgins Trust, and some really good friends were there. It is the second time I have done that now. As I said then, this week and Saturday will be about remembering loved ones who lost their challenge against and their battle to HIV. However, it will be a celebration, as he said. I note that he said that he will be at the Brighton AIDS memorial at the weekend, and I wish him well with that, as I do everybody who will be with him from his constituency and, I am sure, from much further afield. This is also a chance to say to say how much has changed since the late ’80s.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): I just want to say briefly how fortunate I feel I am to have been walking past the Chamber, seen that there was this debate and taken the opportunity to come in. My first wife was a nurse, and I remember when she came home from work—I think 27 years ago—having just treated her first AIDS case, and we were both scared. Since then, the treatment of it and the understanding and appreciation of it in society have changed so dramatically. I realise now, having heard the speech of the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle), that there is still some way to go for those who are hesitant about telling new friends and acquaintances, but it felt like a genuine privilege to have been here to hear him speak, so I thank him very much.

Steve Brine: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention.

As I was saying, much has changed since the late ’80s: health needs are different; we have better drugs and better diagnostic tools; and, as has been said, attitudes towards HIV and AIDS are totally different and totally transformed.

The hon. Member for Kensington mentioned Princess Diana—the original one, as opposed to the new one—and that incredible moment. I will repeat what I said the other night in Speaker’s House. I was in secondary school at that time, and I remember that powerful image being broadcast. I was only a teenager at the time, and little did I know that I would one day be the public health Minister talking about these issues. It was one of those images that is really seared into our national conscience. What a great loss that lady is to so many social causes, as well as of course to her family. It was an incredible image.

As the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown has said, today, it is not about dying of AIDS, but about living with HIV. I would go further, however, because it is about more than that, is it not? It is not really “living with”; it is just “living”. I am also very privileged to be the cancer Minister, and how many times cancer patients say to me—my shadow, the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), knows this, because people very often used to say this to us when we ran the all-party group on breast cancer together—that, “I am not my cancer. It is just something that I do and something that I have as well.” Happily, HIV is now just part of the hon. Gentleman: I am sure he would rather it was not, but it is not just something he lives with; it is something that he lives.

A big public health display in the foyer of the Department of Health and Social Care currently shows all the different public health campaigns over the years. The terrifying tombstone image is obviously something that we have, rightly, moved on from, but it is still an incredible part of our public health campaign history. Back then, the Government made the bold move to run a major public information campaign on HIV—“Don’t die of ignorance”—and we piloted needle exchange schemes, introduced HIV testing and raised the prospect with the public. If we consider the HIV epidemic in this country, we can be proud of the record of Governments of all parties over many years.

As figures released today show, the UK has met the UNAIDS 90-90-90 target—yes!—and it is one of the first countries in the world to do so. Members from across the House are proud of that, and the latest report

from Public Health England showed that in 2017 an estimated 92% of people living with HIV in the UK were diagnosed, 98% of those were on treatment and 97% of those on treatment were unable to pass on their infection. That is a major achievement that we should be proud of. More importantly, those who work in our health service and have done so for years—like the partner of my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes)—should be even more proud.

Prevention is one of my passions, and one of the Secretary of State's priorities. We do not yet have a cure for HIV, which is why prevention is so important. Our efforts to prevent HIV and AIDS have been highly successful, and much has been said about the international dimension, which I will touch on. The UK is a world leader in efforts to end the AIDS epidemic, including through our major investment in the global fund. Our largest investments are through multilateral organisations such as the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, UNAIDS and Unitaid, given their greater reach and scale. I met Lelio from Unitaid at the G20 in Argentina last month, and it is doing such good things with the investment that we announced in Amsterdam, to which the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) referred. I work closely with my hon. Friends in the Department for International Development and the Foreign Office, and these three Departments are very tight and work closely together on this issue.

Excellent initiatives such as the MenStar Coalition aim to get more young men tested and on to life-saving HIV treatment to protect them and their partners. There is the Elton John AIDS Foundation and other partners, and MenStar is rolling out a self-testing campaign in east Africa. The UK is the second largest donor to Unitaid—a charity that does so much work against stigma—and provides an annual contribution of around €60 million as part of our 20-year funding commitment.

There has been much talk about the domestic situation, and NHS England launched the world's largest pre-exposure prophylaxis—PrEP—trial last year. To be honest, I had never heard of that until I became a health Minister—why would I have?—but once officials had explained it to me, it did not take me long to think that it sounded like a real no-brainer. I know that many people are eagerly awaiting the results of the trial. I am one of them, and my officials know of my impatience, which is legendary in our Department. It is crucial to have the right information to address the major questions and effectively implement the PrEP trial on a larger scale.

The point about savings was well made and not lost on me. I am not in a position to make a policy promise at the Dispatch Box today, but on the point about places made by the hon. Members for Brighton, Kemptown and for Cardiff South and Penarth, I say only that I am listening closely and they should continue those discussions with me—I know they will. The Department met members of the all-party group on HIV and AIDS to discuss these issues, and they should continue those discussions with me. We are listening. Many of the public health challenges we face today require different approaches and fresh thinking if we are to make progress. Indeed, in the past few years many innovative ways to tackle HIV have emerged, including HIV testing options such as self-sampling and home testing services, which I know are very popular.

I would like to mention the HIV prevention innovation fund, which I am very proud of. Innovative community-led interventions have had a significant role to play in limiting the HIV epidemic in England, so we set up the HIV prevention innovation fund in 2015 to support voluntary sector organisations. The fund has supported many projects since it started. I announced them at an event here in the House last year—the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth, who chairs the all-party group, was present. In 2017, we awarded just under £600,000 to 12 projects. I am very pleased to say that we are running the fund again this year. The principle of the fund is something we are carrying over into other areas of policy, because it has been so successful. I want to see us do more of that.

This year we celebrated the 70th birthday of the NHS. I have already mentioned the incredible staff who work across the service. England has an outstanding record of achievements in HIV treatment and care. I want to take this opportunity to recognise and thank everyone for doing that. Care for people with HIV is now highly effective, and increasing numbers of people are living with HIV into older age with normal life expectancy. Antiretroviral therapy has transformed the outlook for people living with HIV, from what used to be a tragic death sentence to a very manageable long-term condition, as we heard so eloquently this afternoon.

Our policy is to make sure that HIV testing is as accessible as possible, in particular to those at increased risk. It is therefore very important that testing is available in a range of clinical and community settings—hence why the innovation fund and its programmes are important. Over the years, local authorities, which are now public health authorities up and down the land, have introduced innovations and improvements of their own, in particular on testing. We know it is working. Testing activity at sexual health services, which we know are under great pressure—we do not deny that for one moment—continues to increase and HIV diagnoses have fallen. HIV testing in sexual health services has increased 15%, from 1.07 million tests in 2013 to 1.24 million in 2017. Most significantly, we have seen a 28% drop in new HIV diagnoses between 2015 and 2017. That is encouraging and good, but we must not be complacent. I assure the House that we are not complacent and we want to continue to maintain this progress.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the prevention strategy. That was a very top line document. I had a meeting this afternoon to discuss the prevention Green Paper, which will follow next year. I can assure him that the long-term plan, which will follow before that, will absolutely have sexual health and HIV in it. I am being very ambitious with officials on that. I know that he will rightly hold us to account and I thank him for giving me a chance to say that.

I want to touch on education and awareness. Education around HIV and how it is transmitted remains absolutely critical, as the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown said in his opening remarks. I am pleased to say that schools will be required to teach relationship and sex education from September 2020. The Government announced that relatively recently. I have been very involved in that in relation to the cancer brief, because I am very keen for schools to responsibly teach cancer awareness to young people. At secondary schools, there will be clear and accurate teaching about sexual matters,

[*Steve Brine*]

including factual knowledge around sex, sexual health—including HIV—and sexuality. The schools Minister was sitting next to me throughout his speech. He wanted me to pass on his congratulations to the hon. Gentleman on his speech.

Testing is the only way to be certain of HIV status. Last week was National HIV Testing Week and the Secretary of State took part. This flagship campaign promotes regular testing among the most at-risk population groups and aims to reduce the rates of late diagnosis or of those remaining undiagnosed. Sadly, stigma remains a significant factor in why people do not test for HIV. I understand that. This can mean that HIV goes untreated and can then be transmitted. It is vital that we continue to break down the stigma, normalise testing and support those most at risk of infection.

I want to mention the “Can’t Pass It On” campaign. Whoever is doing the marketing for the Terrence Higgins Trust is doing a very good job—I know it works with a very good agency. As I said at the reception the other night, I was on the tube the other day with my daughter, who spotted some advertising or branding for testing week. She asked me what it was, because it caught her eye, and I was able to explain it to her. She is only 11. If more parents did that for their children and relatives, it would help to break down that stigma. The trust’s

website has a very good page on the “Can’t Pass It On” campaign that includes different people’s stories, and I have a funny feeling that before we leave the Chamber, “Lloyd’s story” will be on it, with a clip from today in Parliament. I will certainly be clipping it off the Parliament TV website and tweeting it out through the Department of Health’s social media account.

In conclusion, I congratulate the hon. Gentleman again on introducing this timely and vital debate, and I wish him and everybody well for Saturday who will be marking World AIDS Day, whether they be remembering and celebrating private, not yet able to do so publicly, and those who, like him, are able to do so publicly. They are all part of the story, and our best wishes and love go to them all. We look forward to brighter futures in this policy area, as we work towards what I am determined will be zero stigma and zero transmissions.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Would it not be wonderful if more people paid attention to the work done in the House in such debates—this excellent, positive, meaningful, emotive and successful debate this afternoon? If only.

Question put and agreed to.

4.6 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 29 November 2018

[ANDREW ROSINDELL *in the Chair*]

Private Rented Sector

1.30 pm

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Fourth Report of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, Private rented sector, HC 440, and the Government response, Cm 9639.

It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. The Select Committee chose to have the inquiry because of the increasing importance of the private rented sector, which has doubled in size over 15 years. Clearly, more families are living in the sector than ever before, and more people see it as their long-term form of accommodation, whether by choice or because it is the only form available to them.

The Committee heard that 82% of people were satisfied with their accommodation, although when people answer such surveys, I sometimes question whether expectations are as high as they might be. If we look at other figures, we see that while non-decent accommodation in the sector fell from 47% to 27% over 10 years, the actual number of non-decent properties has stayed the same—it is a lower percentage of a larger number. Citizens Advice also produced figures showing that 41% of tenants in the sector had waited longer than they thought reasonable for repairs to be carried out, and 800,000 properties had a category 1 hazard.

There are therefore problems, but while many properties might have some problems, other properties are clearly in a really bad state of repair, with some landlords doing little about it—indeed, they almost run a business in properties of that type.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing the debate and for his excellent speech. Does he agree that we need to give local authorities the power to tackle and crack down on rogue landlords through private sector licensing, rather than having to get permission first from central Government?

Mr Betts: We made a number of recommendations in our report and—my hon. Friend is right—that was one of them. We recognised that the Government had made some changes to the rules on selective licensing, in line with the recommendation on widening the criteria used to bring about selective licensing schemes in the Committee's previous report back in 2013. They are also changing the legislation about the definition of properties included in licensing for housing in multiple occupation, which we welcome.

Nevertheless, in essence, our recommendation is that licensing ought to be a local matter, depending on local circumstances. It should be a local decision, subject to the Secretary of State's intervention only when councils have not followed the proper procedures. As I understand it, the Government are now reviewing selective licensing. One of my questions will be about the state of that review and when it is likely to report.

In our report, we tried to focus on those landlords who are not doing the job that we would expect them to do. To divide landlords up, there are the bad ones, who are not good at getting around to doing things in a timely way—they are inefficient, or incompetent to some extent, and are sometimes accidental landlords. There are then the so-called rogue landlords, who have more systematic failings, leaving a large number of properties in an unacceptable condition. Then there are the really hardcore landlords—we ought to call them criminals, because that is what they are. The criminal landlords run a business to exploit vulnerable tenants in unsafe and unhealthy conditions. They are robbing not merely the tenants but the taxpayer, because they are getting money in and yet not providing homes that are fit to live in. We tried to concentrate on how to deal with those landlords, but our report also recognised actions the Government have taken in a number of respects. Quite reasonably, we highlighted actions that they have taken in response to our previous report on the private rented sector. We are pleased with that as a Committee.

Right at the beginning of the report, we refer to the imbalance of power between tenants and landlords, and to how that needs addressing. However, I will not go through all our recommendations. Instead, I will focus on where the Government have said they will do something—whether that is to consult, review or consider in some way—and ask the Minister where that has got to and what we can expect.

On the Deregulation Act 2015, we call for a review of the retaliatory eviction legislation and guidance on how it has worked. The Government did not seem totally enthusiastic about that at first, but they have now said that they will review the Act, looking at its effectiveness in terms of retaliatory eviction and perhaps at bringing in more formal requirements to have longer-term tenancies. The Government have gone a bit quiet on that since their announcement, so where is that review up to, and when can we expect some announcement?

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing the debate. I put on record my apologies because I am unable to stay for the duration of the debate—I am hosting an event elsewhere in this place about a related matter, which is housing rent arrears arising from universal credit.

On retaliatory evictions, the Committee recommended reform of section 21 of the Housing Act 1988. There is a growing body of evidence that section 21 should be not only reformed but abolished. In response to our report, the Government stated that, on the one hand, they recognised “the concerns of the Committee around retaliatory eviction”, but, on the other hand, that they did not accept our recommendation that section 21 needs to be reformed. They said:

“We believe the current legislation strikes the right balance between the interests of landlords and tenants and we have no plans to change the legislation in this way.”

Does my hon. Friend agree that, without meaningful action on section 21, those are simply empty words from the Government?

Mr Betts: I hope that the Minister will come back on that, because we made a clear recommendation, and it would be helpful to have her response to it. The two things go together. Our report called not for the abolition

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of section 21, but merely for it to be looked at again. The same is true of retaliatory evictions. The Government are looking at one thing, so will they indicate that they might be prepared to look at the other as well, as part of a joint review?

We also called for a specialist housing court. We are pleased that the Government have now announced a call for evidence on the setting up of such a court. Will the Minister explain what will be covered and the likely terms of a housing court's jurisdiction? Will it cover section 21 notices or retaliatory eviction? Will it cover tenancy fees, which we have recently had legislation on? Will it cover the issues arising from the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Bill from my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck)? Will it go so far as to look at the whole matter of leasehold, which we are discussing in another inquiry? Will the Minister explain precisely what it will cover, or whether the Government have ruled on what it will not cover? It would be helpful to have such information.

The first of two other issues we asked to be looked at was that of five-year electrical safety checks. We are pleased that the Government have announced support for that in principle, but when will we get a clear announcement and action on it? In terms of having carbon monoxide alarms not only in every room with a coal fire but every room with a gas fire, I understand that a working group inside the Department is looking at that. Where has that got to? Every day of delay might lead people to lose their life because of carbon monoxide poisoning, which is easy to stop with a very simple measure. Will the Minister give us information about that as well?

We looked at enforcement and local authority powers. That is clearly important, and we questioned the housing health and safety rating system, as we have done before.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): On enforcement, the report makes the point that half of the prosecutions in the country happen in my borough, Newham. In the Committee's view, what problems are there with the enforcement arrangements that seemingly make it so difficult for the vast majority of local authorities to carry out such prosecutions?

Mr Betts: My right hon. Friend raises a good point. Newham is a trailblazer—I think 50% of the prosecutions in the country happen there. We looked at two main issues in the report: the first is resources. I am sure it is not true that Newham has too much money and does not know how to spend it on other things; I am sure it has many challenges. The second is political will: is there the political will in the council to address these issues? Clearly there was, and still is, in Newham, but in more than half the councils in the country there are no prosecutions at all.

Councils will say, "We adopt a softly, softly approach and try to persuade." Often that goes on with landlords who are in the inefficient and incompetent but reasonable category. Officers say to them, "You need to put this right," and they do, but it does not work with the rogues and the criminals. Tougher action is needed. At the end of the day, it is about political will. Clearly, resources are under pressure; there is pressure on care services—the

Committee will look at children's services shortly—and that does mean there is less money for important things such as private sector housing enforcement.

We looked at how easy the powers were to use. I said that the rating system is complicated. Is there a case for bringing in a simpler minimum standard? By and large, the professional officers do not want to change. Landlords and tenants gave evidence that, although the rating system may be understood by most professionals working in the service, it is understood by very few landlords and virtually no tenants. Is a system that is so complicated that no one outside the professional sphere understands it fit for purpose? The Government have done some events, where they have talked to professional officers. There is a division of opinion among them—perhaps the majority still want to keep the rating system—but at least the Government have now acknowledged that there is general support for updating the system, in terms of both the evidence base and the guidance, which is very out of date. Will the Minister tell us how far we have got with that?

One of the landlords organisations that gave evidence told us that private sector housing legislation was based on 150 different pieces of legislation. Everything the Government do—however worthwhile—is built on top of this higgledy-piggledy structure, with no real coherence. Will the Government ask the Law Commission to do an overall review? We made that recommendation in our 2013-14 report. At some point, someone must do a comprehensive review, not necessarily to change the intention of the legislation, but to pull it together as a coherent whole. The Government responded that they will have discussions with the Law Commission. Will the Minister tell us where those discussions have got to?

We raised the issue of fees and penalty notices. The Government say they are at an appropriate level, but the Committee wants them to be raised because, for some of the really bad landlords, the fines levied are a business cost that they write off against the business. Courts should give back the cost to local authorities who take a case. Local authorities' resources are under pressure; if authorities spend a lot of money prosecuting a landlord and they get the prosecution, the court does not give them back the cost involved. That can be really discouraging. Has the Minister had discussions with her colleagues in the Ministry of Justice on that recommendation?

We recommend the creation of a benchmark system, whereby the different approaches of local authorities could be compared, including the number of prosecutions they take out. We asked the Government to work with the Local Government Association on that. They said they would have talks with the LGA. How far have those talks gone?

The Committee supported the Government's decision to bring in banning orders. *The Guardian* and ITV News have publicised the fact that the banning orders are not public. That is not to say that that will not happen, but under the Housing and Planning Act 2016 they are available only to local authorities to tackle problems in the private rented sector. They cannot be made public as the legislation stands. The Prime Minister has committed to change that, but I understand that that needs primary legislation. Will the Minister say whether the Government intend to bring in primary legislation to do that?

Although a local authority may know that someone is banned in another local authority area, knowing whether a landlord is operating in an area and the properties they have is very difficult, because of the lack of information. To make public that a landlord has been banned would cause other people to come forward and say, “That landlord is banned, but he is renting a property down our road.” It would be very helpful if that could be done.

I went to a meeting of the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health in Leeds to talk about our report and the general support for it. Interestingly, Mark Baxter, an environmental officer in Scarborough Borough Council said, “If the Government change legislation, could they go further and insist that when a landlord is banned in court, they have to give the court, for the public record, a list of all the properties they own, manage or have an interest in?” That is an incredibly simple but effective way forward. Once publicity shines a spotlight on these bad landlords, they should be made to help by giving that information, and it should be an offence not to give all the information at that stage. That would be very helpful to get a proper grip on this issue.

Mr Dhesi: My hon. Friend is very generous to give way again. Does he agree that deposits should be capped at three weeks’ rent rather than the current six weeks proposed by the Government? That would mean an average saving of £575 for tenants across England, based on the latest English housing survey data.

Mr Betts: That came up in the Tenant Fees Bill, and the Committee recommended a compromise of five weeks. The Government did not accept it, but we support that recommendation, so as Chair of the Committee I cannot completely agree with my hon. Friend. If I remember correctly, the Government have held a consultation on alternatives to deposits, which is a helpful response to one of our recommendations.

We all agree that we must be as tough as we can be, and tougher still, on bad landlords. I hope the Minister will revisit our recommendation. The really bad, criminal landlords may be banned and have management orders against them, but in the end some of them will find ways around that because it is really profitable for them to do so. They have broken the law once, so they will carry on by ignoring banning orders if they can. Why do we not take the properties off them? Why have the Government resisted that recommendation? The proceeds of crime operate in other spheres. Let us get tough on the bad landlords.

Helen Hayes: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Betts: My peroration was just about finished, but I will let it be interrupted.

Helen Hayes: I thank my hon. Friend. Allow me to add a small example to the point he makes so powerfully. My constituents were evicted from their private rented property after they complained because the bathroom ceiling collapsed over the bath 10 minutes after they had finished bathing their children. I hope the Minister agrees that, in those circumstances, it is not too much of a sanction to confiscate the property from such criminals.

Mr Betts: I hope the Minister will reflect, even if she cannot commit to a change of policy today. These are bad people renting bad houses to vulnerable tenants. They are making proceeds from their crime, so let us take from them the asset that enables them to do that. I hope the Minister will think about that and respond to the points I have raised.

1.49 pm

Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the Chair of our Committee, the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts). When I was a Housing Minister, I looked at the issue of crooks running beds in sheds and, often, human trafficking alongside. I entirely agree: seize the asset, take the money off them and make them pay for what they are doing.

On the broader issue, the hon. Gentleman made a very good set of recommendations about the Committee’s report. Six months on from the report’s publication and the Government’s response, this is a good time to step back and look at where the Government have got to and at the market as a whole. As the Chair of the Committee pointed out, one in five households lives in rented accommodation. There are many reasons for that—some economic, some demographic and some social. Although many people would clearly prefer to own their homes, we should not ignore the fact that, certainly in my experience, an increasing number of young people prefer to rent. Theirs is a generation that expects to have two or three careers, never mind jobs. It is a generation that rents its music rather than buying it as old fogies—I nearly said the wrong word—like me did. Their expectations are different. When we form policy, we need to think about that generation, too.

As the Chair of the Committee said, the vast majority of tenants said during the inquiry that they were satisfied. We should not overlook that. However, the gap between the majority of homes and the very worst has increased, so I have no hesitation in supporting the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Bill, introduced by the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck). That will help us to root out the worst offenders.

Put simply, reform of the sector is needed, but it should be focused. We should not be tempted into pretending that every landlord is out to exploit their tenants. That helps no one. We need a consumer-led—tenant-led, so to speak—rental market. That means we need clarity about services and charges, fair dispute and redress arrangements for when things go wrong, greater choice and a more modern housing stock. It means we should encourage the building of more homes for rent and the rectification of substandard homes. It also means—this addresses the point made by the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms)—that local authority enforcement needs overhauling so it is consistent and effective. I will come to that in a moment.

One of the report’s key themes was the respective rights of landlords and tenants. One of the main benefits of the Tenant Fees Bill is that it will help to clarify the role of landlords and letting agents. Alongside reforms to money laundering, that will help the market and improve the way it works for people. Our report also sought clarification of the law concerning people’s rights and obligations, including those of tenants. I welcome the reference in the Government’s response to publishing easy-to-understand

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“how to” guides for tenants. That is good, but we may also need consolidation. We need the law itself, not just the words that describe it, to be made simpler.

Equally, we legislators should all recognise that laws and regulations are sometimes limited in what they can achieve. They certainly stop bad practice, but they are not good at changing the culture of a business sector or promoting best practice. For that, we need people in the sector themselves to change—we need the practitioners to raise their game. That means we need qualified letting and managing agents who are committed to high standards.

What needs to happen? First, we should require anyone working in lettings and property management to be qualified. Members of the public might be amazed that that is not the case already. Secondly, the scope of those qualifications should not be imposed by the Government but should be agreed jointly with the industry and consumer representative bodies—I think of the Consumers Association as a good example—and forged with professional bodies such as the Institute of Residential Property Management and the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, of which I am a fellow.

We should also grandfather across existing qualifications and ensure that they are part of the new process. We cannot afford to create a new barrier for people who have already committed to being professional. Indeed, there is a shortage of good, qualified people in residential property management for some of the blocks our constituents live in. We do not want to create a problem there, so grandfathering across existing qualifications would be sensible.

Thirdly, qualifications need to recognise not only different roles and levels but the different demands of the private rented sector and the social housing sector. Essentially, what matters is that people are competent to perform their roles financially, technically and of course legally. I also want a culture of continuous professional development to be adopted in the sector so that people keep up to date. Together, those elements, which build on the report, would help to change not only who works in the sector but the standards they maintain. I would be grateful if the Minister specifically addressed those points.

We heard about the standard of buildings and the housing stock, which is a big challenge. It is right that we rectify and improve the bad buildings we have now, but we need to do more than that—we need to build more modern homes to rent. That is why in 2012-13, when I was Housing Minister, I actively promoted a new model—the build-to-rent market. Having attracted billions from pension funds and long-term institutions, that market has blossomed in the past five years. More than 117,000 homes—modern, purpose-built homes that are available on long-term leases and provide services to tenants—are under construction or available to let. As it matures, that market will offer an even broader range of homes and rents, and provide greater choice for tenants seeking an alternative to the old housing stock. I hope the Minister confirms that the Government are committed to continuing to support the build-to-rent sector.

The Committee’s report also highlighted the need for effective enforcement by local authorities, which was touched on earlier. We received evidence—it was some of the most concerning we received—that there is not

only a low level of enforcement but huge variability between councils in similar areas. For example, the Residential Landlords Association told us that in 2016-17, although more than 105,000 complaints were made by tenants, councils prosecuted just 467 people. That is less than one tenth of 1%. I appreciate, as Members said, that prosecution is not the sole enforcement action, but it is a pretty good indicator. At less than one tenth of 1%, something is not working.

Enforcement is hugely variable, too. There are 32 London boroughs. One of them—Newham—is responsible for 60% of prosecutions. The Committee heard that six out of 10 councils did not prosecute a single landlord in 2016. David Cox from ARLA Propertymark told us—this is in the report—that laws are passed but they are just not enforced. Part of the problem is a lack of money. That is why we asked the Government to ensure that councils have the money to enforce both current and future regulations.

However, as the hon. Member for Sheffield South East highlighted, this is not just about money; clearly, it is also about local political priorities and political leadership. That is why I strongly support the Committee’s suggestion that there should be a benchmarking scheme. That should be introduced, funded and run by the Government and managed through the Local Government Association. Councils should publish data about the number of complaints they receive, how they are resolved and prosecutions so all of us—our constituents included—can compare the enforcement levels of councils in similar areas. Will the Minister update us on what progress has been made with the LGA on that issue?

Teresa Pearce (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): My constituency is in two boroughs with very different approaches. In 2016-17, one had to spend £5 million on temporary accommodation. For that borough, trying to end any sort of tenancy—no matter how bad the landlord—is counterintuitive, because it would then have to house the tenants but it does not have any housing stock. This issue is to do with political will and resources, and doing something about the private rented sector, but it is also about finding safe premises for people to live in—it is about supply, too. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the situation is very complicated?

Mr Prisk: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. I think it is complex, which is why benchmarking solely on prosecutions is too narrow. She is right to say that it is a constant challenge for councils to judge the resources available, but the different levels of enforcement—even between neighbouring councils in similar areas—suggests to me that the system is not working.

My last point is about whether the report and the Government’s response are in danger of being overtaken by technology—something that both the Committee and the Government will want to come back to, I think. For example, online services such as Airbnb are creating completely new ways for people to find somewhere to stay, ostensibly and originally when travelling on holiday. Equally, the web is now enabling the emergence of a grey market in informal serviced lettings.

I have seen examples of both in my constituency. No one is quite clear about how to define such activity, let alone whether it can be regulated. At what point does an Airbnb letting, which was initially for one week but

then becomes two weeks or four weeks, become something more formal? Should those platforms, which enable the transaction, be defined as letting agencies in law?

Some would reasonably say, “Do not interfere, do not meddle”—it would be my natural instinct to say that—but as we tighten up the regulation of the private rented sector, the danger is that the crooks will shift into these emerging markets, creating the potential for the next property scandal. All of us in this place, but the Minister in particular, will need to decide how to ensure that any changes we make are future-proofed.

Does the technological nature of the transaction matter or do we just focus on making sure that we have modern, up-to-date consumer rights? How do we shape the regulations so we do not stifle genuine enterprise? Can the Minister tell us what the Government are doing to think about that? She is always looking at the picture in the round, as any good Minister does, but can she tell us whether the Government would be prepared to look at the issue and whether we as a Committee should consider it in the future?

There are a number of crucial areas where the reform of the sector could make a positive difference not only for tenants, but for landlords. The report sets out a clear way forward, and I look forward to the Minister’s response.

2.2 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests; I am a vice-president of the Local Government Association and the owner of a small property portfolio.

I rise to do three things: first, to talk about the situation in my own borough of Harrow; secondly, to look at the detailed report that we, as a Committee, produced; and thirdly, to add a few things that I think are needed. It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr Prisk), with his measured approach and his experience of having been the Housing Minister. Equally, it is a pleasure to follow the Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), who I have worked with on this Committee over many years—probably more than we would care to mention.

On the Committee, and certainly since I have served on it, we make sure we proceed by consensus. Individuals may hold views that are not contained in the report, but it comes from the entirety of the Committee and is produced on a cross-party basis. I warmly welcome the Minister to her place and I hope she will tell us why the Government are not taking forward some of the measures that we have recommended—again, on that all-party basis.

In my borough, the private rented sector is growing dramatically. It used to be a tradition, in outer London in particular, that as people became more prosperous and more likely to commute for longer distances, they would sell their homes and move on, then commute into central London for a job. Nowadays, they tend not to sell their homes. They move on and acquire a new home, but they keep their existing home and rent it out. One challenge that has arisen in Harrow is that large numbers of properties—typical suburban, three-bedroom semis—are now rented out to 10, 12 or in some cases 20 people, who are living in them. This brings the consequences of antisocial behaviour and overcrowding, and quite frankly the people living there are being exploited.

Most people in that position come from eastern Europe. I now have 10,000 eastern Europeans living in my constituency. They are warmly welcomed—they are here to work and want to contribute to the economy—but they are being exploited. Rents of a typical three-bedroom property are in the order of £2,000 per month. If you have 20 people sharing that £2,000, then the rent is not too bad. However, the living conditions are absolutely disgraceful. That is, I think, one of the key challenges.

The local authority has responded by setting up a selective licensing scheme in one ward, which was vigorously opposed by the private landlords concerned for the obvious reason that they thought they would not be able to continue to exploit their tenants. The challenge for the Government when legislative changes take place is, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford mentioned, that although the vast majority of tenants are satisfied with their position, what do we do about the bad, criminal landlords who exploit vulnerable people and make their lives a misery.

Mr Betts: We have been on the Committee together for more than eight years, and I think we have all had examples of landlords behaving quite badly, not merely in letting properties but in objecting to licensing schemes. It is not just about the regulatory framework, but about the fact that their names will be known, as well as which properties they own and rent out, and Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs gets rather interested at that point. The cost of that could actually dwarf anything else they have to do, such as paying fees for the licence.

Bob Blackman: I thank the Chair of the Select Committee for that intervention. That is particularly true in the Edgware ward of the London Borough of Harrow, where I asked the council a series of questions about how many registered houses in multiple occupation they had on their books. I was astonished when they told me they had 89 for the borough. I can take Members to roads in Edgware where there are 89 in the road. One problem is the local authority’s resources to deal with these issues, but, more importantly, people just ignore their responsibilities. That has to be dealt with.

I come now to the report itself. I will not deal with the recommendations that the Government have taken on board, because they are fine and we all agree with them. I am delighted that they have been taken on. I worry about some aspects that the Government are not addressing so far. When the Minister replies, will she update us? The Government response was some five months ago and I hope that things have moved on. I will go through the report, looking at the questions that I would like the Minister to answer.

In the Government’s response, the housing health and safety rating system recommendation is partly accepted, but the view is that the Government will review the position in due course. Can the Minister update us on where that review is? The Chair of the Select Committee mentioned the reality of carbon monoxide poisoning and other safety measures in homes. The hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), who is no longer in her place, raised a desperate situation in her constituency. The issue is ensuring that tenants’ safety is paramount. Over the time I have served on the Select Committee, we have considered various different aspects of safety, and my concern is that building

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regulations and safety regulations do not seem to be being updated as they should, both to protect tenants and to point out to landlords their responsibilities. I would like to understand the Government's position in that area.

Equally, where the Government and Law Commission are reviewing what legislation could be enacted, the Government say they are having discussions with the Law Commission. That is always helpful, but could we be updated with the results? As I have said, if we introduce legislation we must be careful that we do not put off good landlords from renting out their properties and maintaining good order at the same time as squeezing out the criminal behaviours that are clearly unacceptable.

I turn now to section 21 notices; we will have a debate on that subject next Thursday, I think, and I do not want to rehearse the discussions we will have there, because no doubt the Minister will be answering that debate too if it proceeds as expected.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler): My Thursdays are your Thursdays.

Bob Blackman: That is welcome.

Let me take up the issue, because we made recommendations on this and the Government have not accepted them, but they agree to keep the issue under review. We have a delicate balance to strike, because the sad reality is that if landlords are in a position where they cannot evict bad tenants, there is a serious problem and they will say that it is not worth being a landlord and letting out the properties.

As the author, promoter and sponsor of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 on section 21 notices, I know them in infinite detail. They are deemed to be no-fault evictions, and clearly we need to preserve the position whereby a landlord can get their property back, but at the same time, some landlords seem routinely to issue section 21 notices on six-month tenancies as protection for getting the property back at the end. One solution is to have longer tenancies, with protection for the tenant and for the landlord, with the potential for break clauses on both sides. That seems to have gone very quiet in Government thinking, and I hope my hon. Friend the Minister can update us on where we are going with longer tenancies and protection of tenancies.

There seems to be a suggestion from the Government that retaliatory eviction is a relatively rare occurrence. For those people who gave evidence to us having suffered it, it might have been a rare occurrence but it was a life-changing experience and we must condemn it. Landlords have a duty to keep their homes up to a reasonable and safe standard, and if tenants complain that the property is not kept up to that standard, it is quite right that the landlord should then put it right. If the result is that the landlord evicts the person or the tenants, that is an outrage and we need to ensure that action is taken. At the moment there is not enough protection for the tenants. The Chair of the Select Committee mentioned the specialist housing court, which would be warmly welcomed by both landlords and tenants. If we could have an update on the status of the Government review, that would be terribly helpful and informative to the Committee.

I will say two last things before I sit down. First, we made a recommendation on the local housing allowance, particularly regarding studio accommodation. In London, this is becoming a big issue. Properties are subdivided into small units and put out to rent and the tenants are therefore being exploited. There is a case, which we have made in the report, for taking action in this area, and I would welcome the Minister's taking some action. I accept that this situation is not necessarily true across the country, but in London it is a serious issue that must be addressed.

Secondly, on penalties for bad landlords and the protection of tenants, although I do not normally read *The Guardian*, it has provided a very helpful brief in its coverage on rogue landlords and what has happened. The sad reality is that if landlords fail the fit and proper person test and are banned, all their tenants should know about it. That just makes sense. To have a position where a landlord can be banned in one borough but carry on renting in others just does not make sense at all. One thing we need to see is urgent action to introduce a position where landlords are banned and action is taken.

I agree that in the most serious cases, a fine just becomes part of doing business, so having the ability to confiscate the property and protect the tenants from the behaviours of rogue or criminal landlords must be the final resort. On that point I will sit down, but I look forward to the Minister's response and to working with colleagues to improve the position for both tenants and the good landlords in this country.

2.16 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): It is a pleasure to join my former colleagues on the Communities and Local Government Committee to debate their excellent report. I can genuinely say that I miss the Committee; if the Committee members know that I have been moved on to the Procedure Committee instead, they will understand quite how much I miss them. The reports we did together on the Committee were very useful and thought-provoking, and the contributions by hon. Members today are indicative of the attitude they take to their work on the Committee.

The report is an excellent piece of work that highlights many issues within the private rented sector in England. I suppose I must be missed from the Committee too: when I was on it, I would try to make comparisons with Scotland, where we have done a huge amount of work in the private rented sector in recent years. I notice that there are some good points of comparison that, if I were still on the Committee, I might have added to the report. I hope to highlight some of those issues here; I know the Minister has come to visit Glasgow before and spoken to some of the professionals in Scotland, so she will understand that there are things we have done in Scotland that may be of use in England also.

I start by mentioning the Private Housing (Tenancies) (Scotland) Act 2016, which came into force on 1 December 2017 and is coming up to its first birthday. The Act made a number of changes within Scotland: it moved tenancies to being open-ended, so that rents were more predictable and there was protection against excessive rent rises, and it included an ability for local government to introduce local rent caps for rent pressure areas, which is important when we see rents spiralling out of control in some places.

The 2016 Act also introduced comprehensive and robust grounds for repossession for landlords, which could only happen in 18 specified circumstances rather than because the landlord felt they wanted to take the property back; they had to meet those tests as well, so that gave protection to both tenants and the landlord. Disputes between tenants and landlords can now be heard in a new specialist tribunal that we brought in to handle them, which is a useful thing for everybody all round.

We also ensured that letting agents have to register and adhere to a code of practice, which goes some way towards what the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr Prisk) said about professional qualifications and skills; if there is a code of practice in place at least, then that gives some professionalism to those companies.

I very much agree with what the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford said about qualifications. An awful lot of people who end up being landlords in the private rented sector did not start out that way. They may have bought a flat as a younger adult and then moved on but kept it and tried to use it to earn rental income, and they may not quite understand their obligations and responsibilities. For a while, buying flats and renting them out became a quick way of making money. A bit more needs to be done to make sure that landlords understand all their obligations.

Mr Prisk: I agree with the hon. Lady about codes of practice, and I am keen to support them. However, I have come to the conclusion that we need to be clear that someone cannot operate in this market unless they have the qualifications. It is rare for me to say something like that. Does she accept that mandating qualifications is actually a stronger move than introducing a code of practice?

Alison Thewliss: Yes, and I am interested to see how that proposal develops. I certainly think it would be useful: it would reassure tenants to know that their landlord had some kind of qualification to put a roof over their head. It might get rid of some of the more criminal elements in the sector as well.

All landlords have to be registered in Scotland—there is not the hotch-potch of local registration mentioned in the report—which means that, if they step out of line, they can be banned. We have had problems in my constituency, slightly like those mentioned by the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), of tenants being exploited and lots of people being crammed into one flat. Govanhill in my constituency has a very large private rental sector and lots of rogue criminals. The hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) suggested that “rogue” sounds a bit more casual; I certainly feel that “criminal” is the better word.

In May 2018, five landlords were struck off the landlord register for renting substandard properties, and a further nine were struck off and banned in September 2017. That is all publicised and goes in the press, so there is no doubt about who those landlords are, what they have been up to and the conditions that their tenants have been living in. The Govanhill enhanced enforcement area gives council officials the right of entry into properties if there is any suspicion that they are not up to standard. On their first inspection, only 21 properties met the Scottish repairing standard. When they came back for a subsequent inspection, 175 properties met the standard, so there had been a clear improvement through that process.

Giving local authorities the power to enter flats and do those assessments is quite important in making sure that standards are met. It also gets around the issue of some local authorities not having the political will to do things. If everybody has to be registered across the board, that is at least a first step from which prosecutions can follow, if required. However, I do not think it has been in force for long enough in Scotland for us to be able to tell whether there are postcode lotteries, because housing varies quite substantially in my constituency and in other parts of Scotland as well.

I draw the House’s attention to the Nationwide Foundation’s report on vulnerability among low-income households in the private rented sector in England, because it makes for very interesting reading. It mentions that the proportion of privately rented properties failing to meet the decent homes standard has been falling, but that the number of such properties has actually increased. Numbers and proportion are quite different here. It also highlights, as other hon. Members have mentioned, that most properties that failed had a category 1 hazard—a severe or immediate risk. It should frighten us all if people are in such terrible conditions that their lives could be at risk. I urge the Government to do a bit more to make sure that properties meet those standards.

I also urge the Government to do more on revenge evictions, which our legislation in Scotland has militated against. It is something that we have managed to act on. Generation Rent also produced a very interesting briefing on this. It mentioned that, in 2017, 12,711 evictions by bailiffs happened under the accelerated process under section 21 of the Housing Act 1998, but that that is likely to be the tip of the iceberg. An awful lot of those people will not go through the court process, so we do not necessarily know how many people have actually been evicted. It also points out that two thirds of private renters have no savings. If someone with no savings has just been evicted, the last thing they will want is to go through a court process. They will just not have the means to do so, so they will try to find somewhere else as quickly as they can and move on. We need a better understanding of how many people face evictions through this process.

Moving towards a national database with better data gathering on this issue would be useful in informing what happens next, and the Government ought to think again about that. I am interested in hearing what the Minister says about the things that the Government did not accept from the review. The Committee will continue to push those suggestions, because they are good and solid. We particularly need to protect people from revenge evictions.

Private renting is a growing sector, with more and more people who are more and more vulnerable, including families. It is not only young people renting a flat for a while. There are people who live their whole lives in the private rented sector now because there is a severe shortage of housing in some parts of England. We need to look at how we can better protect those people. The hon. Member for Sheffield South East and others made clear that the cumulative effect of introducing legislation on legislation is that the protections are not where they should be. People need those protections so that they can have some certainty in their lives. Not having that certainty has a huge impact on people’s health, wellbeing

[Alison Thewliss]

and prospects, and particularly on children if they have to move quite a lot. We need to make sure as best we can that people are protected.

Lastly, I very much agree with the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford about lettings from companies such as Airbnb. The Minister would do well to consider that further, because there could be an emerging gap in the market and we need to somehow make sure that there is protection within regulations.

2.26 pm

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. This is an important debate, and we have heard some really helpful contributions. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) for securing it and for his leadership of the Select Committee, and I thank the other Committee members who are here. All have raised important points.

I should be clear at the outset that, as hon. Members might expect, the Opposition agree with the Committee's assessment that the majority of landlords are good. I do not think anybody questions that. They play an important role in the housing system and in our society. However, as the Committee's report illustrates, the situation faced by a growing number of private renters is intolerable. Most of us here today will see in our constituency surgeries—I certainly do—the horrible things that too many people have to endure. That includes the 800,000 privately rented homes with at least one category 1 hazard, landlords cutting off electricity to vulnerable tenants, and letting agents demanding hundreds of pounds to do things such as view a property.

We need to keep in mind all the time what private renters want, and that needs to be the test for policy makers. I think there are two things: first, people want to rent a property fit to be called a home; and, secondly, they want the same rights and redresses enjoyed by consumers in lots of other areas of society. For many, the private rented sector undoubtedly fails those two tests. Standards at the bottom end of the market are poor. As Opposition Members have said many times, people have more rights when buying a fridge-freezer than when renting a property.

The report identifies some important failings in Government policy that have led us to this point. I will look at two broad areas: the lack of intervention and enforcement, and the imbalance of power between tenants and landlords. On the first, as the report demonstrates, outdated legislation and a lack of enforcement mean that the current system of setting and enforcing standards does not work. We agree that the current legislation is overly complicated. It has built up over many years and has become somewhat hard to navigate and dated. Penalties are not strong enough to deter bad practice, and fines are too small to incentivise legal action in the first place.

We have already heard about the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck). However, the Government could have helped its provisions to become law years ago by accepting Labour amendments to the Housing and Planning Act 2016. The fact that so

little enforcement action is taken is all the proof we should need that the system is broken. As we have heard, Advice4Renters estimates that just 0.1% of landlords letting non-decent homes are prosecuted each year.

The Guardian revealed today that nine out of 10 local authorities failed to issue a single civil penalty notice against a landlord or letting agent last year. It is impossible to deny that the billions of pounds of cuts faced by local authorities have affected their ability to enforce through environmental health and trading standards. I accept the argument that we also need leadership in local authorities, but the extent of the cuts has been very significant and must inhibit what local authorities can do. The fines being so low means that there is neither a deterrent for bad landlords nor an incentive for councils to take action. We share the disappointment expressed by the Local Government Association and others that the Government ignored the Select Committee's recommendations to improve enforcement through increased fines and powers.

The report was right to express concerns about the situation with landlord licensing schemes. I have seen the positive impact of such schemes in my own borough, where Croydon Council has issued more than 30,000 licences. It is wrong for the Secretary of State to hold a veto over councils wanting to tackle rogue landlords. The Secretary of State has blocked councils such as Redbridge from introducing borough-wide licensing. There is a clear contradiction: Ministers talk about standing up for renters, but their actions prove otherwise.

Let me turn to the imbalance in the private rented sector. The report is clear about the things that need to be done to make the rules fit for purpose and to ensure that they are enforced more, but there are deeper structural issues in the private rented sector. The Committee rightly points out that we cannot draw a clear line and say that there is a small minority of rogue landlords and everyone else is perfect. That would oversimplify the issue and ignore the structural problems that mean that a landlord does not have to be rogue or even breaking the law in any way to make tenants' lives difficult. There is an imbalance that no court or enforcement authority can solve, because it is part of a system that is fundamentally skewed against private renters.

The system is stacked most heavily against those at the very bottom—that is clear. Permitted development and abuse of the local housing allowance in lockdown properties make a mockery of planning and welfare rules. That is a symptom of a broken housing market. We are failing so badly to build the homes that the country needs that the Government are essentially saying, "Anything will do." Tenants, left with little or no choice, pay the price, but yet again the Government ignore the Committee's valid recommendations on this topic.

We could talk more about what needs to be done about landlords refusing to rent to people on benefits. That issue comes up repeatedly in my constituency. I know that Shelter is trying to take some legal cases through the courts to affect that. I will not talk more about that now, but it really is heart-wrenching in constituency surgeries.

Retaliatory evictions are a real concern. They have been talked about today and were rightly raised by the Committee. When 44% of renters say that they will not negotiate over disrepair for fear of eviction, and when charities are having to warn people that raising a complaint

might get them evicted, that is a structural failure in the system. We agree that the current protections are nowhere near robust enough to avoid retaliatory evictions or punitive rent rises. I have seen this happen to my own constituents, as we all have. Labour would go further than the Committee's suggestion of extending the time limit for protecting tenants from section 21, which the Government seem not to be observing anyway. If we say that section 21 is unfair for those who have made a complaint, why do we accept it for those who have not complained? No-fault evictions are at the heart of the imbalance between tenants and landlords and should be scrapped entirely.

The Government have admitted that they need to do more. They say that they want to rebalance the relationship in the rented sector and give tenants access to redress. But given the record of the Government in relation to renters, people would be right to be sceptical. Consultations, calls for evidence or plans to introduce measures such as a housing court, ombudsman schemes or letting agent regulation are worth very little if they do not result in action. The Department has a bad record in terms of turning consultations into legislation: 185 housing consultations have been launched by the Department since 2010. Too often, consultation fails to translate into anything substantial.

The Government recently announced plans to look at introducing three-year minimum tenancies, which then appeared to be quietly dropped. There is little point in a housing court or ombudsman if tenants do not have rights to protect in the first place. The Department's record on private renting so far has been to talk tough but under-deliver. The Government have blocked Labour's proposals to amend the Tenant Fees Bill so that deposits could be capped at three weeks' rent. As we have discussed, that would mean an average saving of £575 for tenants across England and £928 in London. The current six-week cap has the potential to cost tenants more: we know that the majority—more than 50%—of landlords charge four weeks' rent as standard, so it would end up increasing people's deposits and not saving them money.

Mr Prisk: The hon. Lady is setting out her party's views on various issues. A number of people who are good landlords are very anxious about future rents. Would it be Labour party policy in government to cap them or index them?

Sarah Jones: As I was about to say, we would introduce three-year tenancies, and it would not be possible to increase rents above inflation over that period. It is a matter not of setting what the rent would be, but of people having more security in a tenancy and more ability to understand the level at which the increase would happen over that longer period.

Mr Prisk: I take it from that that there could be no tenancy shorter than three years.

Sarah Jones: It is interesting that the hon. Gentleman should say that, because we are looking at developing our policies in this area and have also said that we want to scrap section 21. We need to look at how that would work and what the conditions would be. It is really important to stress, though, that we are not saying that people should have the right to remain in their home indefinitely if, for example, they are not paying their rent or are, in other ways, causing disruption or antisocial

behaviour. That is absolutely not the point of what we want to do. There will always be a need for a landlord to be able to evict tenants who are not paying their rent or who, for whatever reason, should not be in the property.

We need to find the middle ground. At the moment, there is a problem, particularly in London, and I have seen it in Croydon. When we talk to renters organisations such as Generation Rent, they talk of a cycle whereby people are being evicted for no obvious reason. For example, a landlord might not be an expert landlord, as we have talked about. Someone may have inherited a property or have moved out of London. They might have a property and not really know what they are doing. They might decide to move back in or they might decide to do something else with the property. Then we have a group of people who are constantly having to move because they are being moved on through section 21 evictions, or we have people who cannot afford the rent increases, so they are also having to leave through section 21. An imbalance of power is our starting point when we are looking at policy development. I hope that that answers the hon. Gentleman's question.

Mr Betts: Is my hon. Friend basically saying that the proposal will be very similar to one that I think Shelter put before the Select Committee in 2013-14, which was to introduce three-year tenancies, with the rent in that period linked to some inflation measure so that there was a clear understanding by both landlord and tenant of how it would progress in the course of the tenancy? The other issue that we raised, which brings us back to the housing court idea, is that if that tenancy proposal happens, landlords do need a way reasonably quickly to get out a tenant who is not paying their rent. Having a housing court might be one way to enable that process to happen and to make landlords more comfortable with longer-term tenancies.

Sarah Jones: I thank my hon. Friend: I did not see Shelter's evidence in 2013, but, yes, that sounds a reasonable way forward. The absolute starting point, as I said at the start of my contribution, is that we know that most landlords are good landlords. We are not trying to create a system in which they cannot function and cannot evict people when they need to; we are trying to create a system that is fair. The Labour Front-Bench team were fortunate to go to Berlin recently to see, as many people have, the system of renting that people have there and to look at some of the other models. There are lots of lessons to be learned from other countries.

I should make progress. The *Guardian* and ITV investigation into the private rented sector, which has been talked about and has forced a U-turn from the Prime Minister, is worrying. Despite the Government estimating that there are 10,000 rogue landlords, not a single name, at the time of that investigation, had been added to the database; that was in October, which was more than six months after its launch. One wonders what the point of a rogue landlord database is if the rogue landlords have not been identified. The Mayor of London's database has more than 1,000 entries. I hope that the Government, through the Minister, can update us on where the rogue landlord database has got to today.

The Government announced that they would give £2 million to local authorities to take action against bad landlords, but that amounts to £6,000 per council.

[Sarah Jones]

Meanwhile, the trading standards teams expected to enforce new legislation such as the Tenant Fees Bill have seen enforcement officer numbers go down by 56% since 2009. These teams have faced funding cuts of almost £100 million since 2010. Local authorities overall have had billions of pounds taken away from their budgets. In that context, £6,000 does not feel like enough.

The Opposition recognise that the scale of the challenge means we need a more radical response—a consumer rights revolution. We have a commitment to end unfair evictions. I am proud that my local authority, Croydon Council, was the first to pass a motion calling on the Government to scrap section 21. We have committed to give renters greater security, as we have just discussed, with a three-year cap on rent rises. We want to name and shame rogue landlords and introduce tougher fines for those who fail to meet minimum standards, with those fines funding local authority enforcement work. We would properly support landlord licensing. We also want to see greater powers for Mayors across the country to control rents, if appropriate, in high-cost areas such as London.

Inspired by the system in Germany, we have committed to spend millions to kick-start renters' unions. I spent time at the Labour party conference talking about that with London Renters Union, which has helped many renters out of situations in which they would have struggled on their own. We want root-and-branch reform of the private rented sector. It is too dysfunctional for us to tinker around the edges. The end result of insecure tenancies, unsafe homes or extortionate rents is staring us all in the face. The end of a private tenancy is the leading cause of homelessness today. There are 1.6 million people in chronic debt, and 120,000 children will wake up tomorrow without a home. That is not to mention the extra 1 million people under the age of 35 who are unable to buy their own home and are forced to rent in the private rented sector. For all of their sakes we should reform the private rented sector.

2.41 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I thank hon. Members from across the House for their considered speeches. I congratulate my friend, the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), on securing this debate. I thank him and all the members of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee for their inquiry into the private rented sector and for working with the Government to improve the lives of those living in it.

The private rented sector plays a vital role in providing homes across the country and is an integral element of the Government's approach to making the housing market work for everyone. As we outlined in our response to the Committee's inquiry, the sector has changed dramatically over the past decade. Not only has it grown to become the second largest tenure, but it also houses an increasingly diverse range of tenants. It is of great credit to those who deliver and support the private rented sector that it has managed to react to such change, and continues to drive forward improvements in quality, standards and safety.

I want to use this speech to reflect on the Committee's report and outline some of the work the Government are delivering to ensure that everyone living in the private rented sector is able to build the life they desire. We agree with the vast majority of the Committee's recommendations; where differences arise, they are of degree, not kind. Although I cannot cover everything in such a short time, I hope that hon. Members will see how the Government are pursuing a package of measures that will work together to improve the private rented sector. As the Committee cautioned in its report, the Government recognise that they cannot take a piecemeal approach to the sector—they must take a holistic approach to reform.

Successive Governments have shared the opinion that the rights and responsibilities that govern the private rented sector must be placed on a statutory footing. In its report, the Committee raised concerns that the volume of legislation covering the private rented sector could be creating a complex and challenging landscape to navigate, as we have heard again today.

Although the Government share the Committee's desire for greater understanding, we do not feel that the legislation is in need of the type of root-and-branch reform that the Committee—or, indeed, the Labour party—suggests. Instead, we believe that the challenge for the Government is to help everyone understand the legislative foundations of the sector, to ensure that people can make the best use of these important protections. That is why we are structuring our work to address the key challenges that flow from our overarching objective, which is to rebalance the relationship between landlords and tenants, to deliver a high-quality, fairer and more affordable private rented sector.

To achieve that aim, we need to address a number of interconnected challenges, which the Committee also highlighted in its report: affordability, property standards, enforcement, and the rights and responsibilities of landlords, agents and tenants. I want to use this debate to set out some of the work under way to drive improvements in the sector, how this work links together and the progress made since we responded to the Committee's inquiry.

A lack of affordable rental property can mean that tenants are forced to accept substandard or unsafe accommodation. That is not a choice that we want anyone to face, so we are working hard to improve the private rented sector to ensure that no tenant faces that choice in the future. We believe that the key to improving choice and affordability for tenants is to build more homes for rent.

To answer the question raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr Prisk), we want to build more homes. We want to build to rent to continue to grow and make a significant contribution to housing supply. That is why the Government introduced the £1 billion build-to-rent fund and the £3.5 billion private rented sector guarantee scheme, to support thousands of extra homes built specifically for private rent. However, we also recognise that house building takes time. That is why we are working to improve affordability and conditions for tenants now.

We introduced the Tenant Fees Bill to protect tenants by capping tenancy deposits and banning unfair fees at the outset, renewal and termination of a tenancy. As well as helping tenants, the Bill will strengthen the hand of good landlords and agents across the UK by levelling

the playing field, driving out rogue operators and ensuring that reputable landlords are no longer undercut by those who overcharge.

Alison Thewliss: Christopher Mullins-Silverstein, who works in our Whips Office, brought it to my attention that there are quite often disputes around leaving a tenancy. For example, he had to pay for cleaners before he was allowed to leave. The landlord then disputed the fact that the cleaners had been in and done a good job, and is withholding the deposit. He has to pay for additional cleaners plus the deposit, plus an exit fee. Those fees mount up and make it more and more difficult for people to move on to other tenancies, given all the debt that they accumulate.

Mrs Wheeler: Indeed, such stories are legion. That is why we brought in the Bill. Finishing a tenancy is very important and should be done incredibly carefully on both sides, so that that matter does not arise.

It is testament to the work of hon. Members from across the House that the Bill has been so well received and supported throughout its parliamentary journey. I thank the hon. Member for Sheffield South East and the other members of Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee for their detailed prelegislative scrutiny, which served to strengthen the Bill. Although our commitment to improving affordability runs throughout our work, I know the Committee shares our commitment to improving property standards and safety.

I thank the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) for all her work in developing and progressing the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Bill. It is an excellent example of cross-party work, which will lead to meaningful progress and strengthen the private rented sector in the future. Under the provisions of the Bill, landlords will have to ensure that any dwelling they rent out is free of hazards, from which a risk of harm may arise to the health or safety of the tenant or another occupier of the property. Where a landlord fails to meet that requirement, their tenant will have the right to take action in the courts. The Bill will give the courts the power to order non-compliant landlords to take action to reduce or remove a hazard, and tenants will be able to seek compensation when landlords refuse to do so.

I will move on, because time is running out and there were so many questions from hon. Members for me to answer. I will do my very best, but if I do not manage to answer them today, I am sure I will be able to write to hon. Members later.

When it comes to the housing health and safety rating scheme—I can never say the acronym HHSRS, which I hate—the Government are explicit that one person in an unsafe home is one too many. We understand the scale of the challenge. We are taking steps to ensure that central Government set out the appropriate standards and that local authorities have the tools they need to enforce these standards. The housing health and safety rating scheme has been around since 2004, and everybody has said that it is very complicated, so we recommend a review. It is the right time to look at it, so we need to put that into practice to see how it needs to be updated. That fits nicely with the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Bill, which I hope will finish its progress and become an Act shortly.

We are also acting to improve safety. In line with the Committee's recommendations, we have announced the introduction of mandatory five-yearly checks on electrical installations in the private rented sector. We will introduce legislation for those mandatory checks as soon as parliamentary time allows. We will also give the Government response to the consultation before Christmas. We expect the outcomes of the scoping review for the HHSRS next spring—[*Interruption.*] I know, I got it that time. The second stage, which will also be set out in the scoping review, will follow. We expect the outcome of the review on carbon monoxide shortly, then we expect to consult on the proposed changes. An announcement on the next steps will also be made shortly.

On lockdown properties, it is absolutely unacceptable that a minority of rogue landlords exploit the housing system by converting their properties into tiny, unsuitable self-contained units so they can get a higher rate of housing benefit or rent and try to avoid the HMO licensing requirements. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and the Department for Work and Pensions are analysing evidence of the relationship between housing benefit, housing tenure and quality. We are committed to working together to understand how we can make best use of our financial levers and existing powers to support tenants and improve the quality of housing, while ensuring value for money.

Many hon. Members have talked about the housing court, which we are very interested in taking forward. Both landlords and tenants have raised concerns about it. Effective and efficient access to the courts is vital for landlords and tenants who wish to challenge bad practice. When all the other options have been exhausted, landlords should be able to recover their properties when they have reason to do so and tenants should live in the knowledge that the court system should protect and support them where needed and not leave them lost in a sea of legal confusion.

We hope the Committee welcomes our recently launched call for evidence, which will gather views on user experience of the courts and how it could be improved. Building on the Committee's recommendations, our proposals explore whether a specialist housing court would make it easier for all users to resolve disputes, reduce delays and secure justice for landlords and tenants in housing cases. That work not only speaks to the court experience, but cuts across the Committee's concerns about retaliatory eviction and is a key consideration in our work on longer tenancies.

To be specific, the call for evidence on the housing court was launched on 13 November and closes on 22 January, so it is a work in progress. It is designed to understand the correct use and experience of the courts, so I am looking forward to seeing the evidence put before us when it closes.

On retaliatory eviction and section 21, our position is clear. No tenant with a genuine complaint about the condition of their property should be fearful of retaliatory eviction, which is why we have already taken steps on the matter by legislating to protect tenants from retaliatory eviction through the Deregulation Act 2015. We are also aware that the vast majority of landlords provide well-maintained properties and that, thankfully, only a small number of tenants encounter the threat of retaliatory eviction.

[Mrs Wheeler]

As set out in our recent letter to the hon. Member for Sheffield South East, despite the rarity of the practice, our commitment to protecting tenants against retaliatory eviction is undimmed—what a great word; well done to my officials for writing that. We share the Committee’s position that the Government must ensure that tenants are properly protected from that, which is why we have included the consideration of retaliatory eviction in our consultation on the barriers to longer tenancies, to ensure that we have the most up-to-date information to inform our thinking.

The consultation on longer tenancies closed at the end of August—not that long ago—and stakeholder events were held in September. We are analysing the responses and we will respond shortly. We had a large number of responses—more than 8,000—and it is important to consider them fully, and align them with the workload of our experience in the courts. Considering the volume of responses is no small feat. We are working to provide the Government response to the consultation in due course.

I will move on—I appreciate that I have to leave two minutes for my good friend, the hon. Member for Sheffield South East, to close the debate. Local authority capacity and enforcement has been a key point of the debate. From my experience in local government, I know the vital role that local authorities play in the private rented sector, particularly in enforcement. The Committee called on the Government to support local authorities to make best use of the powers available to them, and to go further, and that is what we are going to do. We have designed our enforcement tools to allow local authorities to retain the financial penalties they raise and drive them back into their teams to fund future enforcement activity, exactly as Torbay has done. Torbay has been extremely successful in enforcement work and receiving fines—indeed, it has employed another officer on the back of the fines that it has already received.

Committee members will clearly also be pleased to hear that we have launched a £2 million fund to support local authorities with their enforcement work. That upfront boost will allow local authorities to grow and refine their approach. The funding came as a direct response to my Department’s engagement with local authorities across the country at our roadshow events throughout the summer. In response, we are creating a compendium of enforcement guidance that will bring all the relevant guidance into one place, along with templates. That will form part of our national training offer to local authorities. Equipped with effective powers and armed with guidance and support, local authorities will become ever more effective in targeting their work to remove bad landlords and protect tenants.

I am running out of time, so I thank all hon. Members for an excellent debate. The way parliamentary time works means that, in effect, it has been six months since

the work, and it is great that other stuff has been able to come to fruition in that time. I hope my remarks demonstrate the Government’s commitment to building a private rented sector that works for everyone, that supports good landlords to deliver the homes the nation needs and that provides safe, secure and affordable homes for tenants.

We do not shy away from the challenges facing us and we are aware that we need to support the entire private rented sector if we are going to achieve these goals—taking on Airbnb, if necessary. It is in that spirit that I thank hon. Members for their speeches and questions. I look forward to working with the hon. Member for Sheffield South East and the other members of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee in the weeks and months to come.

2.58 pm

Mr Betts: Everyone would agree that it has been an excellent debate on the report, and that the report has generally been welcomed. I should have referred to the fact that I am a vice-president of the Local Government Association, which should be on the formal record. As well as thanking hon. Members who have contributed to the debate, I thank members of the Select Committee. As the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) said, as usual we produced our report with a unanimous recommendation, having considered the evidence before us. That is how we try to work.

It is true that the majority of landlords do a good job and offer good premises to tenants, who are satisfied with their homes. Our report focused on the bad landlords who really need tougher action to be taken against them. We welcome many of the steps that the Government have taken, but we want to push them further.

We recognise that there is an issue of resources for local authorities—I think the Committee will look again at local government funding in the new year—and, of course, of available properties. The hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr Prisk) pushed the idea to the Minister of build to rent, which is absolutely right. We also need more social housing. There is also an issue of political will for enforcement at local authority level, which we referred to. We are looking forward to the LGA’s response to the Government about benchmarking.

It is a pleasure to have the Minister back in her place; we all welcome her. She answered many of the points we raised, but I have noted that we did not get an absolute response to some in the time available. We will write to her next week about them. I thank the Government. We will continue to monitor their progress on our important recommendations and their actual actions on them—not just the words, but the action we want to see in due course.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Fourth Report of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, Private rented sector, HC 440, and the Government response, Cm 9639.

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

International Men's Day

[MR ADRIAN BAILEY *in the Chair*]

3 pm

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered International Men's Day.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I start by thanking the many colleagues from all parties in the House who supported the application for this debate, and the Backbench Business Committee for finding the time for it as close to International Men's Day as possible.

I am sorry that the debate is not in the main Chamber and that we have been put back into Westminster Hall, but that is certainly not the fault of the Backbench Business Committee, which tried to make it happen in the main Chamber. The debate was actually allocated time in the main Chamber, but unfortunately the Government did not allocate the time for the Backbench Business Committee to hold it. I certainly do not blame the Backbench Business Committee; I am actually very grateful to it for finding an alternative date, namely today.

I also thank once again all the many people who have been in touch with me to tell me their story or to put forward their organisation's point of view. I am very grateful to them all for taking the time.

International Men's Day was actually on 19 November, and for most people I should imagine that it was a case of blinking and missing it. That is why I feel that this debate is important. International Men's Day does not receive anything like the coverage that International Women's Day does. As I have said in previous debates, the aims of International Men's Day are admirable. Its objectives are:

"To promote positive male role models...To celebrate men's positive contributions...To focus on men's health and wellbeing...To highlight discrimination against men"—

that includes highlighting the inequalities that men and boys face—

"To improve gender relations and promote gender equality" and finally

"To create a safer, better world"

for everyone. It is worth reiterating those aims, as they provide a focus for what International Men's Day is trying to achieve.

There is so much that I could say today that it is very hard to know where to start. As I have said before, there are many areas where I think the plight of men is ignored or minimised, and many areas where men are certainly treated differently from women. I will concentrate on the things that I feel need to be pointed out, which others will perhaps not mention today. That way, we can ensure that we cover a wide range of subjects in the debate.

I start with the issue of domestic violence. I will keep mentioning the unrecognised male victims of domestic violence in this type of debate, especially as the issue can—tragically—sometimes lead to suicide, which, as has been said during these debates many times, disproportionately affects men.

One message I have received that links these things together was from someone who said they had been suicidal in the past. They wrote to me and said:

"Thank you so very much for all that you have done for equality by calling attention to Men's rights issues. I have only recently...discovered the men's rights campaign after seeing a 2011 episode of the US Talk show, 'The Talk', in which a majority female panel and audience mercilessly jested at the idea of a brutally violent sex crime in the news, purely because it had been committed against a man.

To see how that, and other things, was acceptable made me want to give up.

Earlier this year I was suicidal. I've contemplated it several times before, but have never come so close.

Without exaggeration of ego, I can tell you that you have saved my life."

An episode of "The Jeremy Kyle Show", which was along the same lines as the TV show that I have just mentioned, was recently brought to my attention. A woman was explaining that her partner had gone to the bathroom and she discovered that he was cheating on her. She said that when he came out of the bathroom, she hit him in the face. The audience laughed, then clapped and then whooped with delight. That is the reaction of the public to domestic violence against a man. If attitudes need to change, then it is these attitudes that should be at the top of the list. Can people imagine what the reaction would have been if that had been a man admitting to hitting a woman in the face?

Yet that was not an isolated incident. There are many examples of these attitudes to male victims of domestic violence, which to me is like everyday sexism towards men. The crime survey conducted by the Office for National Statistics showed that in the year ending March 2017 more women than men thought it was acceptable to hit or slap a partner if they had been having an affair or cheated. That paints an uncomfortable picture for those who want to portray domestic violence as purely a male problem. Is it any wonder that men are less likely to come forward to be counted and report abuse, especially if that is the social reaction to such violence?

One man who contacted me said:

"My mental ill health started affecting me as far back as 2010 when I was in a relationship with an abusive ex-girlfriend. I was frequently hit, had my bank account drained of money and was often locked in a bedroom with no way of getting out. I got out of the relationship, but it did have a dramatic effect on my own mental health and wellbeing."

Later on, he was assisted by the Richmond Fellowship, which I believe is a national mental health charity, and he actually ended up working for it. He says:

"Without the support of Richmond Fellowship and Cambridge 105 Radio, I wouldn't be here now sharing this story."

This is just one example of a man suffering domestic abuse. On the positive side, it also shows that there are people and organisations out there that can and do help.

Nothing highlights more starkly the apparent lack of concern for male victims of domestic abuse than the Equal Treatment Bench Book, which is used in the courts—by magistrates, for example. It should be renamed, given that its section on domestic abuse has nothing "equal" about it at all. It refers to the number of women killed each week by a current or former partner, without making any mention at all of the men murdered or abused by their current or former partners. It also says:

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“There are a number of significant reasons why women do not leave dangerous partners, including safety”.

What about men? That is a Ministry of Justice publication, for goodness' sake. I fail to see how publications such as this help magistrates to abide by their sworn oath that they will

“do right to all manner of people after the laws and usages of this realm, without fear or favour, affection or ill will.”

Interestingly, within further breakdowns of domestic abuse figures there are some noteworthy facts that an Equal Treatment Bench Book should perhaps have taken into consideration. For example, according to the crime survey by the ONS for the year ending March 2017, the number of black African men who have suffered domestic abuse is more than double the number of black African women who have suffered such abuse, at a rate of 8.7 per 100 for such men compared with 4.2 per 100 for such women. In the white Irish category, men are four and a half times more likely to be victims of domestic abuse than women, at a rate of 8.2 per 100 of the population for such men compared with 1.8 for such women. There is so much more that could be said about the Equal Treatment Bench Book, but I will resist the temptation to go down that route today.

I move on to the issue of women and men in prison. I have covered this problem in the justice system on many occasions and highlighted the clear bias in favour of women at every stage, yet there are still people who do not want to see any women at all being sent to prison. Setting aside the fact that it is very hard for a woman actually to get sent to prison in the first place, those so-called equality supporters are just showing their true colours. It would almost be easy to confine their comments to the loony bin of thinking if it was not for the unbelievable fact that the Ministry of Justice appears somehow to have been hypnotised by these idiotic suggestions.

The Government's recently launched strategy on female offenders is completely wrong-headed. One of the justifications for its lily-livered approach to female offenders was said to be that female prisoners were often victims of domestic violence. Having recently tabled parliamentary questions, I can confirm something that people might not expect: there are two and a half times more men than women in prison who have suffered domestic abuse. That is the fact of the matter. In the latest figures, which relate to 30 June 2017, the Ministry of Justice says that 1,626 female prisoners had been the victim of domestic abuse. On the same day, there were 4,146 male prisoners in the same position. Again, that might be an inconvenient truth to the Ministry of Justice, but it is the reality, based on the Ministry's own statistics.

In another irony, the same parliamentary questions revealed that nearly one in five female prisoners—18%—is a perpetrator of domestic violence. You couldn't make it up: the Ministry of Justice's strategy is based in part on women being the victims of domestic abuse, yet the beneficiaries of the policy could well have committed domestic abuse themselves.

All these noises about female offenders, saying how a different approach is needed to deal with women, are supposed to be in the name of equality, but nothing could be further from the truth. It is one of the most blatantly sexist, discriminatory things that is happening under our very noses. I should say, before the Ministry

of Justice suggest it, that the solution is not letting out male prisoners and rehabilitating them in the community as well, to make it a level playing field. All those people are criminals, and the solution is to make sure that we keep them in prison.

I also want to touch on male circumcision: male genital mutilation. According to a barrister's opinion, carrying out circumcision on males when there is no medical need—non-therapeutic circumcision—is a crime under the Offences Against the Person Act 1861, being at least actual bodily harm if not grievous bodily harm. In 1983, Lord Hailsham, the then Lord Chancellor, said of female genital mutilation:

“in the case of a minor under the age of 16, there is no possibility that consent is any defence at all. A minor under the age of 16 is not able to consent to the commission upon her of a criminal assault. Neither parental consent nor the consent of the minor would be any defence at all, and if the parents did such a thing, or instigated such a thing or participated in such a thing, it would only render them liable to criminal penalties, too.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 21 April 1983; Vol. 441, c. 677.]

When I put it to the Government in 2016 that female genital mutilation was already illegal before specific laws on the subject were introduced, they agreed that it was. When I then put to them the position regarding boys, they took a different line. They quoted Sir James Munby, who was the president of the Family Division of the High Court, in a case of January 2015:

“Whereas it can never be reasonable parenting to inflict any form of FGM on a child, the position is quite different with male circumcision. Society and the law, including family law, are prepared to tolerate non-therapeutic male circumcision performed for religious or even for purely cultural or conventional reasons, while no longer being willing to tolerate FGM in any of its forms.”

As the former barrister who I mentioned earlier also said, it would require a parliamentary override for male circumcision to be legal, and that has never existed. No exemptions to the law of the land are permissible for religious or cultural reasons.

The Ministry of Justice went on to say that there was no doubt that female genital mutilation could have a physical and psychological impact on women, and also said that some girls die as a result of the procedure, which is absolutely correct. I do not pretend to be an expert in this field, but I believe that boys have also been reported to have died following a circumcision, and I have seen accounts of the physical and psychological impact of circumcision on men.

I understand that the position of the NHS is that the risks associated with routine circumcision, such as infection and excessive bleeding, outweigh any potential benefits. I am mentioning all this because I believe it should be on the record, not least because of the very different approaches to male and female genital mutilation. The Government said back in 2016 that they had no current plans to change the law in relation to male circumcision. Given everything I have said, there may be no need to change the law to bring about a change in male circumcisions. However, I would be particularly interested to hear from the Minister on that point.

I also want to touch on parental alienation. Men are clearly disadvantaged when it comes to family breakdowns and how children are allocated after those breakdowns. Women are more likely to get custody of the children and, as has been noted on many occasions, men really do draw the short straw in these instances. Parental alienation is a topic that requires much more time than

can be given to it today, but I want to put on record how concerned I am about what is a growing problem in this country. For those not familiar with parental alienation, it is what it sounds like: parents being alienated from their children, usually by the other parent, to the detriment of that parent and the children. In my view, it is a form of child abuse. It can happen for all kinds of reasons, and in some cases it is clearly right that parents are kept away from their children—for example, when there are genuine safety concerns. However, parents—when I say “parents”, it is usually men, in reality—are being kept from their children without justification.

One solution is more use of child contact centres. I recently visited Bingley contact centre in my constituency, which is run out of Bingley Baptist church. It is one of the centres under the umbrella of the National Association of Child Contact Centres, which says that more than 1 million children have no contact whatever with one parent or another after separation. I want to place on record my thanks to everybody who works at the Bingley contact centre. They are all volunteers, and they give up their time week in, week out to make sure that parents get to see their children and—just as importantly, if not more importantly—that those children get to see their parents. It is fantastic to see the reaction of the children when they see the parent who has previously been alienated from them. These centres are meant to be a temporary solution, and they work to give—mainly—fathers the chance to get back into their children's lives. There is a waiting list for that service in Bingley, and no doubt in other places around the country. That is a shame, as the more fathers who can see their children, the better.

I mentioned everyday sexism against men earlier in relation to domestic violence, but there are plenty more cases that need to be challenged. People may recall the absolute hoo-hah over the Presidents Club charity event. That men-only event was derided because the hostesses were asked to wear certain clothes, and a lap dance was given as a prize. I am sure we remember that all hell broke loose when that event was reported. Even the millions raised for good causes, including Great Ormond Street Hospital, were under threat of being returned in disgust.

Fast-forward a few months, and the *Daily Mail* featured an article about 11 old ladies who invited their daughters and granddaughters to their nursing home for a performance by Hunks in Trunks, complete with numerous pictures of male dancers in the buff, with no trunks in sight. That was of course hilarious, and not seedy at all: women ogling men, women touching men—and those men had far fewer clothes on than the women who were at the Dorchester hotel for that charity dinner, I can assure you, Mr Bailey.

If that had been a bunch of male pensioners doing that with women with no clothes on, apart from a scrap of material, I am pretty sure that the reaction in the newspapers would have been very different. The papers certainly would not have been reporting the story in such a glib fashion. I accept that the events are not totally comparable, but there are plenty of other, similar examples of how we treat men and women differently. Advertises that apparently objectify women do not, it seems, do the same for men.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): I am glad that the hon. Gentleman almost admitted at the end of his remarks that the two situations are not comparable.

Does he not see the difference between essentially forcing women to look and dress a certain way as part of their job to please men, and a person having a job where they take their clothes off for a living?

Philip Davies: I see the hon. Lady's point, and I absolutely accept it. I just hope that when the papers report a similar event in reverse, she will say, “Well, that is absolutely fine.” I do not think the reports would have been the same if male pensioners had been doing to women what those female pensioners were doing to men, but if the hon. Lady is saying that she would treat both exactly the same, that is fine; that is all I ask in this particular instance. I just doubt that that would have been the general reaction.

To show how ridiculous these things are, I was recently accused of sexism, and I could not for the life of me think what the lady who complained was talking about until she explained. I had sent her an email in response to her message to me following the mass misreporting that I had blocked the Bill to deal with upskirting, when, in fact, as the Speaker confirmed afterwards, I had done nothing of the sort. I said I was

“sorry people just act like a herd without knowing the facts.”

She tweeted that I had sent her a sexist message. I was dumbfounded because I could not work out what on earth was sexist about that line. When I inquired, she sent me an email back saying that by referring to the words “people” and “herd” it sounded as though I was referring to women as cows. That is how ridiculous the situation has got. You literally could not make it up.

Then we have the pay gap, which is reported in such a way as to be sexist against men. Although the whole thing is a nonsense from start to finish—I suspect most people who complain about the pay gap have not got even the first idea how it is calculated—it seems that a pay gap against women is totally unacceptable and yet a pay gap against men is apparently a good thing—at least, it seems to be, according to organisations such as the Parliamentary Digital Service. On Parliament's own website, on the release of its figures, it states:

“In the Parliamentary Digital Service...the mean pay gap was -5.21%. The median pay gap was revealed to be -4.16%. This negative gap”—

the fact that men are paid less than women on average in that department—

“illustrates that women have a pay lead in terms of both mean and median hourly pay over men.”

The director of the Parliamentary Digital Service said:

“I am delighted that this first set of gender pay data is so encouraging for women in our organisation and I am proud to lead an organisation which is committed to ensuring equality and diversity in staff, including gender equality.”

So it seems the politically correct belief is that a pay gap is OK if it is against men. That cannot be right. We surely should not want a pay gap at all. Any pay gap must be wrong. We have a part-time pay gap in the UK that has persistently favoured women over men. I never hear anybody complaining about the part-time pay gap in this country, but we have to treat these things equally. If a pay gap is wrong, it is wrong. One cannot be right and one wrong. We can all agree with that.

This is one of the myths that has taken on an untouchable status as evidence of discrimination against women, when it is nothing of the kind, particularly given that

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the pay gap is not about paying someone less for the same job, which is already illegal. I wish that normally intelligent people would grasp that and do more to expose this issue for the sham that it is.

Yet again there are many more issues that I would like to cover today, but I do not have time. We have blatant discrimination against men in businesses, organisations and politics, where we are hellbent on having more women. No care is given to how that is achieved, so we now have positive discrimination, which is, as it says, discrimination. People think, not without justification, that women have been discriminated against in the past, but rather than thinking the solution is to remove that discrimination, it seems their agenda is to try to reverse it and say, "We want you to be discriminated against in the way that we were for all those years." That kind of revenge tactic is what positive discrimination is. [Laughter.] The hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) laughs, but women-only shortlists, which she may have been a beneficiary of, discriminate against men. She thinks it is funny, but the people of Blaenau Gwent did not think it was funny when Labour lost one of its safest seats in 2005 simply because it had imposed a women-only shortlist and denied a good local man with impeccable local credentials the chance of standing. He stood as an independent and won the seat, which had been one of Labour's safest seats in the country. That indicates the hon. Lady is probably slightly out of touch with working-class Labour voters around the country.

Dawn Butler: What amuses me is how out of touch the hon. Gentleman is when he talks about the hoo-hah over girls as young as 18 years old being forced to wear short skirts and high heels to serve men. He talks about the "untouchable status" of women when we try to get some balance and equality into the system. Without all-women shortlists, this House would not be as diverse as it is, which I am sure the hon. Gentleman has taken offence at.

Philip Davies: I do not really want to get into women-only shortlists, apart from saying that they clearly discriminate against men. There are only two possible reasons to have a women-only shortlist: either the women standing are not as good as the men and therefore need positive discrimination to help them, or the Labour party selection committee is so sexist it would choose a worse man than a better woman. If the hon. Lady believes the Labour party is stuffed with sexists who would choose a worse man than a better woman, I will not disagree with her, but it is hardly a ringing endorsement of people running the Labour party up and down the country. I will not even go on to the barmy idea that our stretched police forces should now extend the list of hate incidents—not even hate crimes—that they spend time on to cover misogyny and maybe misandry, but, in all likelihood, just misogyny.

I hope that the issues I have covered are different from those that others will speak about in this debate. I think the world really has gone mad at times, which is why I am glad that we can have these debates to discuss the variety of issues affecting men. As I have said before, nothing I say on this subject should be controversial in a normal world, yet people who have read or seen

things about me might get the impression that I have somehow been unbelievably controversial in simply asking for men to be treated exactly the same as women. It is apparently sexist to ask that men are treated the same as women, but I do not think it is.

Finally, one clear message that I would like to go out today is that men should not feel alone. Whatever their problem, there are people out there who can see their point of view and can help. We politicians are not all blind to the problems that men face, and I hope that men feel reassured that they have a voice in Parliament on all issues and not just those that fit certain politically correct agendas. Also, the vast majority of women out there agree with common sense rather than the politically correct dogma that many people in this House give them as they claim to represent their interests. Together I hope we can make this country a better place for men and women, so they can live together equally happily, being treated the same and not differently simply because of their gender.

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): Before I call the next speaker, may I make it clear that I want to call the Front-Bench spokesperson at 4 o'clock? You can do the arithmetic as well as I can. If all speakers on the Back Benches take that into consideration, I will be grateful.

3.28 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I am afraid my arithmetic is not as good as yours, Mr Bailey, but I have a fairly short speech. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I would like to have said it is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), and it is good to know that his sense of grievance is alive and kicking.

I know International Men's Day was earlier this month, but we are debating it today. According to its UK website, the day

"provides a fantastic opportunity...to...Highlight some serious issues affecting men and boys and their wellbeing...Make a difference to men and boys' lives...Celebrate...men and boys in all their diversity...Have some serious fun".

The day is overseen by six volunteers who are involved in a range of British charities and academia, and all of us should be grateful to them for the hard work that has gone into the day.

I want to start by highlighting one of the serious issues affecting boys and men: mental health and wellbeing. There have been many suicides within my constituency of Motherwell and Wishaw in the past year. As a community we felt helpless, frustrated and confused, and have looked for someone to blame. In our communities the trauma has had a ripple effect, which is still going on. Many departments and agencies have supported our communities and I want to take this opportunity to say thank you. I should say that all the suicides were of young men.

I know from meetings with Chris's House, Families and Friends against Murder and Suicide, the Scottish Association for Mental Health and North Lanarkshire Council's suicide prevention team that much proactive work is already being carried out on suicide. The big question that remains unanswered is why so many people, especially young men, choose to end their lives. Unfortunately it is in the nature of suicide that many

questions remain unanswered. Deprivation, life traumas and mental illness can be key factors, but not everyone is known to agencies before attempting or completing suicide. Men aged 34 to 54 are more likely to complete suicide, and that may often be due to men being less likely to talk about their feelings and mental health. The age group in question is most likely to suffer relationship breakdowns resulting in decreased income, child maintenance payments or turning to drugs or alcohol, which can lead to the stigma of unemployment or homelessness.

The players of Scottish premieriership football club Motherwell wear suicide prevention logos on their shirts. Players have made a video to encourage men to open up and talk about their feelings. Suicide prevention helpline numbers are displayed throughout the stadium. MPs need to speak openly about the issues and encourage our constituents to do the same. All my staff have had “safe talk” training, so as to be able to spot the indicators, encourage difficult conversations and signpost for help. Those interventions can save lives. In Scotland one in 10 people at any time is having suicidal thoughts. Thankfully the majority do not act on them, and many seek help. The Scottish Government have poured money into suicide prevention. We are all concerned for our communities and should be suicide-alert.

Contrary to what the hon. Member for Shipley suggested, I am going to talk about domestic abuse, which knows no boundaries of gender, culture, class, age, sexual orientation, ethnicity or belief. It continues increasingly to affect people in LGBTI+ relationships, members of ethnic minority groups and men. It remains under-recognised, under-acknowledged and under-funded in the communities in question. In my constituency I work with *Sacro* and *Fearless*, both of which have received lottery funding. *Fearless* reaches out to those people who are less inclined to seek access to domestic abuse services. It offers practical support in getting access to a range of supports including housing and health services, and support appropriate to inclusion with someone's community. *Fearless* recognises that men too are increasingly victims and survivors of domestic abuse. I thank Nikki Beardsmore and her team for their work in that area.

Male role models are important to young men and boys, and not everyone is as lucky as my two sons were. It was the greatest tribute that my younger son could give his father when he said that his dad's legacy was the way he brought up his three children, and that he wanted to do the same with his family. Role models are what boys who do not have good dads need. That is why it is important that men in public life—especially first-class sportsmen—take cognisance of the fact that young men and boys emulate and mimic their behaviours. My father was a typical Scot who did not share his feelings and who harboured suicidal thoughts as a result of his war experiences. It affected his entire life thereafter and he only once talked about his service. We need to break away from that stereotypical male buttoned-up approach to mental health and emotions. Men need to be more like women.

Last Saturday I hosted an evening with some girlfriends. We met at 6 and were still talking at 11.30 when male drivers arrived to pick up their partners. We discussed our health, children and experiences of work. I of course do not have a proper job. I am something of an object of curiosity to those friends, who have known me a long time. They find my status as MP quite puzzling.

My point is that we talked and shared experiences. I got a lot out of the evening and I hope my friends did too. I know that that close circle will help to sustain me through difficult times. For International Men's Day I hope that many men will change the habit of a lifetime, open up to those close to them and enjoy what women have known for centuries—the fact that a problem shared is a problem halved.

3.35 pm

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. It is also a great pleasure to speak in this debate, whose equivalent I had the honour of leading last year. My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) spoke then, and I am grateful for his remarks today, and for those of the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows). I entirely agree with her that it is extremely important to have a circle of friends such as she described. I recall a time when I was in business, living overseas, and the business was going through a particularly difficult time. The opportunity to share that not just with my wife but with friends was hugely important. Having that ability is important for people who are under the weight of difficulties such as potentially having to make people redundant, and who cannot see a particular way out.

I entirely agree with what my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley said about the many different areas in which we need equality. For reasons of time I shall not dwell on the issues that have already been covered. Suffice to say that male suicide is an incredibly important issue for us to address. One might say it is a public health issue, but it is more than that. It is a personal issue affecting families throughout the country. It affects children, parents and circles of friends.

I am going to concentrate on the international aspect of International Men's Day. I had the privilege of visiting the refugee camp at Calais in January and I saw some of the young people, who are almost—not entirely—exclusively young men. They had made their way up to Calais in the hope of reaching the United Kingdom. I spoke to one or two of them and, interestingly, although one would think most would have come from the middle east because of the conflict there, most actually came from countries such as Ethiopia, Eritrea and Nigeria. What struck me—and it is something I have been passionate about for most of my working life, including in this place—was the need for jobs and livelihoods, which applies to everyone, men and women. We are fortunate to have a relatively low unemployment level in this country, even among young people, although it is still too high. I was in Kosovo a couple of months ago to discuss with its Government ways they could tackle their youth unemployment figure. There—in a European country—60% of young people have no job. I am convinced that one of the greatest challenges facing the world at the moment is ensuring that young men and women around the world have the chance of a job or livelihood.

That is why, together with others, I have tried to form a global coalition for youth employment. I was speaking with the secretary-general of the Commonwealth, Baroness Scotland, about that very issue just a week ago. She is passionate about it. It is not just a question of economic development and the creation of jobs—important though that is; it goes right back to education in primary and secondary schools, and to ensuring that boys and girls

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have the education and training in life skills to enable them to get work and have a livelihood in the future. That applies to both boys and girls, and to young men and women. However, I would say that because so much of young men's identity is invested in their work as well as their family, it is absolutely vital for them.

I want to challenge not just our Government and our country but global organisations and national Governments across the world to take this issue seriously. Some of them are, but unfortunately an awful lot are not—they are perhaps concentrating on the needs of the better-off in their country. They are listening to the people with the loudest voices, not to the young men and women who absolutely need jobs and livelihoods for their future.

I shall give just a few examples of what can be done. I have already mentioned education. As we have heard, there needs to be much more mentoring so that people with experience, skills and compassion can talk to young men and women about their future, and feel that they are being listened to. That needs funding—I do not mean lots of grants giving out money with little accountability; I am talking about loans. The small business loan scheme, for instance, has been a great success in helping young men and women set up their own businesses in this country, but around the world young men and women do not have access to that kind of capital. I declare a personal interest in that, having been involved for a number of years in setting up a social enterprise in leasing in east Africa. We see young men and women entering work, whereas previously they were not able to.

Let us not beat around the bush: in this country, often it is young men who want to acquire practical skills. Young women do as well, but it is more often young men, particularly at the age of 16. We sometimes find that training and practical skills are not available to them because there is greater emphasis on the academic route, and that is the case not just in this country but around the world. I have seen some excellent programmes, supported by the Department for International Development in places such as Nepal and Nigeria, where there have been opportunities for young men and women to pick up those practical skills. There needs to be much more of that—the idea of training in these skills is often lost in the drive for university education and academic education, because everybody sees that as the way forward.

I want to celebrate International Men's Day and the role that young men and boys—as well as young women and girls—play in this country, but let us also remember that we need to address this internationally and encourage countries across the world to celebrate this day and the role that equality for boys, girls, young men and young women can play in their development.

3.42 pm

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I commend the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) for securing the debate. He has raised many issues, each of which is probably worthy of long debate. It is difficult in a debate like this one, which is quite short, to have the conversations that we really want to have.

I am feminist, and I have two sons. They have brought issues to me while growing up, and we have always talked about equality. We are going back a generation—my sons are in their early 40s. I remember one coming home from school and saying to me, "It's not fair—the girls have a special room where they can go at lunchtime, and boys don't have one." Girls who had their period or were not feeling well were allowed to go to that room and have some quiet time, which I tried to explain to my sons. Should schoolchildren—whether boys or girls—not feel well, they should have a room where they can sit down quietly. That is just sensible.

We have to be careful about our language and ensure that people who have an audience, such as those in the media, think about what they are saying. Another issue was picked up just last year. My son and I were listening to the radio—something was going on in Coventry—and the presenter commented on some men's "wonderful six-packs". My son was appalled and said, "What if that was a man on there, talking about what big breasts someone had?" We have to be careful about the language that we use, especially in the media and in newspapers, although we cannot often control what happens there, and people will always read what they want to.

International Men's Day is designed to highlight some extremely important issues—none more so than men's mental health and tackling male suicide. I want to focus on those issues, and this debate gives me the opportunity to do so. I will always take the opportunity to talk about it.

Last year, suicide rates among men in the UK were at their lowest for more than 30 years. While that is, of course, extremely encouraging, we must not overlook the underlying statistics, which show that there were 5,821 suicides in the UK last year. Of those, 4,383 were male suicides, which means that more than three quarters of people who took their own lives were men—the rate was 15.5 suicides per 100,000 men. One such death is one too many. Those statistics lay bare the scale of the crisis in men's mental health, and they also highlight how essential it is for us to continue to target expertise and resources at understanding the causes of male suicide and trying to prevent it.

Why is suicide such a highly gendered occurrence? We know that mental health issues can affect anyone and are caused by a number of factors, including bereavement, unemployment, finance and debt issues, family and relationship problems—as has been said already—social isolation, low self-esteem, drug and alcohol issues, and many other personal factors. It is not that men are necessarily more susceptible to these mental health triggers; societal expectations have shaped men's behaviour in how they deal with—or, more accurately, how they fail to deal with—their emotions, feelings and wellbeing when confronted by them.

The malign influence of masculine conditioning—it shapes the way men are brought up to behave and the roles, traits and behaviours that society expects of them—demands that rather than talk about their emotions and how they feel in times of difficulty or crisis, men should instead be silent, manly and strong. That social and emotional disconnectedness simply adds to men's vulnerability and contributes to a higher rate of suicide across the male population.

How do we tackle this problem? Part of the answer is to reduce the stigma around men's mental health and to encourage men to open up and seek help when they are

struggling or feeling in despair. In Coventry, the encouragement and the conversations are being initiated by the award-winning mental health awareness and suicide prevention campaign, "It Takes Balls to Talk". It is the brainchild of mental health nurse Alex Cotton, who is my constituent.

The campaign is a public information programme targeted at male-dominated sporting venues across Coventry and Warwickshire, which uses sporting themes to raise awareness of mental health support services and seeks to reduce male suicide by encouraging men to talk about their feelings. Since its launch more than two years ago, "It Takes Balls to Talk" has played a vital role in breaking down the barriers that prevent men from initiating conversations about their mental health and wellbeing, and from positively engaging with mental health services in my local area. Such targeted initiatives promote positive mental health and make a lasting difference. That is why I am extremely proud of what the campaign has achieved so far and of the work it does across my city and Warwickshire. It is why I support it wholeheartedly.

I want to conclude by encouraging any men affected by a mental health issue not to bottle it up. Those are wise words for anyone. Talk to a friend, a colleague or a family member. Contact Mind, the Samaritans or "It Takes Balls to Talk". They need to know that there are always people and organisations out there who will listen and offer practical help, advice and support. After all, you know what they say—it has just been said: a problem shared is a problem halved.

3.50 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Bailey. It is great to be here to celebrate International Men's Day. I know a lot of lovely men and the international ones are my particular favourites. I am very fond of modern European men, although sadly ardent Brexiteers do not seem to share my enthusiasm.

In these days of the #MeToo movement, we are hearing thousands more women's voices that used to be silent. We have women demanding they are not paid less for the same or similar jobs as men, and women seeking to do their jobs without worrying about being groped or sexually assaulted by their boss. We have women who want to be able to go where they choose and wear what they choose without being attacked and then blamed for it. We hear a lot from women now. Thank goodness for today's opportunity for men to stand up and demand those rights, too.

Some men who have long enjoyed the easy comforts of a patriarchal society feel threatened by more women having a say. Their own voice is no longer dominant and their privilege is no longer secure. They are left in a state of confusion by this politically correct agenda. They do not know what is acceptable to say or do around women anymore, now that they may have to account for their actions. They cannot even trust other men to laugh at their sexist locker room banter—too many metrosexuals around nowadays! The feminist agenda is seeking to enforce the radical notion that women are equal human beings, and those men's grip on power has loosened.

Still, there is not too much for the privileged male to worry about just yet. Modern Britain is a long way from gender equality and old stalwarts such as those in the

legal profession are keeping the side up. White, privately educated men are still far more likely to rise to the top across the old professions and we have the lowest proportion of female judges in the EU. Those trusty Brexiteers are doing their bit to keep it that way by distancing the UK from that gender diversifying European influence. If men's voices really can be silenced in this place when still fewer than a third of MPs are women, we must be doing a pretty good job. Imagine what would happen if gender balance was actually achieved.

All joking aside, I am only too aware that many serious health concerns particularly affect men—hon. Members have already touched on them—and that is perhaps the justifiable reason for having this debate. Those issues deserve thorough scrutiny and action taken to tackle them. They include such things as increased risk of alcoholism, earlier mortality and the alarming suicide rates among young men, to name just a few.

Anyone determined to improve the stats might be interested in the findings of a recent report from the World Health Organisation. After studying the figures for 41 countries, it found that places with greater gender equality also had better health outcomes for men. In the most equal societies—measured by such factors as women in leadership positions and educational attainment—the risk of depression among men was halved, suicide rates were lower and there was a 40% reduction in the risk of a violent death. It is official: feminism is good for everyone.

It is not some innate biological differences that cause the different problems men struggle with—anatomical-specific issues aside—but societal pressures. The intense nurturing of a narrow, stereotypical idea about what men should be and how they should interact with women is difficult for many men. It is damaging to their health as much as it is to society's. The more macho cultures encourage heavy drinking, for example, linking it to increased status and power in a group. On the other hand, speaking out about feelings, as has already been commented on, is discouraged.

There are no simple solutions, but society is shifting. Diving back into the world of the 1950s with its heavily embedded gender roles is the opposite of what needs to be done to improve matters. We must untangle masculinity from the toxic forms that have become so prevalent and let men and boys breathe a bit more easily. For International Men's Day, the best thing we can do is to stand together in support of feminism and equality because it is good for men's health. When women's voices are speaking out for parity of the sexes, they are speaking out for men, too.

3.55 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey, and a pleasure to sum up for the Scottish National party in this debate. I thank the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) for his comprehensive opening speech.

International Men's Day is indeed a significant date on our calendars, although we are a wee bit late with the debate, as it was on 19 November. This annual international event is celebrated in more than 80 countries, including the UK. It was inaugurated in 1999 in Trinidad and Tobago with backing from UNESCO. The theme for 2018 is "Positive male role models". The UK themes for this year are, "Making a difference for men and boys"

[Patricia Gibson]

and “How we can give men and boys better life chances”, as my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) set out.

We have heard much today about why International Men's Day is so important. The hon. Member for Shipley and my hon. Friend starkly set out the taboo around men who are victims of abusive domestic relationships, and we need to break that silence for men and women. We have heard that the biggest killer of young men across the UK is suicide, so it is extremely important that men and boys alike can access the support they need. We have heard much about that today. It is also important that young men and young boys have positive role models to inspire them—not just famous celebrities or sportspeople, but people in their own families, their own communities or their own orbit living good, decent lives. To that end, we need to continue to encourage men to enter the primary education sector, as well as the secondary education sector.

International Men's Day must be a far-reaching, big conversation, celebrating the contribution of men to our families, our communities and our country. We must work to ensure that men are more willing to talk about their hopes and fears, and take more care of their health and wellbeing. We have to do more to remove the stubborn stigma that persists around mental health issues and to continue the conversation about it being okay to struggle and about it not being a sign of weakness for a man to ask for help. We also need to make it clear that equality progressing for women does not in any way take anything away from men, who are, after all, half our population. As my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) shared with us, more equal relationships between men and women appear to have better health outcomes for men.

Much has been said today about the male suicide epidemic, and it is not an overstatement to call it that. The falling behind of young men and boys in education is also a challenge. We understand, too, the challenges faced by fathers as new parents or fathers separated from their children, as outlined by the hon. Member for Shipley. There is also the range of other challenges we have heard about today. There is no doubt that men feel under pressure to fit roles and behaviour that society has traditionally defined as masculine, such as not showing feelings and having to seem strong all the time. As we know, that can lead many men into despair and can even damage their mental health, as the hon. Member for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher) pointed out. That is a culture that we need to change, because it does not help men—it does not help anybody.

On average, men's life expectancy is four years shorter than women's. While that gap is decreasing, it is decreasing pretty slowly. Men have a higher incidence of heart disease, strokes, diabetes and obesity. They are 14% more likely to develop cancer than women, and 37% more likely to die from the disease.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw and the hon. Member for Coventry North East reminded us, the suicide statistics are the most concerning. Some 76% of suicides in the UK are committed by men. It is the biggest killer of men under the age of 45, which is difficult for me to get my head around. Every single day, about 12 men kill themselves across the UK, which

demands some kind of response. In Scotland, men are three times more likely to kill themselves than women. The rate is the lowest in the UK, but it is still far too high.

To tackle suicide, we need to ensure that mental health support is available and works for those who need it, and to encourage men who need that help to seek and accept it—we can all agree on that. It will require a tremendous culture change, which I think will take longer than we would like. We know that men are more likely to be reluctant to seek help and are far less likely than their female counterparts to go and speak to their GP about pretty much anything, as my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw and the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) outlined.

We know that, on average, boys do worse in post-educational attainment. That means that we need to ensure that learning experiences for boys and young men take account of their needs and the ways in which they learn, because there is evidence that boys and girls learn differently. As the hon. Member for Stafford pointed out, young men and young women need opportunities to find their way and their place in the world in order to reach their potential, whether they live in the UK or anywhere else in the world.

We know that the majority of children in care are boys. In 2017, 55% of the 14,897 looked-after children in Scotland were boys. That itself leads to poor outcomes, with poor educational attainment. It means a greater likelihood of experiencing the criminal justice system, of dying prematurely and of ending up homeless. It is a stark and worrying picture, which we need to address.

These are complex matters, as the hon. Member for Coventry North East pointed out, but over time we need to demonstrate to those we represent that we are mindful of these things and are actively seeking to address them together. These are not party political issues; they are issues about the society in which we live and how we can work to make it better and make the statistics relating to men better for all our sakes.

I pay tribute to two men's sheds that have sprung up in my constituency—one for the three towns of Saltcoats, Ardrossan and Stevenston, and one in the Garnock valley servicing Beith, Kilbirnie and Dalry. Those men's sheds—I am sure that others are springing up in constituencies across the UK—offer support, friendship and skills-sharing. They are run by volunteers and welcome all men aged 18 and above. I have seen first-hand the camaraderie and friendship that men's sheds foster. They do nothing but good for the men who choose to attend them.

What damages men damages us all, and damages our society. Men are an integral part of all our lives, since we all have fathers, husbands, brothers and sons. Advancing the rights of women is not about doing men down; it is about ensuring that we can all reach our potential, regardless of our gender—men and women together. International Men's Day cannot be about setting genders against each other, any more than International Women's Day should be, because that does not help anyone. It is an important day to celebrate the fact that all men contribute, and have contributed, to our countries, societies, communities and families, and to recognise the particular, and sometimes unique, challenges that men face.

I reassure the hon. Member for Shipley that I agree that men should be treated equally to women. That is actually all that women want, as my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith pointed out. I am pleased to have participated in today's debate, and I look forward to hearing the Minister's thoughts.

4.5 pm

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Bailey. I congratulate the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) on securing the debate, but I think he has done a bit of a disservice to it and to its theme. The hon. Members for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) and for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) hit the nail on the head when they talked about a fear of male privilege being taken away, and how the debate should not pitch one gender against another. Equality is equality, and that is what we strive for.

I am pleased that the debate is in its fourth year, and that I have been able to speak in it again on behalf of Her Majesty's Opposition. As we have heard, more than 70 countries around the world celebrated International Men's Day this year. I am always happy to appreciate and talk about the positive contributions that men make in society. Today plays a pivotal role in raising awareness of the issues affecting men in the UK, some of which we have heard about.

When we talk about men, we mean all men—the intersectionality of men, including trans men, disabled men, black men, poor men and young men. As we have heard, they suffer from everything from domestic abuse to rape, bullying and forced marriages, to name but a few. Nobody has yet mentioned the rough sleeping rate. In 2016-17, 86% of rough sleepers were male, which is a shocking statistic. We must ask ourselves what we can do as a society to prevent that from escalating and to tackle the issue before us.

One major issue that also largely affects men and was mentioned a number of times by the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) and my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher) is, sadly, suicide. In 2017, 4,382 men tragically took their own lives—an average of 12 per day. We must look at what drives men to take their own lives and at what we can do as a society, and in this place, to reduce that high rate. Mental health plays a huge role, as do poverty, feelings of inadequacy, and social media. Hon. Members talked about health and cancer, and men have a high rate of prostate cancer. It is also a fact that men remain three times more likely to take their own lives than women. Again, we should focus on what we as a society can do to stop that happening. Mental health issues play a huge role in suicide and in homelessness, and disproportionately affect men from diverse communities—I think the hon. Member for Shipley touched on that. According to the Lambeth collective's black health and wellbeing commission, black men are 17 times more likely to be diagnosed with serious mental health issues.

Other issues, regarding institutional racism, pertain to the diagnosis of mental health issues, such as the overmedication of black men. However, that does not negate the fact that a high proportion of black men suffer from mental health issues. Again, we must ask

ourselves what we can do collectively as a society, and in this place, to stop that happening. I should also say that always having to justify themselves against racial stereotyping plays a fundamental role in the mental health of black men.

In 2013, the gay men's health survey found that 3% of gay men and 5% of bisexual men attempted suicide that year, compared with just 0.4% of heterosexual men. We need to understand the role that we play in society, through our language and our attitudes, in allowing people to feel comfortable in their own skin.

Time and again, we hear the Prime Minister say that mental health will be given parity with physical health, but it seems to be all talk and no action. Money is not being put into mental health. It is so disappointing that mental health funding has been cut and that the number of mental health nurses has fallen by at least 6,600. How can we give parity to mental health if we are cutting the numbers of mental health nurses? We need mental health nurses in schools, in hospitals and everywhere we want to encourage men and young boys to talk about their issues. Every Member of this House must speak up and hold the Prime Minister to account. We must insist that mental health be prioritised and that mental health services be improved for everyone—young, old, male, female, intersex and non-binary. By doing so, we will prevent more people from taking their own lives.

One campaign that I supported this year was for Albert Trott to be recognised with a blue plaque. Albert Trott was a talented cricketer who played for Middlesex, Australia and England and who lived in Brent, my constituency, between 1897 and 1911. He is famous for being the only man ever to hit a ball over the pavilion at Lord's—a great feat. Sadly, after his retirement he suffered from depression and mental illness. In July 1914, at the age of just 41, he took his own life. Some have alleged that he may not have been recognised for his accomplishments because of the stigma surrounding suicide and mental health. I am clear that Albert Trott should be celebrated and recognised. There should be a blue plaque in his name; perhaps it could even make mention of mental health to raise awareness of the issue, especially in professional sports.

Currently, no footballers in the premier league have publicly come out as gay. That is a sad situation—just imagine the anxiety and the turmoil for footballers who are gay. I am pleased that most of us in this House have agreed to make homophobic chanting at football matches a criminal offence. The Football Offences (Amendment) Bill will receive its Second Reading in January 2019 and I hope we will vote to make it law. We must do more to ensure that people are free to be their true and authentic selves at work, at home and in the street.

Let me mention a few names of people at the forefront who have used their fame to highlight the issue. Reggie Yates has done some amazing work on mental health and on what prison does to the mind. I was so impressed by hearing him speak and speaking to him. We need to do more to support him in encouraging black men to speak up. He has worked with #GramFam and CALM—the Campaign Against Living Miserably, which helps young men in regard to mental health. I could mention so many more people, including Stormzy, Zayn Malik and Gareth Thomas, who came out after retiring and who recently suffered a homophobic attack and was brave enough to speak about it. I am grateful to them

[Dawn Butler]

all for sharing their inspirational stories, which remind us that we need to talk about men and celebrate good men.

I know that time is short, Mr Bailey, so I will conclude. There is no shame in being caring. We have heard today about how we want to encourage men to talk and share their feelings. Let me end with a reply to the hon. Member for Shipley, who asked me about the standard of women MPs. I want him to listen very carefully to this: I look forward to the day when there are more rubbish women in this House. I look forward to the day when there are as many rubbish female MPs as rubbish male MPs, because only then will I know that we have reached true equality.

4.13 pm

The Minister for Women (Victoria Atkins): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I hope that I can start my speech on a slightly more positive note than that on which the hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) ended hers, although I understand how she meant it.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) for securing this debate and for his continued commitment to shining a light not only on the pressing issues that men and boys face, but on the issue of equality. Having observed him in the Select Committee on Justice, the Women and Equalities Committee and the Chamber, I know that it is striving for equality that motivates him. He may occasionally attract attention by spreading that message—with which I am sure we all agree—in ways in which other Members may not express themselves, but none the less he does it in a way that shines a light on it. If I may say so, he is also an extremely efficient speaker; I counted at least seven huge topics that he raised in his speech. I hope he will forgive me if I do not address each and every one, but of course I will write to him on issues that I do not cover.

I thank hon. Friends and Members from all parties for their contributions to this important debate. I am pleased that it is now in its fourth year, which marks its firm importance in this House. I was struck by the aims that my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley set out for International Men's Day, including the admirable aim of promoting male role models, a theme that the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) spoke very movingly about. She shared with us the incredibly important legacy of her husband, and her son's thoughts on it.

Celebrating men is another aim of the day. My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) gave us an international perspective based on all his work around the world helping the most deprived communities and trying to spread equality and fairness. I am particularly grateful that he was able to contribute to the debate.

Promoting gender equality is also an important part of International Men's Day. I sense from all the speeches made today that we are united in that aim. We know that rigid gender stereotypes can and do inhibit people's choices and aspirations. When that happens, capable young boys and men can be held back from reaching their potential and, more widely, from becoming the positive role models that they can be.

The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) mentioned the important role that male teachers can and must play in education, particularly primary school education. I am sure that everyone here feels, as I do, that the lack of male teachers is a sad fact about our primary school system. We are desperately trying to improve the situation, because we know the hugely positive effect that male teachers can have on boys and young men.

We all believe that it is crucial that we work together to champion gender equality in business, in politics and in our communities, because creating a more equal society in which everyone can participate and thrive benefits us all. My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley asked that men be treated equally to women. I am tempted to say with a wry smile that I wonder whether men would like to constitute fewer than a third of roles at board level, as women do at the moment. That is why we have the Hampton-Alexander review—not because we are trying to push men out of boards, but because we are trying to ensure that women are recognised in the workplace and achieve their potential on merit at the highest levels of business.

Quite rightly, hon. Members' speeches focused on probably the most pressing issue that men and boys face in the 21st century in our country: mental health. Very sadly, as we have heard, rates of suicide are much higher among men than among women and suicide is the leading cause of death in men under the age of 50. Colleagues have already set out some thoughts on why that may be so. I am sure we agree that we need to do more to ensure that men can feel comfortable talking about their mental health needs. That is not just a point for us to discuss in this place; it is a societal change that needs to happen.

The Government want to push forward and achieve parity of esteem for mental health. We are doing that in a number of ways, including investing more than ever before in mental health—spending is estimated to have increased to just under £12 billion—as well as introducing the first waiting times standards for mental health, to ensure that more people get timely access to the treatment that they need. The five-year forward view for mental health will ensure an additional investment of £1 billion by 2020-21. An extra 1 million people will have access to mental health services. There is additional investment to improve mental health crisis resolution services in the community, to improve perinatal mental health and to ensure that there are liaison mental health services in general hospitals to support people in mental health crisis.

Many excellent organisations have been referred to, including CALM, Time to Change, Men's Sheds and so on. Those organisations are all helping men and boys in our constituencies to make contact with each other, reach out and, I hope, deal with some of their problems.

Colleagues have also raised domestic abuse. I make it very clear that everyone deserves to feel safe at home. Home for all of us should be a place of safety, kindness and love. We know that domestic abuse can happen regardless of gender, wealth, background, geographical location and so on. That is precisely why the Government are bringing forward a draft domestic abuse Bill this Session to tackle the terrible scourge of domestic abuse.

My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley will be pleased to know that the Bill is of course gender-neutral, because I fully recognise, as do the Government, that

men can be victims of domestic abuse. However, I must place that in context: the reality is that a disproportionate number of victims are women. According to estimates from SafeLives, in 2016-17, 95% of victims were female. I do not say that to create controversy; I say it as a fact—and that is why so many services are focused on helping female victims. The most serious cases show us that the vast majority of victims are female, but I do not for a moment take away from the point that men and boys can be victims as well.

My hon. Friend mentioned the interesting statistics on offenders. He is extremely consistent and persistent in his campaign in this regard and wrote to the Ministry of Justice about the statistics for offenders in prison. His statistics are correct—1,626 female prisoners and 4,146 male prisoners have been victims of domestic abuse. I am obliged to put that in context. There are 3,287 female offenders and 68,827 male offenders in prison, which means that the percentage of domestic abuse victims in the prison population is 49% for women and 6% for men.

In terms of prisoners who are perpetrators of domestic abuse, 18% of female prisoners are identified as ever having been a perpetrator of domestic abuse or violence; 34% of male prisoners have been so identified. A great deal of our work on the Bill and the package of non-legislative measures that we are bringing forward will be to focus on the impact that domestic abuse has on children, as well as on people who end up in prison. We want to see whether there are things that we can do to help ensure that the cycle of violence is broken so that the prison population is not peopled with victims and perpetrators of domestic abuse.

The hon. Member for Brent Central raised the important issue of homelessness and rough sleeping. Men are more likely to end up sleeping rough for a variety of reasons, including higher rates of interaction with the criminal justice system and higher rates of alcohol and drug abuse. We are determined to tackle all forms of homelessness, including making sure that people in temporary accommodation are getting support to keep a roof over their heads.

We are investing more than £1 billion by 2020 to support those efforts and have been implementing the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, which requires councils to provide early support to people at risk of being left without anywhere to go. Our rough sleeping strategy is an ambitious package, which will help people who sleep rough now and helps to put in place the structures that will end rough sleeping once and for all. We want to make sure that we get to the root of the unique problems in every local authority and tackle the very complex range of reasons why people sleep rough.

My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley mentioned access rights to children and the family courts. The legislative framework that governs family law cases is gender neutral and is focused on the welfare of children, not on the rights of parents. By law, the court must presume the involvement of a parent in the life of a child will further that child's welfare, unless there is evidence to the contrary. There would need to be very good reasons for a court to decide that a parent should not spend time with their children or that there should be no parental involvement at all.

The court has a wide discretion to determine what is necessary to meet a child's welfare needs. That may reflect the court's consideration of social work analysis

and recommendations from the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service, the wishes and feelings of the child concerned, how capable each parent is of meeting that child's welfare needs, and any harm or further harm the child is at risk of suffering. The evidence from research is that the family courts are in favour of contact and make significant efforts to try to facilitate an ongoing relationship between a child and its non-resident parent.

I am conscious of time, so I will fly through the gender pay gap. The gender pay gap is 17.9%. The reason why we publish those figures is not to somehow discriminate against men—it is to close the gap. My hon. Friend raised in particular the issue of the gender pay gap for men who work part time. That reflects the fact that women, including those in well-paid jobs, are more likely to work part time, while men are less likely to work part time, and when they do, they tend to do so in lower paid roles. It is a fascinating area of research and there will be much more to discuss in coming years.

On hate incidents and the police, there is no requirement on police forces to record hate incidents, as perhaps has been reported. It is up to police and crime commissioners and chief constables to decide how they deal with hate incidents and to set local policing priorities. There is a pilot scheme in Nottinghamshire at the moment, where the chief constable has decided that misogyny hate crime incidents will be recorded. Although it is not a crime in and of itself, the force want to get a sense of the rate of such incidents and the chief constable has decided to do that. There is no requirement from the Home Office, but obviously such data is very interesting and we are watching it with great interest.

My hon. Friend also mentioned the very complex issues of female genital mutilation and male circumcision, and I very much understand why he raised that. Female genital mutilation is illegal and the range of ways in which a little girl can be mutilated is, frankly, horrific. I take the point he raised about male circumcision. I will consider that and will write to him, because I would not wish to address such an important matter on the fly.

My hon. Friend concluded his speech by wishing that we could all live together equally in happiness. I finish by saying that I think we can all agree on that.

4.29 pm

Philip Davies: I thank you, Mr Bailey, for chairing our session today. I thank everybody who has attended and spoken in the debate. I am sure everybody would agree that we have had some fantastic contributions, from Members from all parts of the House.

I am glad that people were able to give a plug to some of the initiatives in their constituencies, such as "It Takes Balls to Talk" in the constituency of the hon. Member for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher) and the men's sheds in that of the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson). I thank everybody for their contributions. Everybody has raised a different element or issue, all of which are very serious. The hon. Member for Coventry North East said that there was not much time to talk about these things, and I hope we will have longer in the future. We might have lots of men discussing issues, but we do not often discuss men's issues.

4.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Written Statements

Thursday 29 November 2018

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

General Affairs Council (Cohesion)

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): My right hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary for State for the Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Lord Henley) has made the following statement:

A meeting of the General Affairs Council (Cohesion) will be held in Brussels on 30 November 2018.

The General Affairs Council will discuss the legislative package for cohesion policy in the next multiannual financial framework. Ministers from member states will present their positions on the strategic context and priorities set out in the legislative proposals for post-2020, with a view to influencing the Commission's proposals.

The Austrian presidency will provide an update on non-legislative and legislative items.

[HCWS1120]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Draft National Policy Statement: Water Resources

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): Today I am laying before Parliament a draft national policy statement for water resources infrastructure. This is now subject to an eight-week consultation. This will guide planning decisions for water resources infrastructure of national significance, making sure we get the infrastructure we need delivered in a timely manner and to a high standard.

The statement sets out Government policy on what is needed to secure resilient water supplies to respond to future challenges including climate change, population growth and to better protect the environment. New water resources infrastructure, including reservoirs and water transfers, is needed alongside reducing demand and conserving water, to provide a plentiful supply of water for future generations.

The statement is accompanied by draft habitats and sustainability reports, on which we are also consulting.

The consultation is available on gov.uk and will close on 31 January 2019. The relevant period for parliamentary scrutiny of the statement will be from 29 November 2018 to 16 May 2019.

[HCWS1121]

Agriculture and Fisheries Council

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): The Agriculture and Fisheries Council took place in Brussels on 19 November. The UK was represented by Lord Gardiner of Kimble, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Rural Affairs and Biosecurity, and Lords Minister.

The main focus of the Council for fisheries was a Council regulation for fixing the fishing opportunities for certain deep-sea fish stocks for 2019 and 2020, for which a political agreement was sought. The UK was content with the Commission proposal and intervened to stress the importance of setting fishing opportunities in line with scientific advice. Following a series of trilateral meetings between member states, the Commission and the presidency, a unanimous political agreement was reached.

The primary focus for agriculture was a policy debate on the post-2020 CAP reform package, including two legislative proposals: the first on financing, management and monitoring of the CAP, the second on common market organisation (CMO) of agricultural products. On the first legislative proposal, member states welcomed the shift to a performance-based approach, but voiced concern about the burden monitoring and reporting would place on them. On the second item, most member states were content to maintain the status quo, while some member states suggested that new tools should be applied.

An exchange of views was held on the current challenges in the field of plant protection. Member states agreed with the presidency on the challenges posed by climate change and international trade in preventing the introduction and spread of damaging pests. The UK intervened, pointing out the UK's long term plans and emphasising support for a precautionary approach on imports.

The commission also informed the Council about the present market situation which has been characterised by general stability. On the continuing issue in the sugar market, the Commission announced that it will be convening a high level group to propose action. A number of member states voiced specific concerns over pig meat.

The Council held another exchange of views on Task Force Rural Africa (TFRA) which included a presentation of the findings from the body's forthcoming report by the Commission and the chair of the Commission's Task Force Rural Africa. Some member states suggested areas for partnership with a particular focus on delivering UN sustainable development goals.

One item was discussed under any other business:

The Commission informed member states about the implementation of the European maritime and fisheries fund, pointing out the low uptake of funding by member states.

[HCWS1119]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Foreign Affairs Council

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): My noble Friend the Minister of State for Defence, the right hon. Earl Howe, and I attended the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) on 19 November. It was chaired by the High Representative and Vice-President of the European Union (EU) for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HRVP), Federica Mogherini. The meeting was held in Brussels.

Current affairs

The Council discussed Iran and confirmed its ongoing full support for the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA) given that Iran continues to implement the agreement and notwithstanding the reintroduction of US sanctions on 5 November 2018. Ministers expressed solidarity with those member states where Iran had carried out unacceptable activities and confirmed their readiness to consider a targeted appropriate response. Ministers also touched briefly on the outcome of the international conference for Libya hosted by the Italian Government in Palermo on 12 and 13 November and the situation in Gaza, following the latest escalation of violence.

Central Asia

The Council discussed central Asia (Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) ahead of the 14th EU-central Asia ministerial meeting that will take place on 23 November in Brussels. Ministers noted recent significant changes in the region and the new momentum in bilateral and regional co-operation. They expressed a strong interest in stepping up EU engagement in central Asia on reform and economic development, as well as the promotion of sustainable connectivity and regional conditions for peace and stability in Afghanistan. Adoption of a new EU strategy on central Asia is expected in 2019.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

The Council discussed Bosnia and Herzegovina following elections on 7 October. Ministers underlined the importance of forming Governments at all levels as soon as possible to enable political leaders to focus on the reform agenda that was essential in responding to citizens' aspirations. Ministers also agreed that electoral law reform should be undertaken.

Yemen

The Council exchanged views on Yemen, in particular with regard to the EU's political and humanitarian support. Ministers confirmed their strong support for the United Nations (UN) led process and the UN special envoy (UNSE) Martin Griffiths. Ministers agreed to send a clear message to all those involved in the conflict to consolidate de-escalation efforts, cease hostilities and engage in political talks led by Martin Griffiths.

Ukraine

The Council discussed the latest developments in Ukraine, in particular the situation in the Azov sea and the "elections" in the so-called "Luhansk People's Republic" and "Donetsk People's Republic" on 11 November 2018. Ministers confirmed their commitment to Ukraine's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, recalled that the EU did not recognise the "elections" of 11 November 2018 and confirmed their readiness to consider appropriate targeted measures in response. They also agreed that full implementation of the Minsk agreements remained essential and highlighted the EU's continued humanitarian engagement in eastern Ukraine. Ministers touched on the EU's support for the reform process in Ukraine; the EU and Ukraine will have the opportunity to review progress on reforms, bilateral and global co-operation, at the Association Council meeting scheduled for 17 December 2018.

Security and defence

The Council discussed a range of security and defence issues. Ministers welcomed the second tranche of projects under permanent structured co-operation (PESCO) and

stressed the importance of agreeing arrangements for third country access by the end of the year. The Council welcomed the establishment of a civilian common security and defence policy (CSDP) compact, to improve civilian responses to security threats. It agreed to strengthen the role of the military planning and conduct capability, and to conduct a co-ordinated annual review on defence as a standing activity to provide an overview of defence spending, national investment and defence research efforts. The Council also adopted a partial general approach on the European defence fund.

EU-NATO co-operation

Ministers discussed EU-NATO co-operation in the presence of the NATO Secretary-General, including on issues related to hybrid threats and military mobility. The Council underlined the importance of coherence and mutual reinforcement between the EU and NATO. It welcomed the second joint declaration on EU-NATO co-operation signed on 10 July 2018.

CSDP operations and missions

The Council had an exchange of views regarding CSDP operations and missions.

The Council agreed a number of measures without discussion:

The Council adopted conclusions on Ethiopia;

The Council adopted conclusions on Sudan;

The Council adopted conclusions on Afghanistan;

The Council adopted conclusions on Pakistan;

The Council adopted conclusions on water diplomacy;

The Council adopted conclusions on the establishment of a civilian CSDP compact;

The Council adopted an updated list of permanent structured co-operation (PESCO) projects;

The Council adopted its position (partial general approach) on the European defence fund (EDF);

The Council adopted a new EU strategy against illicit firearms, small arms and light weapons and ammunition;

The Council adopted an updated version of the EU cyber-defence policy framework;

The Council extended the mandate of EUTM Somalia;

The Council approved annexes for the military requirements within and beyond the EU;

The Council took note of the report submitted by the head of the European Defence Agency (EDA);

The Council adopted the guidelines for the EDA's work in 2019;

The Council took note of the single progress report on the development of EU military capabilities in the period from November 2016 to June 2018;

The Council adopted a decision to promote capacity building in the member states of the League of Arab States;

The Council adopted a decision concerning support of SEESAC for the implementation of the regional road map on combating illicit arms trafficking in the western Balkans;

The Council approved the Commission's conclusion of the EURATOM/KEDO agreement;

The Council approved the Commission's conclusion of the EURATOM/KEDO agreement (retroactivity).

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Grenfell Update

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): Hon. Members will be aware of the ongoing Grenfell Tower inquiry and the harrowing accounts from all those affected by the Grenfell Tower fire. I want to provide the House with an update on the Government's ongoing work in response to the tragedy.

Recovery

The Government have committed over £80 million to support the bereaved, survivors and the community following the Grenfell Tower fire. This includes rehousing costs, new mental health services, investment in the Lancaster West estate, and a community space.

NHS England has also announced that it will provide up to £50 million to fund long-term mental and physical health checks and treatment for those affected by the Grenfell Tower fire.

Grenfell Tower site

I would like to update the House on progress towards the long-term future of the site. The Government have always been committed to working with the community to create a fitting memorial, with the Prime Minister giving her personal commitment that the bereaved, survivors and community will decide what happens to the long-term future of the Grenfell Tower site.

As part of this, I made a commitment in August 2018 that the Government would take responsibility for the Grenfell Tower site. I would like to update the House on the steps I have taken to put this announcement into effect.

I am pleased to inform the House that the Government will meet the ongoing costs of keeping the tower site safe and secure. This will deliver on my earlier promise to the bereaved, survivors and community that the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC) will take no role in making decisions regarding the Grenfell Tower site. Once ownership transfers, Government will make operational decisions, such as those on safety, security and access, until the long-term future has been determined by the community.

As we work towards responsibility transferring to Government, I want to reassure the House and the community that the independent site management team continue to closely monitor and inspect the tower and are responsible for ensuring that it is safe and secure.

I recognise that sensitive management of the tower site, working towards a fitting memorial, is of paramount importance to the bereaved, survivors and the local community. The arrangements that I am putting in place will ensure that Grenfell Tower will continue to be managed effectively and sensitively.

In taking responsibility for Grenfell Tower, I will become responsible for decisions about the tower site. I would, therefore, like to reassure the House and the community about how I intend to approach decision making. The principles I commit to include that:

most importantly, the community will continue to be engaged at each step along the way to a lasting memorial;

the health and safety of those living, working and at the school in the local area, as well those working on the site, will continue to take priority;

decisions that I take about the tower site will be evidence-based, informed by the advice of public authorities and technical experts; and that,

I will consult the police and the Grenfell Tower inquiry to ensure that decision making does not interfere with the path to justice.

The community-led Grenfell Tower Memorial Commission will develop a proposal for what happens to the Grenfell Tower site in the future, and will decide how the memorial site will be owned and managed in the long term. The Minister with responsibility for Grenfell victims, the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service my right hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (Mr Hurd), continues to meet with members of the bereaved, survivors and wider community to discuss the process and the role of community representatives.

Environmental monitoring

On 26 October 2018, I announced additional environmental checks will be carried out in and around the Grenfell Tower site to reassure the bereaved, survivors and wider community that any environmental risks to public health will be fully assessed and appropriate action taken.

This is an issue that I take very seriously, and my officials have been working closely with RBKC, the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Environment Agency, NHS England and Public Health England to plan further environmental sampling of the site, including comprehensive soil analysis to check for any signs of contamination.

The new soil testing programme will take place alongside existing air quality monitoring which has been in place since the fire. So far, the monitoring has consistently shown the risk to people's health from air pollution around the Grenfell Tower site to be low. Public Health England will continue to monitor this and publish the results on a weekly basis—alongside an explanation of the data in terms of potential impacts on health, at the following web link:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/environmental-monitoring-following-the-grenfell-tower-fire>.

An expert multi-agency group which includes the Environment Agency, Public Health England, RBKC and NHS England has been set up to make sure soil surveying around Grenfell Tower is comprehensive and that analysis will be provided to the public. The Minister with responsibility for Grenfell victims recently chaired the first meeting of this group. As a result we have started procuring the relevant expertise and will appoint independent environmental specialists from a network of leading experts. Their work will be overseen by the multi-agency group.

Once selected, the specialists will proactively engage the community on the design and implementation of the testing process. This will take place in the new year.

Both the Government and the NHS share a resolute commitment to support all those affected by the fire. The NHS has run health drop-in events within the local area for those who are concerned about their health.

The Minister with responsibility for Grenfell victims and I are also committed to engaging local residents with the investigation process from start to finish and consultation workshops will begin in January, to inform the scope and locations of the main site investigation and sampling.

Rehousing

The Government remain committed to ensuring all survivors are permanently rehoused as quickly as possible.

Since my last update to the House in July, based on data provided by RBKC as of 26 November, 44 more households have moved into permanent accommodation bringing the total to 149; and the number of households living in hotels has reduced by 23 to 15. Out of 203 households, there are currently 26 households living in good quality temporary accommodation, 12 in serviced apartments and one staying with family and friends. Every household has had an offer of permanent or temporary accommodation, and 201 households (99%) have accepted an offer. A total of 194 of these households have accepted permanent homes, of which 149 have now moved in.

The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea continues its efforts to rehouse those who lost their homes in the fire, and improved progress has been made. While I recognise the complexities involved, the overall pace of rehousing has been too slow, and there remains a small number of households in hotels as we approach 18 months after the fire. I expect the council to do everything possible to speed up the rehousing process and ensure that the remaining survivors are permanently rehoused as quickly as possible.

It is important that the bereaved, survivors and wider community continue to be supported. My Department will continue to work closely with RBKC to this end. I would like to express my thanks to all those involved in supporting the survivors throughout this difficult process.

Building safety

As well as the work set out above that the Government have done with their partners in respect of the recovery, we are determined to learn the lessons from the Grenfell Tower fire and bring about a fundamental change to ensure that residents of high-rise buildings are safe and feel safe. That is why we have set in train a programme of work to deliver that change by addressing the issues raised by Dame Judith Hackitt in her independent review of building regulations and fire safety.

Ban on the use of combustible materials

We recognised the strength of feeling on combustible cladding and having consulted, announced a clear ban on the use of combustible materials on the external walls of new buildings over 18 metres containing flats, as well as new hospitals, residential care premises, dormitories in boarding schools and student accommodation over 18 metres. Today regulations have been laid to give legal effect to the ban. As part of wider work on fire safety across Government, I will work with the Education Secretary to join up our reviews of fire safety guidance. I also welcome the Department for Education's commitment to ensuring schools over 18 metres built as part of their centrally delivered build programmes will not use combustible materials, in line with the terms of the ban, in the external wall.

Remediation

As of 31 October 2018, 289 private sector high-rise residential buildings have been identified as having unsafe aluminium composite material (ACM) cladding. We have made good progress in getting remediation completed (in 19 cases); started (in 21 cases); and with plans in place for 98 buildings. These numbers continue to increase, but we are taking decisive action to deal with the remaining buildings where owners are not fulfilling their responsibility to remediate unsafe ACM cladding. That is why, as part of our strong commitment to ensuring that residents of high-rise residential buildings are safe and that they feel safe, I am announcing measures to support local authorities to take action where remediation plans are not clear.

I am laying an addendum to the housing health and safety rating system operating guidance. This addendum provides specific guidance on the assessment of high-rise residential buildings with unsafe cladding. This will help local authorities to make robust hazard assessments and boost their ability to take decisive enforcement action.

Alongside this the joint inspection team, hosted by the Local Government Association, will provide support to local authorities in their assessments and give them confidence to take enforcement action.

I am also writing to local authorities with buildings where the owner refuses to remediate unsafe ACM cladding, to offer them our full support to take enforcement action. This will include financial support where this is necessary for the local authority to carry out emergency remedial work.

Where financial support is provided, local authorities will recover the costs from the building owner.

I am determined that building owners will not evade their responsibilities and that local authorities will have all the support they need to ensure that all high-rise buildings with unsafe ACM cladding are made permanently safe for the people who live in them.

[HCWS1126]

Local Government: Northamptonshire

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): In an oral statement on 27 March 2018, *Official Report*, column 661, the then Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid) told the House that he had received an independent inspection report on Northamptonshire County Council that found significant failures that could not be satisfactorily addressed within a reasonable timetable. I appointed commissioners on 10 May to bring stability to Northamptonshire County Council, and I am today publishing the first report from the Commissioners and my response. My right hon. Friend also informed the House that he would be inviting the eight principal councils in Northamptonshire to submit proposals to restructure local government in the county.

On 31 August 2018, I received such a proposal from seven of the eight councils to establish two new unitary councils. The legislation requires that before a proposal for local government reorganisation can be implemented,

I must first consult every principal local authority affected by the proposal (except the authority or authorities which made it), and any such other persons as I consider appropriate.

Accordingly, I am today launching a consultation on that proposal. I am consulting all principal councils in Northamptonshire, principal councils neighbouring Northamptonshire, Northamptonshire chamber of commerce, South East Midlands local enterprise partnership, the Northamptonshire police and crime commissioner, local health bodies, the University of Northampton, and representatives of the voluntary sector. We also welcome views from any interested persons, including local residents and organisations.

The consultation period will run for eight weeks until 25 January 2019. The consultation document is available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/the-proposed-reorganisation-of-local-government-in-northamptonshire>.

and paper copies will also be available in public offices and buildings of all the Northamptonshire councils.

Once the consultation is concluded, I will then as statute provides decide whether or not to implement, with or without modification, the proposal that the councils have submitted to me. In taking that decision I will have regard to all the representations received from the consultation exercise along with all other relevant information and material available to me.

I am also announcing today that following a request from the eight Northamptonshire councils, I intend as soon as practicable to make and lay before Parliament an order under the Local Government Act 2000 to postpone district and parish council elections in Northamptonshire due to be held in May 2019 until May 2020. In deciding to make such a postponement I have had regard both to the importance of local elections as the foundation of our local democracy and ensuring the accountability of councils and to the risks of continuing with the May 2019 elections in Northamptonshire given the local circumstances.

These risks are, as the councils have highlighted to me, that if following the consultation I were to decide to implement the councils' proposal and Parliament approves legislation establishing the two new unitary councils from April 2020 with elections in May 2020, district councillors elected in May 2019 would serve for only one year with their council then being abolished. Elections in such circumstances risk confusing voters and would involve significant costs that would be hard to justify. The councils have also stressed the importance of there being certainty by early December 2018 about the May 2019 elections.

Accordingly, I have concluded that irrespective of whatever my future decision might be on the restructuring proposal, the right course is to postpone these elections and make the necessary secondary legislation as soon as practicable. The councils have also requested on the grounds of practicalities that parish council and district council elections continue to be held concurrently and I intend to legislate for this, postponing any May 2019 parish council elections in Northamptonshire to May 2020.

[HCWS1124]

JUSTICE

Defamation and Privacy Costs Protection

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): The Government are committed to controlling the costs of civil litigation while allowing appropriate cases to proceed. Part 2 of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders (LASPO) Act 2012 reformed the operation of no win, no fee conditional fee agreements in order to address the high costs of civil litigation. In particular, section 44 of the LASPO Act provided that the lawyer's success fee would no longer be recoverable from the losing party. This provision came into effect for the majority of cases in April 2013 but was delayed in respect of defamation and privacy claims pending the outcome of the Leveson inquiry. The then coalition Government accepted the Leveson recommendation that there should be a costs protection regime in place for defamation and privacy claims, before commencing the LASPO Act conditional fee agreement reforms. It consulted on a draft bespoke costs protection regime in 2013. In the event, there was opposition to the detail of that regime, and the then coalition Government did not implement the proposal.

Having considered the responses to the consultation, the Government have now decided on a different approach that will further control the costs of these cases and will also give effect to our legal obligations under the *MGN v. UK* judgment of the European Court of Human Rights in 2011. In the *MGN* case, the court concluded that the obligation for the defendant to pay a 100% "success fee" to the claimant was disproportionate, and that the conditional fee agreements regime was therefore in breach of the defendant's rights under article 10 (freedom of expression) of the European convention on human rights.

The Government will therefore now commence section 44 of the LASPO Act in relation to defamation and privacy cases. However, the Government will keep in place, at least for the time being, the existing costs protection regime. This means that after the event insurance premiums will remain recoverable for these cases. After the event insurance covers the risks of having to pay the other side's costs in unsuccessful cases.

This approach—of abolishing recoverability of the conditional fee agreement success fee, but retaining it for the after the event insurance premium—will protect access to justice, since parties with good cases can still benefit from recoverable after the event insurance in respect of adverse costs; after the event insurance discourages weaker cases as these are unlikely to be insured. This provision will come into force for new cases on 6 April 2019.

The Government have also published today their response to the 2013 consultation, "Costs protection in defamation and privacy claims: the Government's proposals".

[HCWS1125]

Prisons

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): At the Justice Select Committee on 26 June, I reaffirmed the Government's commitment to building

up to 10,000 modern and decent prison places to replace old, expensive and unsuitable accommodation, modernising parts of our prison estate.

Also at the Committee, I confirmed the intention to launch a competition to appoint a framework of prison operators from which we could select the operator for the new prisons including further prisons following expiry of current private sector contracts.

Today I can announce the launch of the prison operator services framework competition through a notice which will be published in the Official Journal of the European Union (OJEU) within the coming days.

Securing a framework of operators should reinvigorate the prison market by encouraging new providers to enter the custodial arena. It will also enable Ministry of Justice to more effectively and efficiently manage a pipeline of competition over the next decade. Once part of the framework, operators can choose to compete in shorter “call-off” competitions for the operation of individual prisons.

The first of these call-off competitions will be for the operation of the new-build resettlement prisons at Wellingborough and then Glen Parva. These are being built using public capital, with construction expected to begin in late 2018 and late 2019 respectively.

HMPPS will not bid in the competition but will provide a “public sector benchmark” against which operators’ bids will be rigorously assessed. If bids do not meet our expectations in terms of quality and cost, HMPPS will act as the provider.

This competition is not about the difference between the public and private sector. It is about driving quality and innovation across the system. I am clear that through this competition we expect bidders to provide high-quality, value for money bids that deliver effective regimes to meet the specific needs of prisoners. Our aim being to help them turn their lives around to prevent reoffending.

This Government remain committed to a role for the private sector in operating custodial services. The competition launched today will seek to build on the innovation and different ways of working that the private sector has previously introduced to the system. The sector has an important role to play, and currently runs some high-performing prisons, as part of a decent and secure prison estate.

We will ensure, through the procurement and contract management processes, that we have sufficient measures in place to have confidence in the delivery and maintenance of the contracted prisons over their lifetime.

A balanced approach to custodial services provision, which includes a mix of public, voluntary and private sector involvement has been shown to introduce improvements and deliver value for money for taxpayers.

The launch of the prison operator services framework underlines this Government’s commitment to reform the prison estate, build much needed prison places, improve standards of decency across the estate, and reduce reoffending.

[HCWS1123]

Ministerial Correction

Thursday 29 November 2018

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Topical Questions

The following is an extract from Health and Social Care questions on 27 November 2018.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): Next year marks 10 years since the passing of the Autism Act. What more can the Government do to support people who suffer from autism?

Caroline Dinéage: To mark the fact that it will be 10 years since the Autism Act was passed, we will start a formal review of that piece of legislation and the autism strategy, to ensure that they remain fit for purpose and heading in the right direction.

[Official Report, 27 November 2018, Vol. 650, c. 156.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for Care:

Errors have been identified in the response I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge).

The correct response should have been:

Caroline Dinéage: To mark the fact that it will be 10 years since the Autism Act was passed, we will start a formal review of **how that piece of legislation has been put into practice, including the autism strategy**, to ensure that they remain fit for purpose and heading in the right direction.

ORAL ANSWERS

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**not later than
Thursday 6 December 2018**

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