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**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES**

**(HANSARD)**

**Thursday 7 February 2019**

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# House of Commons

*Thursday 7 February 2019*

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

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

## Oral Answers to Questions

### INTERNATIONAL TRADE

*The Secretary of State was asked—*

#### **New Trade Agreements: Human Rights**

1. **Mr Paul Sweeney** (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment he has made of the potential merits of including human rights protections in new trade agreements.

[909083]

**The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox):** The United Kingdom has a strong and proud history of promoting our values globally, including on human rights. We are considering all options in the design of future trade agreements, including human rights provisions. We recognise the need to maximise the benefits of trade while being true to our values.

**Mr Sweeney:** I am one of the 38 Co-operative MPs in this place. We are the third largest party in Parliament and we have a long-standing campaign against modern slavery. There is a particular need to emphasise any safeguards against modern slavery in our supply chains, which is an insidious aspect of international trade. Will the Secretary of State take cognisance of that urgency in ensuring that the scourge of modern slavery is outlawed in our legislation and trade agreements?

**Dr Fox:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for reminding me that a party within a party is in fact normal practice in the Labour party—

**Hon. Members:** Behind you!

**Mr Speaker:** Order.

**Dr Fox:** The hon. Gentleman raises an extraordinarily important point. Modern slavery is far more widespread than is recognised. It is a pernicious, wicked practice and it is something that this Government have taken the lead on internationally. It will certainly be reflected in all the values of this Government, including our trade policy.

11. [909096] **Alex Burghart** (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): Scrutiny of our trade deals is vital as we leave the EU. Given the Government's commitment to an inclusive and fair trade policy, will the Secretary of State seek a debate in this place to talk about the scrutiny of our trade deals?

**Dr Fox:** On the consultations that we have already had in public on Australia, New Zealand, the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership

—the CPTPP—and the United States, the Government have a commitment to hold such a debate in the House of Commons. Assuming the agreement of the business managers, I hope that we will have that debate in the House within the next two weeks.

**Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): What assessment has the Secretary of State's Department made of the role of British businesses in tackling abuse and exploitation in global supply chains?

**Dr Fox:** As I said in answer to a previous question, we take such abuses very seriously. This country operates its international trade policy with one of the highest levels of ethics of any country globally, and the Government are always keen to ensure that those ethics are upheld in every way.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** Order. It is open to the hon. Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies) to seek to shoehorn Question 9 into the question with which we are dealing now. It is not obligatory, but his opportunity exists if he wants it, and it looks as though he does.

9. [909093] **Mark Menzies** (Fylde) (Con): I would be foolish not to accept such a generous offer, Mr Speaker. Fylde is one of the biggest exporters of any constituency in the country and, with Brexit fast approaching, trade deals are more important to the sector than ever. What has been done to ensure that future trade deals are processed with the least possible delay and with the best interests of business in mind?

**Dr Fox:** In terms of the continuity of our existing agreements, the best way to ensure full continuity is to have a deal. All those who talk about the pitfalls of no deal would do well to remember that in voting against the deal they make those pitfalls all the more likely. My hon. Friend is right to suggest that it is not only trade agreements that are important but trade itself, including trade promotion for our exports, and I congratulate him on the work he has done to promote this country's interests abroad.

**Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The persecution and mass incarceration of the Uyghur community in the Xinjiang province of China is facilitated by companies such as Hikvision, which manufactures and supplies much of the surveillance equipment that is used there. Hikvision has an expanding presence in this country. Can the Secretary of State assure me that the trade deals that we might have post Brexit will not encourage trade of that nature?

**Dr Fox:** As I have said, any future trade agreements that we have beyond the European Union will be subject to public consultation, to debate in this House and, I hope, to rigorous processes that I may set out in due course about how we can increase scrutiny of those agreements. Members across the House will place different types of emphasis on different constituencies and different sectors of the economy, but I think that the whole House will share those concerns about ethics. I hope that the design of the scrutiny of those trade agreements

that I will be able to bring to the House in greater detail soon will give the right hon. Gentleman the reassurance that he seeks.

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): Is not championing global free trade the best way of promoting human rights?

**Dr Fox:** We all need to remember that the great success of free trade over the last generation has been the truly historic achievement of taking 1 billion people out of abject poverty. That has been the benefit of free trade, and in this era of protectionism we should realise that economic nationalism is a way of rolling back what has been an enormously beneficial human trend.

**Judith Cummins** (Bradford South) (Lab): Two weeks ago, the Joint Committee on Human Rights heard how the Canadian Government had to make a substantial pay-out and issue a public apology to a chemicals company after they were sued for taking a public policy decision to ban a chemical additive to protect human health. The Committee was told that investor-state dispute settlement provisions in trade and investment agreements can

“impact very negatively on human rights.”

Does the Secretary of State recognise that danger? If so, will he rule out such ISDS clauses in future trade agreements? If not, what counter-evidence will he present to the Joint Committee on Human Rights?

**Dr Fox:** I have made clear our concern about human rights, but the idea of banning such agreements is nonsensical. This country has £1.3 trillion of stock overseas. Our investors are important in providing development in a lot of these countries, yet they are not given sufficient legal protections, which they would normally get under systems such as the UK's. That is why those provisions are put in—to protect our investors overseas.

### British Businesses Investing Overseas

2. **Liz McInnes** (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): What support his Department provides to British businesses investing overseas. [909086]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart):** Supporting UK-based companies to invest and operate overseas is a key pillar of the Department's work. In 2017, UK companies brought home £86 billion as a result of those investments. The Department provides market information and identifies investment opportunities and potential partners. We have developed a new suite of products to help UK businesses as a result of outward direct investment pilots in New York, China, Turkey, Brazil, South Africa and Ethiopia.

**Liz McInnes:** I thank the Minister for that answer, but people are quite rightly concerned that setting up overseas subsidiaries or acquiring foreign enterprises could lead to job losses or relocations. Will the Minister confirm the net number of jobs created in the UK as a result of his Department's support for outward direct investment?

**Graham Stuart:** This Government's job creation record speaks for itself. It is the protectionist instincts that run throughout the Labour party that so threaten the jobs miracles that my constituents and the hon. Lady's have enjoyed over recent years.

**Mr Speaker:** I do not know whether the hon. Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti) has observed that there is an opportunity for him now. He takes a grave risk if he waits for question 10, because we might not reach it.

10. [909094] **Rehman Chishti** (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker. With regard to investment in the United Kingdom, having recently attended the opening session of the 116th United States Congress, it was clear that the US wants a free trade agreement with the United Kingdom. However, the US has legitimate concerns about whether the UK would be able to do that if it is tied into EU regulations in goods and services. What does the Minister have to say on that?

**Graham Stuart:** The Secretary of State recently led more than 100 innovative tech companies to CES, the world's biggest trade show. The US is of course our largest trading partner and our largest overseas investor. As my hon. Friend rightly points out, there are real opportunities, which is why one of the first priorities on free trade agreements is one with the US.

**Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): The Environmental Audit Committee has just started an inquiry into the role of UK Export Finance. We pledge to meet climate change targets at home, so why is it that nearly every penny of support for energy projects overseas goes on fossil fuels?

**Graham Stuart:** I do not think that that is accurate, but I do not have the exact numbers to hand. UK Export Finance is there to support UK business in meeting demands and needs as requested by overseas companies and, indeed, countries. I make no apology for saying that UKEF is there to try to promote that, and it has played a role in funding renewable technologies. Our record on that front is good worldwide.

**Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): With UK Export Finance reaching its centenary later this year, what difference has UKEF made to exports? How does my hon. Friend intend to mark the occasion?

**Graham Stuart:** UKEF is yet another example of how this country has led the way when it comes to exporting. It was the world's first export credit agency, and we should all be proud of its work to support British exports over the last 100 years. We will celebrate the centenary throughout this year, notably at the UK trade and export finance forum in June, and we will continue to promote UKEF's world-class support so that even more UK companies can succeed abroad.

### UK Tech Sector Investment

3. **James Morris** (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the level of investment in the UK tech sector. [909087]

**7. Chris Green** (Bolton West) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the level of investment in the UK tech sector. [909091]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart):** We lead Europe in developing a sustainable tech ecosystem. Tech Nation's latest release in 2018 shows that the UK attracted more venture capital investment than anywhere else in Europe, with \$7.9 billion in funding from investors, ahead of Germany, France and Israel. We announced £1 billion for the artificial intelligence sector alone in last year's sector deal, which will help to unlock further opportunities for AI investment in the UK.

**James Morris:** The UK tech industry has been one of the great success stories of the British economy over the last decade. Does the Minister agree that, as we leave the European Union, it is vital that we continue to retain that combination of innovation, entrepreneurial spirit and investment flows, which have put the rocket boosters under the UK tech industry, so that we stay on the leading edge over the decades to come?

**Graham Stuart:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Tech is not only an enormously important industry in its own right, but it is vital to innovation and advances in so many other areas. The Government's industrial strategy grand challenges seek to secure the country's future in innovative technologies. FinTech, for instance, has raised nearly £12.2 billion in just the first half of 2018, with companies such as Revolut securing £190 million of investment. My Department will do everything it can to support innovators, including through the global entrepreneur programme.

**Chris Green:** As well as having immense strength in artificial intelligence, the UK is a world leader in medical research. Does my hon. Friend agree that the work being done to prepare for our post-Brexit future will deliver a superb collaboration with Israel that will help further strengthen the UK as a technological hub?

**Graham Stuart:** The industrial challenge's grand challenge on ageing focuses on our world-leading pharmaceutical and health companies. We have a dedicated team in Tel Aviv actively promoting co-operation between UK and Israeli companies, and we have an established UK-Israel tech hub to enhance those partnerships between British companies and Israeli technology innovators.

**Mr Dennis Skinner** (Bolsover) (Lab): The Minister missed an opportunity in his answer to the supplementary question of the hon. Member for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (James Morris), in which he was invited to talk about a rocket. He should have said that this is the answer to Donald Tusk: to get out of hell, we are going to fly on a rocket.

**Graham Stuart:** The hon. Gentleman, as a Member from a party so bereft of optimists, gives an example to the others. This country has a great future outside the European Union, and technology, in which we are the undisputed European leader, is fundamental to putting a rocket up not only our industry but many of the people with whom he shares the Opposition Benches.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): It is hard to follow that question. None the less, Northern Ireland has many companies that lead their fields in the tech and medicare sectors, so what discussions has the Minister had with the Department for Enterprise, Trade and Investment in Northern Ireland to partner and develop those Northern Ireland companies?

**Graham Stuart:** We work very closely with that Department. I would not say I am a natural industrial strategy sort of person, but the grand challenges have identified the big issues facing not only this country but humanity. By channelling our limited resources to those who make the most difference, we can support areas, not least agritech, in which Northern Ireland is a global leader.

### Preferential Trade Agreement with India

**4. Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the potential for a preferential trade agreement with India. [909088]

**The Minister for Trade Policy (George Hollingbery):** India is an important part of our future trading arrangements. The UK-India joint trade review has enabled us better to understand the bilateral trade relationship by examining trade flows and barriers that could be jointly addressed. Collaboration is continuing to address barriers in the food and drink, life sciences and information and communications technology sectors. The appointment of Her Majesty's trade commissioner in 2018 also provides a joined-up and co-ordinated Government effort to promote UK trade and prosperity in India.

**Bob Blackman:** I thank the Minister for his answer. He will be aware that the UK is the third biggest investor in India and India is the third biggest investor in the UK. What more can we do to ensure that we increase the trade as we leave the European Union and set out on our own free trade mission across the world?

**George Hollingbery:** I thank my hon. Friend for his question. Crispin Simon, the aforementioned HMT, is leading the Department's network to grow trade in key sectors. UK exports to India grew by 28%, to £7.9 billion, in the year ending quarter 2 2018, making that seven consecutive quarters of growth. Goods exports increased by 38% in the same period. Following the launch of the UK-India technology partnership by the Prime Minister and Indian Prime Minister Modi in April 2018, there have been many successes, including the healthcare AI catalyst programme. We have worked closely with many companies, such as BT, Rolex, Diageo, GlaxoSmithKline, Marks & Spencer and G4S.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister might know that, in the Leeds city region, which includes Huddersfield, we have many brilliant businesspeople from an Indian background and they of course have very good partnerships with India. They are totally demoralised at the moment, partly because of this Secretary of State. I would not wish him to go into hell, but they have no confidence in him and they have no confidence in shrinking the potential market for India from 650 million to 65 million people.

**George Hollingbery:** All I can say is that the hon. Gentleman is entitled to his opinions, but I happen to disagree with him fundamentally. We have a close trading relationship with India, and we are working extremely hard to grow trade there. The figures I have already given him this morning demonstrate that there is potential in India, which we are exploiting and will continue to exploit if and when we leave the EU.

**Greg Hands** (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): India of course is in the EU's generalised scheme of preferences, whereas nearby countries such as Pakistan and Sri Lanka are in GSP+, with Bangladesh probably soon to join them. Does my hon. Friend agree that, if we were to adopt Labour's customs union policy, we would have to accept EU trade preference policy without any say in its formulation? Does he also agree that that would lead to a big decline in UK foreign policy influence in south Asia and among diaspora communities in the UK?

**George Hollingbery:** One reason why the Prime Minister has put forward the deal that she has to the House is that it allows the flexibility for us to engage in the ways in which my right hon. Friend expects us to be able to—actively with the south Asia region, and India in particular—and to prescribe our own preference schemes such that we can control our own rules.

**Jonathan Edwards** (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Is it not the case that the priority for the Indian Government is a trade deal with the EU and that the best way for the British state to have a trade deal with the EU is to stay in the EU customs union?

**George Hollingbery:** The Indian Government's priority is likely to be trade with anybody with whom it suits. The hon. Gentleman simply needed to listen to the answer I gave a little earlier: there has been a 28% increase in UK exports to India, to £7.9 billion, in the year to quarter 2 2018, and a 38% increase in goods exports. We can conclude from that there is plenty of attention in India on UK trade.

#### Future Trade Agreements: Intellectual Property Rights

5. **Danielle Rowley** (Midlothian) (Lab): What steps his Department plans to take to ensure the protection of intellectual property rights in future trade agreements. [909089]

**The Minister for Trade Policy (George Hollingbery):** The UK's intellectual property regime is consistently rated as one of the best in the world. The Government are reviewing their future trade policy as we leave the EU. We will continue to consult widely with stakeholders on intellectual property provisions in future trade agreements to support inventors, creators, consumers, and food and drink producers.

**Danielle Rowley:** Scotland is one of the fastest growing regions in the UK's creative industries, which are world leading and currently worth £91.8 billion to the UK economy. Can the Minister therefore reassure the creative industries in Scotland, and indeed across the UK, that professional equipment such as musical instruments

will not be subject to the disruption of additional documentation requirements and tariffs at the border after Brexit?

**George Hollingbery:** Plainly, if the Prime Minister's deal is accepted in the House of Commons, including by being supported by the Labour party, that will not be an issue. If we leave the EU without a deal, the regimes will be what they are. What I can say is that we are working incredibly hard on copyright, patents and enforcement to make sure that the creative industries, which are vital to the prosperity of this country, will be protected in the event of the UK leaving the EU.

#### UK Service Exports: European Single Market

6. **Douglas Chapman** (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): What recent estimate he has made of the value of the European single market to UK service exports. [909090]

**The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox):** In 2017, 46.8% of UK services exports went to the European single market—including the European economic area and Switzerland—worth around £130.5 billion. That represents around 21% of total UK exports. Leaving the EU gives us the freedom to pursue an independent trade policy with countries around the world that reflects our unique strengths in services.

**Douglas Chapman:** I thank the Secretary of State for his response, but last week the Office for National Statistics published the international trade and services statistics for 2017, which showed that financial services proved to be the largest service product exported globally by UK businesses and that the EU made up nearly half the UK's service exports. A key part of business relationships with clients in the EU is the ability to travel freely, known as passporting rights. Has the Secretary of State made an assessment of what the end of freedom of movement, including for labour, will mean for services under the Prime Minister's deal?

**Dr Fox:** Actually, the share of our exports to the European Union accounted for by services is less than our average exported to the rest of the world. In fact, the future of our services will be dependent on global services arrangements, and outside the EU we will have a golden opportunity to shape the global services agenda in a way that suits the United Kingdom's best interests. It is time that we in this House started to reflect the optimism and confidence of the British public who voted to leave the EU.

#### Leaving the EU: UK Steel Sector

8. **Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure that the UK steel sector can continue to trade without disruption after the UK leaves the EU. [909092]

**The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox):** We are working closely with the UK steel sector to provide as much continuity as possible in trading arrangements after we leave the EU. This includes establishing the

Trade Remedies Authority to help to prevent unfair trading practices and identifying more than half a billion pounds' worth of opportunities for UK steel producers.

**Jessica Morden:** When the all-party group on steel met key voices in the industry this week, it was made clear that there is a real lack of engagement from the Government on steel safeguard measures for the UK market in a no-deal scenario. Will the Minister commit to meet UK Steel urgently to discuss this critical detail for an industry that contributes £1.6 billion to the economy?

**Dr Fox:** I do not recognise that description; the Government are indeed involved in talks with the industry about safeguards. The hon. Lady will know that the best way to avoid the problems she identifies is to support the Prime Minister's deal. Those who keep talking about the pitfalls of no deal but keep voting against a deal are making those pitfalls more likely.

**Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that our future trade policies must protect UK businesses, including in the steel sector, against unfair competition from abroad? It cannot be right for Parliament to expect our businesses to respect high standards on the environment, workplace or welfare and then compete freely with businesses abroad that do not.

**Dr Fox:** That is exactly why, in the Trade Bill, the Government introduced the Trade Remedies Authority to ensure that we have protections against unfair global competition in future. It seems absolutely inexplicable that the Labour party keeps talking about protections but voted against the Trade Bill and the establishment of the Trade Remedies Authority.

**Stewart Hosie** (Dundee East) (SNP): Currently, 15% of steel export consignments are subject to tariffs; in the event of no deal, 97% of export consignments would be subject to tariffs. If one considers non-tariff barriers and domestic concerns—the shortage of warehousing was reported yesterday—is this not the time to support an extension of article 50 and to reach out and get a real compromise and an acceptable deal? Otherwise, the Conservatives risk being seen as the party prepared to sacrifice the steel industry on the altar of right-wing ideology.

**Dr Fox:** What the time is right for is reaching an agreement with the European Union, as the Prime Minister has set out, that will give us that certainty. Those who consistently vote against that deal are the ones putting industries at risk.

**Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): The very fact that the Secretary of State is even considering zero import tariffs threatens the survival of our steel, ceramics and tyre industries. There will be no incentive for our partners to negotiate new trade deals, or to renegotiate existing ones, as the Secretary of State will have given away the shop before negotiations start. Thousands of workers whose jobs will have gone will no longer be the consumers he says will take advantage of cheap imports. When is he going to admit he is wrong?

**Dr Fox:** The Government have made no decision on this. When we do so, we will communicate it to stakeholders, the public and Parliament. Of course, the best way to avoid any of this scenario is for us to have a deal with the European Union. Whipping up fear over people's jobs is simply the humbug that has become the hon. Gentleman's hallmark.

### Topical Questions

T1. [909098] **Luke Graham** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox):** My departmental responsibilities are to have foreign and inward direct investment, to establish an independent trade policy and to promote the United Kingdom's exports. I am pleased to announce to the House this morning that UK Export Finance will provide £49 million of support for Darlington-based firm Cleveland Bridge to construct 250 bridges for rural Sri Lankan communities.

**Luke Graham:** International trade is a reserved power. What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to engage MPs in the devolved nations to ensure both that they are helping to form policy and that the DIT is properly resourcing devolved nations?

**Dr Fox:** My hon. Friend is right that trade is a reserved power, but we work with parliamentarians across the House through our regular briefings with MPs, which MPs from all parties attend, our international events programme, online services and the Board of Trade, which I established, to ensure that the benefits of trade are equally felt across all the parts of the United Kingdom.

**Barry Gardiner** (Brent North) (Lab): Many British companies are currently part of trade disputes put forward by the EU at the World Trade Organisation. After 29 March they will be able to continue those disputes, utilising the evidence already submitted, but only if the Government accept a regional approach of 27 plus one countries, which is specifically allowed for under WTO rules. That would avoid the time and cost for businesses and for the taxpayer of having to resubmit evidence in a separate case. Why have the Government refused to adopt that simple solution? Why will they not support British business and ensure that trade disputes do not drag on for longer and at far greater cost than absolutely necessary?

**Dr Fox:** We will not want to see trade disputes drag on longer than necessary, and we will want to co-operate with our European partners in that regard. Of course, the best way to ensure that we have the highest level of co-operation on the disputes that are currently under way is to agree to the Prime Minister's deal.

T2. [909099] **Mr Robert Goodwill** (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): What progress on trade reform and WTO reform was made at the recent World Economic Forum annual meeting? In particular, was consideration given to continuity arrangements with countries such as Turkey so that Ford engines can continue to be fitted to Ford Transits built in Turkey?

**Dr Fox:** A number of issues were discussed with Trade Ministers in Davos, including those of continuity. They also included how complex global value chains will be dealt with in the future, because, as my right hon. Friend has said, when the WTO was created the global economy was not so dependent on them. We need to look at how we deal with the question of tariffs and multiple, repeated taxation in industries such as the car industry.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Lloyd Russell-Moyle. Not here—where is the fella? I hope that he is not indisposed; that would be most unfortunate. Well, who is here? Nic Dakin is here.

**Nic Dakin** (Scunthorpe) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

The steel industry is confronted with the possibility that the trade defence instruments currently in place at European level to prevent Chinese dumping will not come forward at UK level. We also face having to compete against quotas to sell steel into the EU when we are outside the EU. What is the Secretary of State doing to make sure that that does not happen?

**The Minister for Trade Policy (George Hollingbery):** I can say straightforwardly that the anti-subsidy and anti-dumping measures that are currently in place in the EU have been widely consulted on with British industry, and particularly with the steel sector, as the hon. Gentleman will appreciate. We will be transitioning the measures that are important to those industries. The same process has been gone through for safeguarding, and the same result will occur.

**Greg Hands** (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): Will the ministerial team update us on progress in seeking continuity of some of the other EU trade agreements, particularly those in Canada and in Africa, many of which, of course, the Opposition opposed in the first place?

**George Hollingbery:** I simply say what I have said to the House on a number of occasions: we are making good progress on many of those agreements. I have already signed three of them very recently and deposited them with the House. We will continue to update the House as progress is made, and we will bring forward a report in the next week or two, which will help elucidate the matter further.

T4. [909104] **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Employment rights are human rights, so what is the Minister doing to ensure that no trade agreement is signed that undermines our standards in employment rights, health and safety rights and equality rights?

**Dr Fox:** We set out in the trade agreement that this House supported on Canada the non-regression clauses that said we would not water down labour rights or environmental standards, or give away Government control on public service regulation, in order to reach agreement. I supported that and my colleagues supported that in the House, but the Labour party voted against it; I do not understand why.

**Mark Menzies** (Fylde) (Con): Will the Secretary of State update the House on what progress the Government have made on advancing food and drink exports, and particularly on getting some of our exporting countries to reduce their tariffs?

**Dr Fox:** Food and drink is one of this country's most successful export sectors, but a lot of areas of it, particularly those such as spirits—I had discussions with the Scotch Whisky Association just a couple of nights ago—face very high tariffs in countries such as India and Brazil. They are enormous markets for us, but we face disproportionate tariffs, and that is one of the key areas where we seek unilateral reform in such countries so that they can show that they are genuinely committed to free trade.

**Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The Secretary of State has shared with business a progress report on trade deals. I have been trying to obtain that information from him for months; is he willing to share that information with Members of the House as well as with business?

**Dr Fox:** I dealt with this extensively at the International Trade Committee yesterday; the right hon. Gentleman might have wanted to attend.

**Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): Can the Secretary of State update the House on the ongoing trade negotiations and discussions he is having with the United States Administration, not least because the US is our single largest export market?

**Dr Fox:** Our working group with the United States on future trade has met a number of times. There is broad agreement that we should have a free trade agreement with the United States. That would open up huge possibilities for the United Kingdom. There has been a lot of talk in the news this week about the ceramics industry; it would benefit from a free trade agreement with the United States, not least by the removal of the 27% tariffs that it currently faces for UK exports.

**Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): May I congratulate the Secretary of State on signing a trade agreement with the Faroe Islands? Those must have been tough negotiations. Is he seeking an extension to article 50 to complete the negotiations on the 40 trade deals he promised us he would sign?

**Dr Fox:** The hon. Gentleman mocks the agreement with the Faroe Islands; how typical that is of the Labour party when so many jobs in the fishing and fish processing industry are dependent upon it. He may want to know that when I go to Switzerland on Monday I will be signing the largest of the EU agreements of all. *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Before we move on, as Humphrey Bogart said,

“I don't mind if you don't like my manners, I don't like them myself”,

but just because the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) is sporting a rather splendid and garish Bogart tie, that does not mean that he should descend to that level himself. *[Interruption.]* He is chuntering from a sedentary position with predictable regularity—

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): For my constituents against that man.

**Mr Speaker:** The hon. Gentleman says his constituents have a particular view about the Secretary of State; that is quite possible. The Secretary of State's constituents might have a particular view about the hon. Gentleman, too—who knows?

## WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

*The Minister for Women and Equalities was asked—*

### HPV Vaccination for Boys: Catch-up Programme

1. **Mrs Sharon Hodgson** (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): What discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care on launching a catch-up programme for the HPV vaccination for boys. [909060]

**The Minister for Women and Equalities (Penny Mordaunt):** It is the view of Public Health England that a catch-up vaccination programme for boys is not necessary, as evidence suggests that they are already benefiting from the indirect protection known as herd protection, which has been built up from the 10 years of the girls' programme.

**Mrs Hodgson:** I thank the Minister for her answer, but the boys who will be vaccinated in the first cohort are at the same risk of HPV infection and related diseases as older boys who will not be eligible for the vaccination, and the Government are therefore missing an opportunity to protect more boys. The herd immunity the Minister spoke of does not apply to boys who may go on to have sex with men or with women who have not been vaccinated. Will the Minister therefore urge her colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care to reconsider this policy on equality grounds?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the hon. Lady for raising this important question. There are additional programmes specifically for the groups that she mentioned. For example, a vaccination programme is being rolled out for men who have sex with men. Obviously the broad principle of the wider screening programme is to do the most good, and not to do any harm. That is the basis on which decisions are being made.

**Dr Caroline Johnson** (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming the roll-out of the HPV screening test for women? Does she agree that it will increase the number of people who are detected early and reduce the risk of women having cervical cancer?

**Penny Mordaunt:** Yes, and the roll-out has already had a considerable impact. The Department of Health and Social Care will keep these policies under review, but the programme has been an immense success.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Further to the 2018 Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation recommendation for boys to be offered the vaccine, I have been in contact with the permanent secretary of the Department of Health in Northern Ireland. Has the Minister had any opportunity to discuss with him the push for the vaccine to be given throughout all of the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland?

**Penny Mordaunt:** As the hon. Gentleman will know, the healthcare systems in all four nations are in close discussion about all these things. They are driven by evidence and want to see evidence of what is going on in other nations. So yes, those conversations do take place. I will ask the relevant Minister to write to him on the specific point he raised.

**Mark Menzies** (Fylde) (Con): I thank the Minister for what she said about providing the HPV vaccine for gay men on equality grounds. May I encourage her to keep an open mind to extending it to boys, on the same principle?

**Penny Mordaunt:** As I said, these decisions are taken on a clinical basis by people who are looking closely at the evidence, and they keep the policies under review.

### Non-disclosure Agreements: Regulation

2. **Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck** (South Shields) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to regulate the use of non-disclosure agreements in cases of (a) sexual harassment and (b) maternity discrimination. [909061]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst):** The Government share the concern that non-disclosure agreements have been used to hide workplace harassment and discrimination, or to intimidate victims into silence. That is clearly unacceptable. We will be consulting on measures to improve the regulation of non-disclosure agreements, including how best to ensure that workers understand their rights when they have signed a non-disclosure agreement.

**Mrs Lewell-Buck:** Thanks to changes brought in by this Government, local authorities are subject to very limited scrutiny. A scan of responses to freedom of information requests shows that the use of NDAs in local authorities is prolific and out of control. Given that the Prime Minister's planned consultation has yet to materialise, will the Minister confirm that the Government have no idea at all how widespread the use of NDAs is anywhere?

**Kelly Tolhurst:** Non-disclosure agreements have a legitimate place in the workplace and can cover matters other than harassment or discrimination. For example, they have a legitimate use in the protection of trade secrets and when a settlement has been reached. As I have outlined, we will be consulting on the issue, and we are determined to make matters easier for workers.

**Mrs Maria Miller** (Basingstoke) (Con): We should be very clear that employment NDAs are being used to cover up lawbreaking. Maternity discrimination and sexual harassment are against the laws that this place has put on our statute books. Therefore, as well as considering the future of NDAs, will my hon. Friend consider the future of the Equality and Human Rights Commission? It should be enforcing our laws, but it has failed to use its extensive enforcement powers.

**Kelly Tolhurst:** I thank my right hon. Friend, the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, for highlighting the issue; she is quite right. It is true that

there has been a tailored review of the effectiveness and work of the EHRC, and the Secretary of State has met the commission. We are looking at its delivery and effectiveness, but we will welcome any suggestions from my right hon. Friend and her Committee.

### Domestic Abuse Legislation and Immigration Status

3. **Mr Paul Sweeney** (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment she has made of the potential effectiveness of provisions in the draft domestic abuse Bill to support women and children who do not have secure immigration status. [909062]

9. **Alex Norris** (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment she has made of the potential effectiveness of provisions in the draft domestic abuse Bill to support women and children who do not have secure immigration status. [909069]

11. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the potential effectiveness of provisions in the draft domestic abuse Bill to support women and children who do not have secure immigration status. [909071]

**The Minister for Women (Victoria Atkins):** The Home Office operates an immigration policy that supports women and children with insecure immigration status. Victims of domestic abuse who entered the UK as the partner of a British citizen, settled person or person with refugee status are eligible to apply for settlement in their own right. Those who are destitute can also apply for crisis support under the destitute domestic violence concession. We are funding a project conducted by Southall Black Sisters to pilot support for women and children who are victims in these circumstances.

**Mr Sweeney:** If the system is so effective, why does the Ubuntu women's shelter in my constituency have to be the first charity in the UK to provide short-term accommodation for women with no recourse to public funds? Fleeing gender-based and domestic violence, they are denied access to homelessness, social security and housing support. These are non-EEA women with limited leave to remain. Women who have settled status or leave to remain face delays in processing their status. Any situation where women fleeing domestic violence, torture or persecution have no recourse to public funds is unacceptable. Does the Minister agree, and what is she going to do about it?

**Victoria Atkins:** I would ask the hon. Gentleman to advise those working in the refuge to help the women he describes in seeking the destitute domestic violence concession. The point of that concession is to provide immediate crisis support to women and children who are victims of domestic abuse, giving them three months' leave to remain so that they can find new homes and reflect on their situation, and also have access to public funds.

**Alex Norris:** As the Home Affairs Committee, we have expressed concern that the police, having helped an individual who is a survivor of domestic abuse, are then sharing their details with the Home Office for the purposes of immigration control. This has a chilling

effect on the likelihood of reporting abuse. Will the Minister give an assurance that when the domestic abuse Bill has made its way through this place, the only thing that will matter is a woman's welfare, not their immigration status?

**Victoria Atkins:** In those circumstances, the response of the state is always led by the needs of the victim. We must be careful to recognise that the immigration system operates in and of its own right. That is precisely why we have the destitute domestic violence concession to help women in these desperate circumstances by giving them a three-month break period to seek help and build a future for themselves and for their children, if appropriate.

**Liz Twist:** What steps are the Government taking to ensure that police forces are not sharing information on victims of domestic abuse with the Home Office for immigration purposes?

**Victoria Atkins:** This is where there is a tension between the immigration system and the needs of victims of domestic abuse. That is precisely why we have the destitute domestic violence concession to give those women three months' leave to remain and recourse to public funds. But we must be clear that people who do not enjoy settled status in the UK must not have recourse to public funds in the same way that a British citizen would expect.

**Luke Graham** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): Support for domestic violence victims is devolved to different tiers of government right across the United Kingdom. What is my hon. Friend doing to support different levels of government to make sure that victims get consistent support across our United Kingdom?

**Victoria Atkins:** My hon. Friend raises an important point that we are seeking to address through the domestic abuse Bill with the appointment of a domestic abuse commissioner. I am very grateful to my colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government who are in the process of conducting a review of services nationally. The role of the commissioner will be to hold local and national Government, and stakeholders, to account as to the provision of services in areas across the country so that there is no possibility of a postcode lottery.

**Angela Crawley** (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): A constituent from Larkhall suffers psychological, emotional and financial abuse from her husband, with whom she ran a business for seven years in the UK. She held a spousal visa. Due to the length of time it took to be approved for indefinite leave to remain, she had a choice to remain in that marriage or to leave the UK. This was due to Home Office bureaucracy. Does the Minister accept that the Home Office needs to be sensitive to cases such as that?

**Victoria Atkins:** I do; I hope the hon. Lady understands that I cannot comment on a particular case at the Dispatch Box, but that is why we have the destitute domestic violence concession—to give immediate crisis support to victims of domestic abuse whose residency status depends on the partner who may well be abusing them.

**Carolyn Harris** (Swansea East) (Lab): The Women's Aid "No Woman Turned Away" project can only find refuge accommodation for fewer than one in 10 women who have no recourse to public funds. The Government's proposed measures in the draft domestic abuse Bill are not good enough for migrant women. Can the Minister offer assurances that more will be done to ensure that migrant women can have full and equal access to specialist services?

**Victoria Atkins:** I thank the hon. Lady for her question. Only last week, when I visited a domestic abuse refuge in the area around Preston in Lancashire, I heard for myself the particular needs of women in the area who have no recourse to public funds. The Bill's purpose is to provide a statutory definition and so on, to help all victims of abuse, regardless of their immigration status, but of course this matter may well be scrutinised by the pre-legislative Joint Committee of both Houses. We very much welcome that.

#### Female Firefighters: Fire Station Facilities

4. **Emma Dent Coad** (Kensington) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the adequacy of provision of facilities in fire stations for female firefighters.

[909063]

12. **Mary Glendon** (North Tyneside) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the adequacy of provision of facilities in fire stations for female firefighters.

[909072]

**The Minister for Women (Victoria Atkins):** We all enormously value the work of women and men employed by fire and rescue authorities who work to protect their communities. It is unacceptable that outdated practices exist such as shower facilities being unavailable to female firefighters. My hon. Friend the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service has been clear that we look to the National Fire Chiefs Council and local fire and rescue service leaders to address those concerns.

**Emma Dent Coad:** To quote former firefighter Lucy Masoud:

"I remember my first fire station. There was a tiny cramped dorm with three beds though it was meant for one. There was a massive dorm for the guys, yet we were stuffed in like sardines."

At other stations, female firefighters had to sleep on the floor. A "solution" is proposed of having gender-neutral dorms, toilets and washing facilities, which is overwhelmingly opposed and could cause women to leave the service. Will the Minister agree to demand audits at fire stations across the country related to facilities for female firefighters?

**Victoria Atkins:** The hon. Lady knows that 14 fire services were recently inspected by Her Majesty's inspectorate, and that of the 14, two were found not to have adequate shower facilities for female firefighters—Hampshire and the Isle of Wight. I name them, and I very much expect that they will improve their services. We know that there are issues with sleeping accommodation, too.

I would, however, note that although the Fire Brigades Union does sterling work for its members, it is a very great shame that its executive council has not yet managed to appoint a woman to put forward the views of female

firefighters in a national and consistent way. I hope that it will put pressure on fire chiefs and others to ensure that they do better by their female firefighters.

**Mary Glendon:** In addition to working with the Home Office to ensure that there are better facilities, what steps is the Minister taking to encourage more women to take up a career in firefighting?

**Victoria Atkins:** I am so grateful to the hon. Lady for raising this subject, because women are just as capable as men at firefighting. I hope that we at some point see a revised version of Fireman Sam, because we know from social media campaigns that children grow up expecting firefighters to be male, which limits their expectations and perhaps cuts their career opportunities as they go through school and into training. The message from this Government is very clear: we absolutely welcome female firefighters, and we will work with Women in the Fire Service to ensure that we get more women helping to protect our communities.

**Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): As a former member of the national fire service management committee of the Local Government Association, it has been a pleasure for me to see how the culture in the fire service has changed over recent years, but there is still a need to tackle the perception that being a firefighter is a job for a man. Will the Minister therefore welcome the efforts being made by fire authorities such as Devon and Somerset and the West Midlands to promote the message strongly that it is a job that anyone can do?

**Victoria Atkins:** Very much so—I welcome the work of the fire authorities that my hon. Friend mentioned. I note that we have five fire and rescue services headed by women, including, of course, here in London, where Dany Cotton has had to deal with extraordinary events in her tenure as chief. That, I hope, is another piece in the jigsaw of evidence that proves that women can be just as good at fighting fires as men.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for the answers she has given thus far. Clearly, in order to encourage young women to take up the opportunities of firefighting, there need to be role models. What action is she taking to encourage female firefighters employed right now to act as role models to encourage others to follow?

**Victoria Atkins:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend. As I say, the organisation Women in the Fire Service does great work at local level in encouraging women to join the fire service. Again, as role models, we have the five women we know are heading fire and rescue services currently—of course, of the 45 fire and rescue services in England and the three fire and rescue services in Wales, that is a tiny fraction, but they are very positive role models. I also hope that the Fire Brigades Union will manage to bring a woman on to its executive council in the future. It is through that sort of positive work that we will get women into these services.

#### Workplace Equality: Flexible Working

5. **Liz McInnes** (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): What discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on improving access to flexible working to increase workplace equality.

[909065]

**The Minister for Women and Equalities (Penny Mordaunt):**

Flexible working is crucial to support women and men in balancing work and caring responsibilities. That is why the Government Equalities Office is working with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the flexible working taskforce in using our research programmes to develop evidence-based guidance for employers.

**Liz McInnes:** I thank the Minister for that answer, but the right to request flexible working is not the same as an entitlement to work flexibly. Given that so many of these requests are refused and that the Government have said that they want to encourage flexible working, will they consider placing a duty on employers to advertise jobs as flexible?

**Penny Mordaunt:** We have announced our intention to consult on these very matters, but I would also say that, as that will take a little while, employers should not wait for it. We know that by offering flexible working they are going to have a bigger pool of talent from which to pick their employees.

**Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con):** Shared parental leave is as much about cultural change as it is about legislation. What is my right hon. Friend doing to help parents better understand and access shared parental leave?

**Penny Mordaunt:** We are doing a huge amount of work to look at what additional obstacles there might be, such as the bureaucracy in accessing provision, and we are also looking at the experience of those who have taken up and made use of shared parental leave. It is incredibly important that we change the culture and it will take time, but there are still some further things we can do to encourage that, and we are looking at them.

13. [909073] **Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab):** It is almost a year now since Labour launched its diversity charter challenge to embed diversity, including flexible working, in all sectors. Since then, the aerospace industry has launched its charter, techUK is working on a charter and the accountancy body the Association of Accounting Technicians is calling for charters for all business sectors. Will the Minister join these illustrious bodies, including the Labour party, and commit to making diversity charters a requirement for all sectors?

**Penny Mordaunt:** The hon. Lady is absolutely right that there is some great work out there: 97% of businesses offer some form of flexible working—to tie this back to the original question—but only 68% of employees for whom that situation is available are taking up this option. I think this is changing, but there are further things we can do to encourage it. Sharing good practice is one of those things, and I think the charters have played a good role in that.

14. [909074] **Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab):** Will the Minister join me in commending Chwarae Teg in Wales for its work to encourage more flexible working through its “FairPlay Employer” status, and will she encourage more Government employers to seek this status, as has been achieved by the Intellectual Property Office in Newport?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the hon. Lady for putting another example of good practice out there. I absolutely would encourage that. It is only by sharing good practice that we are going to be able to encourage employers that are not doing that to raise their game.

**Apprenticeships and Work: Fair Access**

6. **Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con):** What discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on ensuring fair access to (a) apprenticeships and (b) work in all sectors for the most marginalised people in society. [909066]

**The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton):** I agree with my right hon. Friend, and we are at one in thinking that apprenticeships can be a powerful force for social mobility. We want the advantages of apprenticeships to be available to all, and I am in regular contact with my ministerial colleagues. For the smallest employers we meet 100% of the costs of apprenticeship training for apprentices aged 16 to 18, 19 to 24-year-old care leavers, and 19 to 24-year-olds with an education, health and care plan. As my right hon. Friend knows, and indeed welcomed, last year we introduced a £1,000 bursary for care leavers who are starting an apprenticeship, to support them as they transition into training.

**Mr Speaker:** Unless I am much mistaken the Minister has just elevated the hon. Gentleman to membership of the Privy Council, for which I am sure he will want to thank her. Who knows? It may be a straw in the wind.

**Robert Halfon:** Mr Speaker, I was very honoured to be made a member of the Privy Council after the 2015 election.

**Mr Speaker:** That is why I said “unless I am much mistaken”. I am sorry that I had not noticed the right hon. Gentleman’s status, and three years late, may I congratulate him?

**Robert Halfon:** Mr Speaker, you did call me right honourable yesterday during questions to the Prime Minister.

May I thank my right hon. Friend the Minister for coming to Harlow this afternoon to see Harlow College, which is one of the finest colleges in England? Will she consider using the apprenticeship levy to provide an apprentice premium and transport costs for disadvantaged young people, so that they can climb up the apprentice ladder of opportunity?

**Anne Milton:** My right hon. Friend is frequently right, and most definitely honourable. Targeted financial support is available for young apprentices and those from disadvantaged backgrounds, including the care leaver bursary. The Department for Transport is introducing a railcard for 16 and 17-year-olds this year, and we continue to work together on further options. I am very much looking forward to visiting Harlow College later today.

**Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab):** Can the Minister explain how a young person under the age of 19 from a low-income family, who works 35 hours a week on the minimum wage earning £3.50 an hour on an apprenticeship scheme—less than £122.50 a week—and who is barely able to pay for their own meals, travel, and basic work garments, can be classed as being “employed” by this Government?

**Anne Milton:** I point out to the hon. Lady that we take the advice of the Low Pay Commission on wages for apprentices, and that rate will be going up. I have

spoken about the targeted support available, and whenever I meet apprentices I ask them about their wages and how they travel to work. We are very aware of some of the problems faced by those young people, and as I have said, the railcard for 16 and 17-year-olds is available, and colleges have discretionary bursaries to support them.<sup>1</sup>

### Topical Questions

T1. [909075] **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

**The Minister for Women and Equalities (Penny Mordaunt):** I am pleased to announce that organisations supporting people who have been out of work due to caring responsibilities and have additional barriers to returning to work can apply for a new £500,000 fund from the Government Equalities Office. More widely, the GEO is liaising with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to support people with little or no work history in the five integration areas. That funding is in addition to the £1.5 million fund launched last year, which will help us to gather evidence of good practice, and reflects the GEO's absolute commitment to ensuring that all women realise their full potential.

**Sir Desmond Swayne:** Will the Minister challenge businesses that exclude guide dogs?

**Penny Mordaunt:** Under the auspices of the Office for Disability Issues, and subsequently the assistance dog sector, all those fantastic organisations and charities have come together to harmonise their standards, so that the owner of a café or pub, or a taxi driver, can identify legitimate assistance dogs more easily. There is absolutely no excuse for excluding people who have assistance dogs. We are considering what further measures we can introduce to ensure that that can be enforced, and in particular whether the rules on licensing of venues and premises can help with that issue. The Home Office is setting out its plans for a formal consultation with disabled people's organisations and other representative groups in due course.

**Dawn Butler** (Brent Central) (Lab): This week I had a phone call with regard to a young man who tried to commit suicide and a mother who felt that she did not want to burden her children any more, all because of the Windrush scandal. They say that to educate a woman is to educate a nation; therefore, to humiliate a woman is to humiliate a nation. Will the Minister assure the House that the Government will provide urgent and necessary help, support and assistance to women and vulnerable people affected by the Windrush scandal?

**The Minister for Women (Victoria Atkins):** May I again set out the Government's apology to those who have suffered through this terrible incident and reflect on the fact that this was not just one Government who got it wrong, but many Governments of all political colours? I welcome the fact that colleagues across the House are bringing individual constituency cases to our attention. We can then feed them into the system that has been set up so that we can provide help and support. The hon. Lady must, of course, let us know of any cases she wishes to raise, but the Government must learn

from mistakes, which was why we set up the review. We are pleased that more than 4,000 people have been helped through the scheme—not just Windrush victims, but people from other countries. It is very much a work in progress, but we welcome Members across the House continuing to raise these issues in the Chamber.

T4. [909078] **Eddie Hughes** (Walsall North) (Con): What advice would the Minister give to women, including my daughter, who recently signed a petition seeking to make smear tests routinely available to women under 25?

**Penny Mordaunt:** My answer will be similar to that which I gave to the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) on Question 1. Clinical decisions are taken with regard to age range, but whatever age is set, there will always be people who fall outside it—in this case those younger than 25. What is critical is that people know what is normal for them and what symptoms they should be worried about. The Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), who has responsibility for women's health issues and inequalities, is doing great work with her new taskforce on women's health to identify what a safe period looks like and examine issues such as menopause so that women and girls everywhere really understand when they should be concerned about something and seek help.

T2. [909076] **Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): Many disabled people and pensioners rely on accessible Crown post offices, so will the Minister tell us what discussions Ministers in the Government Equalities Office have had with colleagues in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Department for Work and Pensions about the equality impact of closing, privatising and relocating to WHSmith 41 post offices, including in Cambridge?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst):** I would first like to point out that our franchise programme with the Post Office is not a closure programme, but a sustainability programme. On the franchising with WHSmith for the 41 post offices that the hon. Gentleman refers to, accessibility is key to the delivery of our 11,500 network of post offices in the UK. I personally make sure that that is covered when any new post office branch is being worked on.

**Mr Speaker:** We will hear from the right hon. Gentleman again—I call Mr Robert Halfon.

T6. [909080] **Robert Halfon** (Harlow) (Con): You are too kind, Mr Speaker.

Essex County Council is preparing to close over a third of libraries in Essex, with three out of five libraries in deprived areas in Harlow at risk of closure. Will my right hon. Friend acknowledge the importance of free library services, particularly for the vulnerable and for equality in society and education? Will she talk to Essex County Council and keep our libraries open?

**Penny Mordaunt:** Local authorities have a statutory duty to provide a comprehensive and effective library service. Libraries are clearly more than a repository for books. They can be community hubs through which services

can be provided. I encourage my right hon. Friend to respond to the county council's ongoing library consultation so that we can connect organisations in his community that could be able to ensure that services are not just maintained, but made better.

T3. [909077] **Mohammad Yasin** (Bedford) (Lab): Will the Minister confirm that victims of caste-based discrimination will have full legal protection under the existing law, including if their legal grounds for such discrimination do not meet the *Tirkey v. Chandok* principles?

**Penny Mordaunt:** The hon. Gentleman will know that we have consulted on this and are acting on the basis of our legal advice and the enormous number of responses to that consultation. We have confidence that those protections are there for individuals, but we also want to ensure that people understand those protections really well. We will therefore issue guidance and consult groups on its production.

**Nigel Huddleston** (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I warmly welcome the publication of the draft Domestic Abuse Bill. Will the Minister provide assurance about what the domestic abuse commissioner will do to share best practice across the country?

**Victoria Atkins:** I thank my hon. Friend, who has done so much work on this issue for his constituents. The Bill will introduce a domestic abuse commissioner, whose sole focus will be on tackling domestic abuse and holding local and national Government to account to ensure that services are provided well and consistently across the country, thereby helping all the 2 million people who we know are victims of these terrible crimes.

T5. [909079] **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): Ministers may have seen, as I did, the article by the actress Samantha Renke about how the lack of accessibility in housing adversely affects the ability to be independent. Will the Minister make a statement on the provision of accessible housing, given that only 7% of properties currently have accessibility features?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the hon. Lady for her question and pay tribute to all the work that Sam has done. Many hon. Members will have met her; she has been to Parliament to raise the profile of this issue. The hub—based on the Olympic park—is looking at good design. It has set a challenge to demonstrate that we can build accessible homes for no more cost and with no greater footprint than other homes that are being built. We know that this is possible and we need to do much more to ensure that developers are following the good design guidelines and that we are making housing stock across the country more flexible.

**Helen Whately** (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Last week, we saw the first conviction in UK courts for female genital mutilation—a landmark, albeit an awful one, in the campaign to end this abhorrent practice. What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to end FGM in this country and around the world?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank my hon. Friend for her question. Indeed, yesterday, I was with the Vavengers, a community group that is doing a tremendous amount in the UK to raise awareness of this issue and tackle it. We are absolutely committed to ending this practice

globally by 2030. Both my Departments—the Government Equalities Office and the Department for International Development—are doing a tremendous amount. The advice that our team in Ghana gave was critical to the conviction to which my hon. Friend refers. This is a cross-Government effort and our ability not just to assist the many thousands of girls who are at risk in the UK, but to support the Africa-led movement to end the practice, is a good thing.

T7. [909081] **Rosie Cooper** (West Lancashire) (Lab): Will the Minister indicate what discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on improving access to flexible working to improve workplace equality?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I have frequent discussions with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. We are doing further consultative work, but my message to business is, “Don't wait for that.” An exemplar of flexible working is our civil service, which offers flexible working from day one. As a consequence, it has a wider pool of people to pick from. So do not wait for us, but we are going to do some further things.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): Further to the earlier question about caste, can my right hon. Friend confirm that she still intends to introduce legislation to remove caste as a protected characteristic from the Equality Act 2010?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank my hon. Friend for his consistency on this issue. Yes, it is, and my timetable has not changed since the last time he asked the question. In addition, as I said earlier, we will be issuing guidance.

T8. [909082] **Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck** (South Shields) (Lab): Reporting on the gender pay gap has named and shamed companies into being proactive and closing that gap, but a recent study by the Food Standards Agency found that food insecurity rates were higher for women than men, so why will the Government not implement my Food Insecurity Bill and help to close the gender food gap?

**Penny Mordaunt:** On the gender pay gap, I have had discussions with the Equality and Human Rights Commission about how we can ensure that the requirement to report is enforced, but I hope the hon. Lady will welcome the shift we have seen in the GEO. As well as all the things we are known for—women on boards, looking at the FTSE 350—we need to look at women at the other end of the socioeconomic scale. In April, we will bring forward a new cross-Government economic empowerment strategy for women that will consider women who are trapped in low pay, often for decades, and what we can do together to raise their incomes.

**Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): One barrier to accessing skills, training and apprenticeships is sometimes just knowledge of them in the first place. What more does my right hon. Friend believe that we can do to help to spread the word so that more people across our country can access those opportunities?

**The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton):** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is about understanding the possibilities. We are running two

projects: the 5 Cities project is aimed at increasing the diversity of those seeking apprenticeships; and the other one works with young people in more disadvantaged areas to make sure that they have the opportunity to get into higher-paid professions that they would not normally consider. We therefore are doing more, and it must not be forgotten either that an apprenticeship is a paid job—it is a job primarily. We are encouraging employers to advertise vacancies and embedding apprenticeships in all the careers advice we give to young people.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I apologise to disappointed remaining colleagues. This part of Question Time was scheduled to run for seven minutes, and I have run it for 15. I say as gently as possible to the Ministers that, although we appreciate their comprehensive replies, some of their answers were incredibly long, and as a result colleagues have lost out. I extend the envelope, but I cannot do so indefinitely, and we must now move on.

## Leaving the EU: Mobile Roaming Charges

10.47 am

**Tom Watson** (West Bromwich East) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on mobile roaming charges abroad in the event of a no-deal Brexit.

**The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright)**: Delivering a negotiated deal with the EU remains the Government's priority, and that has not changed, but I am sure the House will agree that we must prepare for every eventuality, including a no-deal scenario.

For that reason, we have taken a number of steps as a Government, working with businesses, consumers and devolved Administrations, to make sure that we deliver the best possible outcome in the event of no deal. The Government intend to legislate to make sure that the requirements on mobile operators to apply a financial limit on mobile data usage while abroad is retained in UK law. The limit would be set at £45 for each monthly billing period, which is the same limit that is currently in place. We would also legislate to ensure that customers receive alerts at 80% and 100% of their data usage so that all users can carefully manage that data usage. These would mean ongoing clarity and certainty for consumers.

I know that there is also a concern on the island of Ireland about the issue of inadvertent roaming. This is when a mobile signal in a border region is stronger from the country across the border. The Government intend to retain through UK law the EU roaming regulation provisions that set out how operators must make information available to their customers on how to avoid inadvertent roaming.

The Government are working hard to make sure that everyone is prepared and ready for all outcomes, and I encourage all businesses to read our technical notice, which we published last summer, on mobile roaming in the event of leaving without a deal. We should be clear, however, that surcharge-free roaming for UK customers may continue across the EU as it does now, based on operators' commercial arrangements.

Leaving without a deal would not prevent UK mobile operators from making and honouring commercial arrangements with mobile operators in and beyond the EU to deliver the services that their customers expect, including roaming arrangements. The availability and pricing of mobile roaming in the EU would be a commercial question for the operators, and many of them, including those that cover more than 85% of mobile subscribers, have already said that they have no current plans to change their approach to mobile roaming after the UK has left the EU.

I hope the steps that I have set out today will reassure the House that the Government are committed to a smooth and orderly transition as we leave the EU. In our telecoms sector, as in all sectors, we are making plans for all outcomes as we leave the EU. That is the role of a responsible Government, and that is what we will continue to do.

**Tom Watson**: Yesterday, while my team was mapping out a potential cross-party approach to tackling the online harms caused by surveillance capitalism, what was the Secretary of State doing? He was trying to slip out a policy change of national significance that clearly warranted an oral statement to the House. We must thank the HuffPost website that the Government did not manage to sneak it out without scrutiny at the Dispatch Box, and we must also thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting the urgent question.

When mobile roaming charges were scrapped in 2017, it was a great day for consumers. Tens of millions of British holidaymakers travelling to EU countries were told that they were able to "Roam Like Home". Before then, many had been burnt by huge and unexpected bills for trying to access their emails or sending pictures to their families back at home. As a nation, we were spending a third of a billion pounds just to use our mobiles on holiday. It was so bad that in 2016, the then Minister for the Digital Economy, the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey), said that

"by realising these changes, we're going to save British consumers millions of pounds a year."

Today's announcement shows once again that this particular Secretary of State and this particular Government will cave in to the lobbying might of telecoms companies rather than listening to the voice of consumers who are set to lose out. He said that mobile phone operators had said that they had "no plans" to raise roaming charges, but he and I know—and, more important, voters know—what that phrase really means.

The reason the EU introduced free roaming in the first place was the fact that the telecoms companies could not be trusted to give consumers a fair deal, so let me ask the Secretary of State some questions. Why has he decided that the price of no-deal Brexit is better paid by consumers than telecoms companies? What binding commitments has he asked companies to give to ensure that consumers are not hit by high roaming charges in the event of a no deal? Can he guarantee that if, by luck or by skill, the Prime Minister gets her deal through, consumers will not pay roaming charges in future? When has he summoned the telecoms chief executives to talks at the Department, and if he has not done so, will he do so this weekend to ensure that consumers can receive their guarantees?

This is how holidaymakers have been hit by Brexit chaos. First, the value of the pound has plummeted, thus increasing the cost of family holidays. Secondly, we will have to pay for visas to travel to the EU. Thirdly, we will be hit by a Brexit bill to use our mobiles abroad. If the Secretary of State does not want to go down in history as the Minister for the Tory triple whammy tourist tax, I suggest that he adopts a different course.

**Jeremy Wright**: The hon. Gentleman expressed a commendable interest in my diary for yesterday. Let me remind him that I was having meetings on the subject of online harms, which he and I had discussed on what I thought was a cross-party basis some time before he made his speech yesterday. I was also spending some time discussing problem gambling with the banks and with the all-party parliamentary group on gambling related harm, which is led by his hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris).

I know that the hon. Gentleman cares about both those subjects and would wish me to spend time on them, but he need not worry, because I have also been spending some time on this subject. Having done so, I can tell him that it will be discussed by this House because this is an affirmative statutory instrument. The Government have set out their view that it should be an affirmative statutory instrument, which will give the House an opportunity to debate this subject, so the hon. Gentleman or one of his colleagues will be able to discuss the matter in some detail when that debate is reached.

The hon. Gentleman says that we are caving in to the mobile phone operators, but the reality is that when we leave the European Union—that is what is going to happen, because the Government and the Opposition, if I understand their current position correctly, intend to respect the outcome of the 2016 referendum—it will not be possible for the UK Government to force our rules and expectations upon EU mobile phone operating companies. So if those companies choose to charge British mobile network operating companies at a wholesale level, one of two things will happen: either that cost will be passed on to those who are using their mobile phone abroad, or it will be spread across all mobile phone users on that network. That is the choice.

The decision we have made is to ensure that consumers are given the best possible protection in the event of leaving the EU with no deal. I have made it quite clear that that is not the Government's intention, however. We worked very hard to get a deal, and we would be grateful for the hon. Gentleman's help on that, but it is important to recognise what we can do and what we are doing. We are making sure that those elements of the current EU regime that can be transferred into domestic law are transferred into domestic law. Making sure that consumers cannot spend more than the amount that is currently provided for in EU law without understanding that they are doing so is an important consumer protection, as is letting people know how much of their data they have already used. That is what we can do, and that is what we should do in the event of no deal.

If the hon. Gentleman is concerned, as I am sure that we all are, to avoid some of the unpleasant consequences of no deal, the good news is that he can help. He and his colleagues can vote for a deal. We are still waiting for the Opposition to take a responsible position on avoiding the no-deal consequences that they come to the House to complain about.

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): Is not a competitive market the best answer?

**Jeremy Wright:** Of course, we have a competitive market, but that is perfectly compatible with providing consumer protections. Where there are sensible consumer protections in place under EU law and we can transfer them into domestic law, that is what we should do. In this case, that is what we are doing.

**Kirsty Blackman** (Aberdeen North) (SNP): The other thing we could do to avoid these charges is not to have Brexit at all. What the Government's 85% statistic tells us is that 15% of customers will definitely be charged extra while roaming in the EU. Last week, Money Saving Expert said that just two out of 12 major mobile

firms have committed to keeping roaming free and that two thirds of people think it important to have no roaming charges when they go abroad. The Government's impact assessment focuses on the cost for mobile operators rather than the cost for consumers. What assessment has the Secretary of State made of the additional cost to consumers as a result of this change?

The Government have not been upfront about this. They have not made a statement on the Floor of the House without being dragged here to answer the urgent question tabled by the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson). I am glad that he has asked this question, but the Government could have been more proactive in explaining to consumers what they expect to happen. The Secretary of State has said that this will be done by an affirmative statutory instrument that will require debate, so will he ask the Leader of the House to make time for such a debate on the Floor of the House, rather than it being debated in Committee? If this is such an important issue and if the Government are not trying to duck and dive, he should agree to it being debated on the Floor of the House.

Lastly, what is the Secretary of State's understanding of the position of people who live in Northern Ireland and work in Ireland, or vice versa, in relation to roaming charges? It seems to me that there is almost no way for them to avoid roaming charges unless they choose to have two mobile phones. Have the Government considered those people when making this decision?

**Jeremy Wright:** The hon. Lady accuses us of attempting to hide the matter, but, as I said, the Government intend to conduct a debate on the statutory instrument using the affirmative procedure. That does not represent hiding. The provision will appear in all the normal processes of the House, and the House will have the chance to discuss what should be done through that Delegated Legislation Committee.

As for whether 15% of mobile phone customers will inevitably pay roaming charges, that is not quite what I said. I said that mobile network operators that cover 85% of consumers have said that they have no plans to introduce roaming charges. It does not follow that the operators covering the other 15% have specifically said that they do. They may have said nothing at all.

Turning to Northern Ireland, I said that there is a legitimate concern about inadvertent roaming, and there are measures that can be taken. Those measures are already reflected in the EU regulation, the key parts of which that we can replicate we seek to replicate. We will ask operators to do all that they can to prevent inadvertent roaming, and there are several ways in which they might do so. Exactly how they do so will of course be a matter for them.

Finally, I suppose that I should give SNP Members some credit. At least they are clear about what they think of Brexit. They do not want it, and I understand that. Unfortunately for them, however, the people of the United Kingdom, voting as the United Kingdom, decided in the majority that they wanted to leave the European Union. This Government intend to honour their decision, as Parliament said that it would, but there are consequences to a no-deal exit from the European Union that the Government seek to mitigate, and this is one of the instruments by which we seek to do so.

**John Howell** (Henley) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that consumer protection is behind his announcement today and that that has been the great strength of the way in which he has approached this issue?

**Jeremy Wright:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who is right. The Government have a responsibility, where we can, to continue consumer protection measures that currently reside in European law but that we think are sensible and desirable and that we will transfer into our own law in the event of our departure. Of course, as he will know, if there is a deal that includes an implementation period, the position will continue exactly as it is now during that period, which is one reason why such an implementation period and such a deal are desirable and one reason why it would be good for the Opposition to take their responsibilities seriously in this regard.

**Thangam Debbonaire** (Bristol West) (Lab): The Secretary of State says that the Government intend to lay the provision as a statutory instrument and that it will therefore be debated in the normal way. However, he will surely know that an enormous backlog of statutory instruments must be passed by 29 March and that appropriate levels of scrutiny will be challenged. Knowing that we lack the time to scrutinise every single statutory instrument in time for Brexit, what words of comfort can he possibly have for consumers in my constituency?

**Jeremy Wright:** I am unsure what the hon. Lady is suggesting. Is she suggesting that the Government should operate by fiat and pass the measure without consulting Parliament at all? I do not think that that would be the right way forward, even if it were feasible. This matter can be addressed by statutory instrument, and the Government intend to do so. We chose to use the affirmative procedure so that the House will have the opportunity to discuss the matter. It would seem that I am being criticised by the SNP for not allowing enough debate and by Labour for allowing too much.

**Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): There is a sense of groundhog day when Members on the Treasury Bench who voted for the deal face complaints from those who voted against it about the prospect of no deal. Will the Secretary of State update the House on what discussions the Government have actually had with mobile network operators about getting a resolution to this issue, rather than just playing politics?

**Jeremy Wright:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend, because I forgot to say in response to the hon. Member for West Bromwich East, who was concerned that the Department had not had such conversations, that we have had discussions with network operators to ensure that we understand their intentions and to talk about what they will do next. Of course, what they decide to do will in the end be a matter for them because, as I have explained, it is not possible for the UK Government to restrict the activities of European mobile network operators. However, they have made their views clear, and the Government are doing what we can to smooth the path of a no-deal exit, but we would all agree that it is better to avoid one. The best way to do that is to vote for a deal, and that is what my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) is doing. Let us have a bit of company from Opposition Members.

**Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): If there is no deal, it will be because the Government have made a conscious choice to go down that route.

Has the Secretary of State attempted to assess the cost implications if some of those companies that say they have no plans at present to introduce roaming charges do, indeed, do so? Has he assessed the associated costs of losing the European health insurance card, of difficulties in securing travel insurance and of the visa charges that have been mentioned? How much will that cost British consumers going on holiday?

**Jeremy Wright:** The costs of health and travel insurance are a little beyond the ambit of this urgent question, but I repeat the point that what the Government can do is to ensure that any additional costs to consumers that occur as a result of a no-deal Brexit—we fervently hope to avoid that eventuality—are limited in any way that the Government can properly limit them. The best way we can do that is to make sure that consumers know when they have reached a certain point of spending so that they can make their own judgment on whether they wish to go beyond that point. The real concern that consumers generally express is that they do not know when they are running up these very large bills while using their data abroad, which is precisely what we seek to avoid. We have chosen exactly the same point at which to make that notification as already exists in the EU regulation.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): My right hon. and learned Friend will be aware that, across the world, many comms companies are monopolies. Despite that, roaming charges have been abolished across the world—it is not limited to the European Union. Does he agree that, actually, this is an opportunity for consumers in the UK to get an even better deal as we leave the European Union?

**Jeremy Wright:** My hon. Friend makes the fair point that by the operation of the market that exists in this country, even if it may not exist everywhere else, consumers will be able to make a choice. It may be that some mobile network operators will choose not to impose mobile roaming charges and others choose to do so, in which case the consumer can make a judgment about the importance of this matter.

**Ian C. Lucas** (Wrexham) (Lab): Have the Government not already had an opportunity to put their deal to the Commons and failed dismally to get the support of even their own Back Benchers? Why do not the Government look seriously at the Leader of the Opposition's proposal today to seek consensus and avoid no deal?

**Jeremy Wright:** As the hon. Gentleman knows, the invitation to the Leader of the Opposition to engage in constructive discussions was offered some considerable time ago. Of course the Government will consider what the Leader of the Opposition says, but if we are to avoid no deal, the way to do it is to get a deal. We will continue to discuss how we might do that with the Leader of the Opposition, but in the end, every single Member on both sides of the House, if they dislike the consequences of no deal, has a responsibility to decide that they will personally take responsibility for doing what they can to prevent it.

**Mike Wood** (Dudley South) (Con): I know my right hon. and learned Friend will not be tempted into offering legal advice on the Floor of the House, but what protection might be available to consumers and businesses who entered a contract on the basis of free calls, texts and data while roaming if operators are tempted to change the terms of those contracts mid-term?

**Jeremy Wright:** My hon. Friend is right that I have a natural reluctance to offer legal advice not only on the hoof but for nothing. My understanding, and I will write to him after making sure my understanding is correct, is that changes in contractual terms during the term of a contract give the consumer the right to exit that contract.

**Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): The Secretary of State needs to remember that the Government's deal was voted down across this House, by two thirds, so it is no good coming here to lecture the Opposition alone. He also needs to understand that the best way to protect consumers who use mobile phones abroad is to look at what is in the letter from the Leader of the Opposition today, because it offers the best way forward to come to a deal and protect consumers in the future.

**Jeremy Wright:** I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman that we should all do what we can to avoid no deal, but I hope that he also accepts that it would not be responsible for the Government to make no preparations whatsoever for a no-deal eventuality. What we are discussing here, at the request of the hon. Member for West Bromwich East, is a proposal the Government are making, through a statutory instrument, to make provision to ensure ongoing consumer protections in a no-deal scenario. It does not in any way suggest that that is the Government's preferred option, but it does suggest that responsible Governments prepare for possible outcomes.

**Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I commend the Secretary of State for his calm and rational approach to this issue. When I renew my mobile phone contract, I am bombarded with various offers about how cheaply I can use my mobile phone abroad, both in and outside the EU. When I arrive in a foreign country, I am bombarded with text messages from my provider about various packages to make things cheaper. Why would they possibly want to price their customers out of a lucrative market by not continuing these customer-friendly arrangements?

**Jeremy Wright:** My hon. Friend is entirely right about that, and this is exactly why many of those mobile network operators have said that they have no intention of doing as he describes.

**Martin Whitfield** (East Lothian) (Lab): Given the disaster of no deal and the apparent inability of this Government to ensure that our holidaying constituents have the same benefits as they do at the moment, does the Secretary of State agree with Alex Neill, the director of home services at Which?, that companies must be "absolutely clear" about the extra costs they are going to pass on to the consumer? How much notice should they give, as we are only a few weeks away from the Easter holidays?

**Jeremy Wright:** Again, the hon. Gentleman will get agreement from me that it is better to avoid the consequences of no deal. I cannot accept that it is not sensible to prepare for them in case they happen. If he wants to avoid them, there is a sure-fire way to do so. I grant that he is responsible only for his vote, just as I am responsible only for mine, but we should all take responsibility on an individual basis for making sure those consequences do not come about.

**Robert Halfon** (Harlow) (Con): I know we are all worried about roaming overseas, but may I ask my right hon. and learned Friend to look at the signal at home, because too many people do not get a mobile phone signal in our country? Indeed, we cannot even get one in many places in the House of Commons. Will he examine access to roaming charges, as his predecessor, the current Home Secretary, did, and allow people who cannot get a signal to roam on to other domestic networks?

**Jeremy Wright:** I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that. He and I both stood for election on a manifesto that committed us to reach 95% of the UK landmass with a mobile phone signal. I am determined to ensure that we meet that target, and to do so we will rule nothing out that may achieve our objective.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I have quite a lot of time for the Secretary of State, but if our Front-Bench team had not asked this urgent question, we would not know what was going on. He may not know this, but I am very popular with my Whips; I spend a lot of time in Committee Rooms upstairs dealing with statutory instruments relating to the withdrawal from the EU. These are little rooms, where measures are quickly pushed through; Ministers gabble through as fast as they can and the scrutiny is deplorable. Let me mention two issues we dealt with recently. The first was insurance for uninsured drivers, where the measure went through the other day and people will not be insured when they go to Europe. The second was air safety, and the Minister gabbled through without knowing the details. This is about parliamentary sovereignty. Today, the Secretary of State says the backdrop is that we all have a vote, so why is the rumour running round Westminster today that the Prime Minister has reneged on the vote next week?

**Jeremy Wright:** First, let me say that the respect is entirely mutual, not least because the hon. Gentleman has a well-deserved reputation as a scrutineer of legislation in this House; as he says, he does it a lot. The point here is that there has been no attempt to hide this; we are talking about a statutory instrument presented to the House so that it can consider it in the usual way. When it gets to the point of considering the statutory instrument, the House will of course have to decide how long it wants to take over it, but the objective is not to hide it; the objective is to make use of the powers in the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, which Parliament decided we should have, to correct deficiencies that arise as a consequence of our EU departure. We are doing it here to make provision for what would happen in a no-deal exit and to make sure that consumer protections we can roll over, we do roll over. I hope that will command the support of the House.

**Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): May I press the Secretary of State on no deal? What binding commitments has he demanded of telecoms companies so that our consumers are not ripped off this summer by higher charges?

**Jeremy Wright:** Again, I should set out what I think the position is. Were we to say to mobile network operators in this country, “You may not impose roaming charges on your customers who travel to the European Union,” that could not prevent European mobile network operating companies from charging UK mobile network operating companies money, and that money would have to be paid by somebody. If we say to the mobile network operators in this country that they may not pass that charge on to their roaming customers, they will undoubtedly pass it on to all their other customers instead. The problem is that, when we are outside the European Union, as we will be, we are no longer beneficiaries of the European Union regulation. We are taking as many elements of the regulation as we can and transferring them into domestic law. That is sensible planning and I hope that the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues will support it.

**Nic Dakin** (Scunthorpe) (Lab): The Secretary of State just said that we are no longer beneficiaries of EU regulation. It was not until the EU acted that the mobile companies got rid of the dreaded mobile roaming charges. How many mobile companies have come to the Secretary of State and said that they will voluntarily not put these charges on to consumers?

**Jeremy Wright:** On the hon. Gentleman’s last point, I said that 85% of consumers are covered by mobile network operators that have said they have no intention of reintroducing charges. What he says is undoubtedly and self-evidently true: if a country is not a member of the European Union, it does not benefit from provisions that cover members of the European Union. The hon. Gentleman will recall that there was a debate in 2016 that took us some time, and these arguments were deployed on both sides. The UK electorate made a decision and we are enacting that decision. In the process, if there are consumer protections that we can and should continue, that is what we intend to do. That is what the measure is about.

**Hugh Gaffney** (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): Will there be an EU vote next week and an opportunity to discuss mobile roaming charges?

**Jeremy Wright:** As far as I can tell, we are discussing an urgent question about whether mobile roaming charges will apply after our departure from the EU. I will repeat what I have said already: we should all want, when we have the opportunity, to exercise our democratic rights to prevent no deal and vote for a deal instead. If that does not happen for any reason and no deal occurs, the Government intend to be ready for it. We intend to give consumers the protection that we still can and look forward to the Opposition’s support in doing so.

**Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The abolition of roaming charges was just one of the ways in which the European Union stood up to the tech giants in the interests of ordinary consumers. Given the

Government’s absolute reluctance to do the same—they are only now looking to address online harm and are still completely ignoring algorithmic control and data exploitation—will the Secretary of State commit to matching evolving European Union tech regulation, or explain why not?

**Jeremy Wright:** I am afraid I do not accept the hon. Lady’s premise. It is not true that the Government have only now started to talk about online harms: we produced a Green Paper on internet safety some considerable time ago and we have talked about it repeatedly. The hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson) and I have discussed exactly the tone of the Government’s likely response and the hon. Lady will see a White Paper shortly. I am sure she would expect that we approach this subject in the proper way, so that when we produce the actions that we intend to take they stick, have effect, are robust and achieve what she and I both want to see.

**Dr David Drew** (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Given that an affirmative statutory instrument can allow only a vote for or against it, will the Secretary of State give the Opposition early notice of what is in that SI to see how the Opposition can improve on what is being put forward?

**Jeremy Wright:** As the hon. Gentleman knows, SIs are laid before the debate so that Members of the House can consider them. In this instance, he has had a fairly substantial sneak preview because much of what I have said will be the content of that statutory instrument, but he will certainly be able to see it before the debate occurs. I hope that that will give him the opportunity to see that it is sensibly based and demands his support.

**Mr Paul Sweeney** (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Is it not the case that this Government are, yet again, trying to hold Parliament to ransom by threatening a no deal when it is in their gift to rule it out immediately, and they should do that, as it would be an act of criminal negligence on their part to proceed with a no-deal situation? That is the reality that we are facing. No one in this country—or certainly a majority in this country did not vote to roll back the European Union’s progress on abolishing roaming charges. This Government should immediately look to compromise with Parliament to reach an agreement that is practical, instead of prioritising the integrity of the Tory party over the national interest. Is that not exactly what this Government are doing?

**Jeremy Wright:** No.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): First, let me thank the Minister for his answers. Norway and Liechtenstein have so-called free roaming agreements in place already, so it can happen. He referred to steps taken to address roaming charges for consumers in Northern Ireland and the close proximity of the Republic of Ireland. Will he confirm the steps that consumers in Northern Ireland must undertake, and are the Republic of Ireland and the EU open to finding an agreement?

**Jeremy Wright:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question. As he says, this is a real concern, but it is one that other places have also wrestled with and found practical solutions to. I believe that the same

thing can be done on the Northern Ireland-Republic of Ireland border. It will be up to each of the mobile network operators to speak to their customers about exactly how this should be done. What we can do in government, and seek to do through this statutory instrument, is place on them the obligation to do so, so that people are not accidentally caught by what would be, again, an undesirable scenario in which this kind of accidental roaming might take place. If he will forgive me, I will not set out the details for each individual mobile network operator. We set the expectation and then each operator must speak to their customers about it.

## Business of the House

11.22 am

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

**The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom):** The business for next week is as follows:

MONDAY 11 FEBRUARY—Second Reading of the Financial Services (Implementation of Legislation) Bill [*Lords*].

TUESDAY 12 FEBRUARY—Remaining stages of the Mental Capacity (Amendment) Bill [*Lords*].

WEDNESDAY 13 FEBRUARY—Tributes to the Clerk of the House, followed by a motion relating to the Securitisation Regulations 2018, followed by a general debate on connecting communities by supporting charities and volunteers.

THURSDAY 14 FEBRUARY—Debate on a motion relating to the UK's withdrawal from the EU.

FRIDAY 15 FEBRUARY—The House will not be sitting.

As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said to the House on 29 January, we will bring a revised deal back to this House for a second meaningful vote as soon as we possibly can. Should that not be possible by 13 February, the Government will table an amendable motion for debate on 14 February. Hon. and right hon. Members will know that the Prime Minister is currently negotiating a revised deal for the UK's departure from the EU. She will provide an update to this House next week and I will make a further business statement if necessary as a consequence of her statement. I will make my usual business statement next Thursday confirming the business for the week commencing 18 February, which will include key Brexit-related statutory instruments.

February is LGBT History Month, during which more than 1,500 events will be taking place across the country—an opportunity to raise awareness and to promote equality and diversity. Finally, for those who follow closely the activities of regular pizza eaters, may I wish everyone a very enjoyable National Pizza Day for Saturday?

**Valerie Vaz:** I am not sure who was eating pizza yesterday at 3.29 pm when the House rose, but I thank the Leader of the House for the business—as I keep saying every week, I think I should thank her, but I am not sure, because there is nothing for the week after, apart from Brexit SIs.

On Wednesday, there will be a general debate, so I am going to ask the Leader of the House if we can have an Opposition day; we certainly deserve one and we could have had one yesterday. But I also want to pay tribute because next Wednesday we are all going to pay tribute to Sir David Natzler, Clerk of the House, and thank him for his 43 years of public service. We welcome the news that our Gracious Sovereign has agreed to the appointment of Dr John Benger as the 51st Clerk of the House. I know that Dr Benger's commitment and that of all the senior Clerks will continue the good work of Sir David in bringing Parliament into the 21st century.

I agree with the Leader of the House: on 29 January, the Prime Minister said:

“if we have not brought a revised deal back to this House by Wednesday 13 February, we will make a statement and, again, table an amendable motion for debate the next day.”—[*Official Report*, 29 January 2019; Vol. 653, c. 671.]

[Valerie Vaz]

The Leader of the House has not quite confirmed this—she could have mentioned it in the business statement. Could she say whether the Prime Minister will be coming back on Wednesday to make a statement? Will this motion be amendable and voteable on?

I am not sure what happens when the Prime Minister is away because they get up to all sorts of Brexit chaos. On zero tariffs, we had the Secretary of State for International Trade saying first that he was going to lay an SI, then he didn't, then he said he was going to discuss it with the Cabinet, then he decided he wasn't going to lay the SI, then he suggested it was going to be added to the Trade Bill. This is the Trade Bill that gives powers to Ministers but there is no policy framework set out in that. The Business Secretary said he would not welcome zero tariffs for all industries, so the two Secretaries of State are saying two different things. Can we have clarity? Which Secretary of State is right? The shadow Secretary of State for International Trade said: "the Secretary of State appears not to understand the basic logic of trade"

negotiations.

"If you have already reduced all your tariffs to zero you have nothing to negotiate with."

Which Secretary of State is right? Could we have a statement from both, or either, on what exactly the Government policy is?

Mr Speaker, I was here earlier and listened to the urgent question you granted on the SI on mobile roaming. I think there is a change in policy because the SI has been laid and the Government impact assessment says that, unless there is a deal, the UK Government cannot unilaterally guarantee surcharge-free roaming for UK consumers travelling to the EU without exposing UK operators to the risk of being obliged to provide roaming services at a loss. So this Government are listening to the mobile phone operators, not to the consumers. I do not recall seeing that on the side of the bus. This is the important bit because there is a slight change of policy. Given that the SI comes into effect the day after exit day, or the day after it is made, can the Leader of the House ensure that the SI is debated on the Floor of the House, and can she guarantee that, if there is no deal, mobile phone operators cannot instigate charges immediately?

It is Time to Talk Day. Everyone should be able to have a conversation about mental health. A YouGov survey for the Prince's Trust has found that the number of young people in the UK who say they do not believe that life is worth living has doubled in the last decade. In the first analysis of its kind, a study published in the journal *Psychiatry Research* found that young people were three to four times more likely to have depression at 18 if they had been exposed to dirtier air at the age of 12. For their sakes, we must act on air quality, which even in Walsall South is over the limit. And may I just ask if the Leader of the House could ask the ministerial cars not to keep their engines running—not to idle while they are waiting for Ministers? This is alarming as 75% of mental health problems begin in childhood or adolescence.

On Monday, we celebrate the International Day of Women and Girls in Science. Both Rosalind Franklin and Jocelyn Bell Burnell made important contributions

to science and they were not awarded Nobel prizes, even though they did the work. It is LGBT History Month and those of us who were councillors in 1988 remember section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988, under which we could not publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality. That was repealed in 2003. At the same time, members of Sinn Féin had to have their voices dubbed by actors when they were interviewed. We have moved on since then, which is why I agreed with the President of the European Council, Donald Tusk, when he said:

"The EU itself is first and foremost a peace project",

and guaranteed the peace process and the Good Friday agreement. Over the last 21 years, a generation of young people have lived in peace in Ireland. There is a special place in heaven for those who want to promote peace—blessed are the peacemakers.

I do not know whether you know this, Mr Speaker, but there is a space on the Government Benches for the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes). He is not in his place because he is at the palace, receiving his knighthood. It is a fantastic story because he started life on a council estate in Woolwich and will now become a knight of the realm. We wish him and his family a very happy day.

**Mr Speaker:** The right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) is unfailingly courteous. He has, in fact, written to me to explain—movingly and manifestly with some regret—his absence from business questions today. He felt that he would have been able to provide the House with a question that was important in terms of substance and beautifully delivered—something that I would not for one moment contradict. We wish him well today, but we hope that he will be back with us next week. I am not sure that we can bear his absence much longer.

**Andrea Leadsom:** I think that everybody would concur; we cannot possibly miss my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) for a further week. I also pass to him our very best wishes and congratulations on becoming a knight of the realm. He is a very good fellow in this place, and a very loyal attendee at business questions.

The hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) asks about the general debate next week. She will have observed that I announced business on the Securitisation Regulations 2018 next Wednesday. That was a request from the Opposition, so I hope that she is pleased that I have been able to find Government time for that debate in the Chamber.

I also congratulate John Benger on his appointment. I was delighted, along with Mr Speaker and the hon. Lady, to be part of the selection panel. We all agree that he will do an excellent job.

The hon. Lady asks about the next steps on Brexit, particularly whether the motion next week will be amendable and voteable. I do want to help the House on this, so let me be absolutely clear: if a deal is brought back for a meaningful vote, yes, the vote to approve the deal will be a motion under section 13(1)(b) of the EU withdrawal Act, and it will be an amendable motion, as it was in January. If we are not able to bring back the revised deal for that second meaningful vote, the business for Thursday, as I announced earlier, will be a debate on a motion relating to the UK's withdrawal from the EU.

The Prime Minister will provide an update to the House next week. If necessary, I will then make a further business statement as a consequence of her statement. As the Prime Minister has said, the motion next week will not be brought back under section 13—there is not a legal requirement to do so—but it is a commitment that the Government have made outside the statutory framework of the EU withdrawal Act. The Government always take seriously the views of this House, and that remains the case on the motion next week, whether it passes with or without amendments. I hope it is clear that, as of now, we will be providing for the House to have a debate next Thursday, whether it is on a meaningful vote or on an amendable, neutral motion.

The hon. Lady asks about the issue of tariffs in a no-deal Brexit. We have just had International Trade questions. I am sure that she will have raised her questions there via Opposition colleagues and received a response. She also mentioned the urgent question on roaming that just took place and has put in a request for that statutory instrument to be debated on the Floor of the House. As always, if she wants to make her request through the usual channels, the Government have been very keen to provide time where there is a reasonable request.

The hon. Lady mentioned the appalling problem of mental health issues among the young, and she is absolutely right to do so, with issues ranging from clean air to excessive use of social media—we have seen only recently the appalling effect that that can have on young people. The Government are committed to doing everything possible to try to resolve the problem of spiralling mental health problems in young people. She specifically asked about ministerial cars' engines running. Ministerial cars' engines are not meant to be kept running, and if hon. Members find that they are, then they should challenge that.

The hon. Lady mentioned that the EU is committed to the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. I would say to her that the United Kingdom is absolutely committed to strengthening further the bonds between all of the four nations of the United Kingdom, and it is this Government who are determined to do everything possible to maintain the Belfast/Good Friday agreement.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I thank the Leader of the House both for her opening statement and for her response to the shadow Leader of the House. I think the position is clear, but this is of course very important in relation to Brexit business, and the right hon. Lady has been, I think, most solicitous in trying to attend to the concerns of the House. Last night, I received notice of the draft business for next week, and I noted with dismay that the scheduled debate on an amendable motion had been removed and that we were in fact due to have a debate on Back-Bench business on Thursday the 14th. I confess that I was very alarmed by that. In so far as that has now been reversed, as in the statement that the Leader of the House has announced, and the debate on an amendable motion will take place, I am greatly heartened by that.

I just want to say to the House, because I think it is very important that there is clarity, that I hope the position reflects—I think it does—the commitments made in the Chamber. On 29 January, at column 671, the Prime Minister said:

“Furthermore, if we have not brought a revised deal back to this House by Wednesday 13 February, we will make a statement and, again, table an amendable motion for debate the next day.”—[*Official Report*, 29 January 2019; Vol. 653, c. 671.]

Two days later, at the business question, the Leader of the House—responding, I believe, to the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan)—reiterated the position by saying:

“We will, of course, have the opportunity to enjoy the Prime Minister coming back for a second meaningful vote as soon as possible. Just to be clear, if we have not brought a revised deal back to this House by Wednesday 13 February, we will make a statement and again table an amendable motion for debate the next day.”—[*Official Report*, 31 January 2019; Vol. 653, c. 975.]

As recently as yesterday, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office, the right hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr Lidington), deputising for the Prime Minister, said very specifically:

“She”—

the Prime Minister—

“said that the meaningful vote itself would be brought back as soon as possible, and if it were not possible to bring it back by the 13th, next Wednesday, the Government would then make a statement and table a motion for debate the next day.”—[*Official Report*, 6 February 2019; Vol. 654, c. 322.]

So I think we have the commitment that had previously been made, and I believe that it is the full intention of the Government to honour that commitment. But the dependability of statements made and commitments given, whatever people's views on the merits of the issues, is absolutely critical if we are to retain or, where lost, to restore trust, so there can of course be no resiling from the commitment which I think is explicit and which has been made: no dubiety, no backsliding, no doubt. I think that is clear.

**Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con):** It seems clear to me that we are simply not going to be able to get the primary and secondary legislation required through by 29 March. However, could we, as soon as time allows, have a debate on the operation of Home Office rules on TB certification and access to approved testing clinics? A young family in my constituency are facing imminently being torn apart because of entirely illogical and unreasonable application of these rules. Despite my constituent having had an X-ray and obtained a TB certificate, at her expense, at a UK hospital, she has been told that it will not count because it is not an approved centre, but the Home Office is telling her that there are no approved centres within the United Kingdom. To add further illogicality, if she returned to her home country of Canada to reapply, she would not need a TB certificate because it is more than six months since she was in a TB-prone country. I am very grateful to a Home Office team for agreeing to meet me to look at this case in detail. However, I do think that it raises a wider issue about applications and access to TB centres in the United Kingdom.

**Andrea Leadsom:** My hon. Friend raises a very concerning case on her constituent's behalf, and I have great sympathy for her constituent in that situation. I understand that my hon. Friend has rightly written to my right hon. Friend the Minister for Immigration, asking her to look into the matter. I understand that my right hon. Friend is seeking an urgent clarification of the situation, and of course if I can be of any help, my hon. Friend can always write to me.

**Pete Wishart** (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week. Unusually, there has been quite a bit of excitement about the contents of today's business statement, with the expectation of an announcement of what happens next in this chaotic Brexit process. The Leader of the House has not disappointed; we will now have the motion on Thursday.

However, I share your concerns, Mr Speaker, because my expectation would be that there would be a statement on Wednesday leading to an amendable motion and a meaningful vote. It is almost certain that that will not be that case—that there will be a general debate, unless the Prime Minister returns with new commitments, as she said, from the European Union. There is as much chance of that happening as of a snowball in hell, so the expectation must surely be that there will be another one of those amendable motions where the Government will simply accept outcomes and decisions of this House that they like and ignore decisions and outcomes that they do not like.

The question therefore is, when will we have meaningful vote 2? When will we be deciding on this? We are out of the European Union in 50 days' time, and we do not know on what basis and whether we are going to have a deal at all. So it is incumbent on the Leader of the House to be abundantly clear today: when is meaningful vote 2, and when will this House decide?

Such were the demands on the working arrangements of the House that yesterday we finished before half-past 3. The rest of next week's business is a curious assortment of uncontentious legislation and general debates. The Leader of the House cancelled the February recess because of what she said were the demands of critical Brexit legislation. Where is the critical Brexit legislation? It is beginning to look more and more as though the cancelling of the February recess was nothing more than a stunt. Countless Tory MPs have been slipped to go on their mid-term holidays. So can the Leader of the House tell us what we will be considering in the week when we were supposed to have the recess?

Lastly, may we have a debate about hell—specifically, on what basis parts of it will be reserved for certain people? If a special place in hell is to be reserved for clueless Brexiteers, Satan is seriously going to have to get into the real estate business. Does this not all just show that the infinite patience demonstrated by the EU in the face of this cluelessness is running out, as the Prime Minister is certain to find out today? We are now 50 days from the departure date and we do not know on what basis we are leaving. No wonder Satan is sharpening those pitchforks.

**Andrea Leadson:** I am very glad that the hon. Gentleman takes these things so seriously; obviously it is a very serious matter, and if he feels it is appropriate to be determining who is going to hell over it, obviously that is a matter for him. I personally do not find it incredibly amusing. I think it is vital that people treat each other personally with courtesy and respect. I have always said that; I continue to think that. It is just not a laughing matter; it is actually rather hateful.

The hon. Gentleman asked some very important questions, and I think I have just set out precisely what is the case, but I will do so again. I think it is unfortunate,

Mr Speaker, that you somewhat muddied the waters by unresponding to the Business of the House statement. I had made it perfectly clear what was the case, and I am perfectly able to do that for myself. I will set it out again for the hon. Gentleman. The Prime Minister is currently—*[Interruption.]* If hon. Members wish to know, they might like to listen. On the other hand, if they want to just yell, that is also fine. The hon. Gentleman asked a question. The Prime Minister is currently negotiating a revised deal, and she will update the House next week—okay? Is that clear? Next week. If necessary, I will make a further business statement, but today's statement is clear that we will meet our commitment—the Prime Minister's commitment—to deliver a debate on an amendable motion next week. If the hon. Gentleman listened to the business statement, he will know that that will be on Thursday.

The hon. Gentleman also asked about this week's business and said that we did not discuss anything. I would just like to point out to him that we had an excellent debate on Monday, when 39 individual Members talked about the importance of sport right across our country in relation to issues such as mental health, reducing obesity and general wellbeing, which are all important matters. On Tuesday, the House debated the police grant and local government finance reports. He may not consider that to be relevant business, but we voted on them and those extremely significant motions have an impact on people in England and right across the United Kingdom. We also discussed some vital subjects in relation to compensation payments for those suffering from mesothelioma and pneumoconiosis. The hon. Gentleman is simply not right to say that we did nothing this week.

The hon. Gentleman is also not right to say that we will be doing nothing during the recess week. He asked again what we will be doing during the period that would have been recess. As I have already said, the business includes some key statutory instruments that are to be debated in the Chamber. He will be aware that Brexit legislation is not a matter only of primary legislation; there are up to 600 pieces of secondary legislation. The House is dealing with those in good order. Over 400 have now been laid, and we remain confident of getting all the statutory instruments that need to be finalised by Brexit day done by then. He should take reassurance from that.

**Mr Speaker:** Colleagues—I address my remarks to colleagues—for the avoidance of doubt, I have not muddied any waters. What I have done is to quote the factual position. Very specifically, I have quoted statements from the Treasury Bench on 29 January, 31 January and 6 February. I know the Leader of the House will be interested in this, because she has just talked about the importance of treating colleagues with respect, which presumably applies to listening to them when they are speaking. The position is extremely clear. I do not try to tell the right hon. Lady how to do her job. I treat her with great courtesy, and I will continue to do so. Nobody is going to tell this Speaker how to stand up for and persistently champion the rights of Parliament. I have done it, I am doing it and I will go on doing it. I could not care less who tries to obstruct me. That is the fact, that is the reality and that is the mission and responsibility of the Speaker of the House of Commons.

**Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger** (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): Now for something completely different, Mr Speaker. [*Laughter.*]

Eastgate, Blackbrook and Holway are names that will not be known to the Leader of the House, but I can tell her that they have the most appalling crime statistics in Somerset, and they come within the county town of Taunton. We need to have a debate on this. There were 5,000 recorded crimes last year, of which very few were cleared up. Half of those crimes are violent and sexual crimes, and the other half involve antisocial behaviour. This affects my constituency enormously. Having had the police figures out this week, may we please have time to debate hotspots that are turning into crime-ridden ghettos before it is too late?

**Andrea Leadsom:** My hon. Friend has raised an incredibly important issue. There is a debate this afternoon on antisocial behaviour, during which I certainly hope he will share his concerns directly with Ministers. He will be aware that there are very concerning rises in certain types of crime, while in other areas the police are doing an excellent job in reducing some of the traditional crimes. Nevertheless, what is important is that the police grant settlement for next year is a significant one, and I hope that he will welcome that news.

**Ian Mearns** (Gateshead) (Lab): I hope I can crave your indulgence, Mr Speaker, because as you will be aware, Back-Bench business and the debates secured by Back Benchers are a highly delicious but very moveable feast. Given the constraints of time today, the second debate scheduled for today on beer taxation and pubs, sponsored by the hon. Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood), has unfortunately had to be withdrawn in order to create time for the first debate.

I would like to give the Leader of the House advance notice that a debate application has been submitted for the 20th anniversary of the publication of the Macpherson inquiry report on the murder of Stephen Lawrence, which is on 24 February. If the House is sitting, a debate on 21 February, if possible, would be very welcome. Additionally, may I remind the Leader of the House that 28 February is the day before St David's Day? If possible, a debate on Welsh affairs on 28 February would be very welcome. Also, 7 March is the day before International Women's Day, and we have a very heavily subscribed application for an International Women's Day debate.

Mr Speaker, the Backbench Business Committee has been forced to press the pause button. This is not about article 50; this is about applications for debates on supplementary estimates. The supplementary estimates have not yet been published, and we can hardly invite people to apply for a debate on something that has not yet occurred. We anticipate that the supplementary estimates will be published on 11 February, and we are therefore extending the deadline for applications on supplementary estimates debates to 15 February.

May I crave the indulgence of the House, and the Leader of the House, again? I have a constituent with a complex variety of significant health issues. Her name is Ms Christine Carr of Dunston, Gateshead. On 14 January I wrote to a Minister at the Department for Work and Pensions about Ms Carr not having received any benefits since 9 January, and she is still not in receipt of those

benefits, despite the DWP being subject to a court order ordering it not to bother her any more for at least a year after her previous employment and support allowance assessment. She has all those complex medical needs, and has been without money since 9 January. Please will the Leader of the House intervene with the Minister of State at the DWP on my behalf?

**Andrea Leadsom:** First, I congratulate the hon. Gentleman, because he always comes to the Chamber with a clear and marshalled list, which is incredibly helpful when trying to decide on the business. I am incredibly sympathetic to his request for a debate on the Macpherson report, and for debates on Welsh affairs and International Women's Day, and I will certainly try to accommodate him.

The hon. Gentleman raises an incredibly important constituency issue. He will know that oral questions to the Department for Work and Pensions are next Monday, but if he wishes to write to me with the details of his constituency case, I will be happy to take it up with the Department.

**Mr Peter Bone** (Wellingborough) (Con): The Leader of the House referred to a statement next week from the Prime Minister, followed by a supplementary business statement on an amendable motion. I guess that the Business of the House motion could not be moved until Wednesday afternoon, which gives very little time for amendments to be tabled for debate on Thursday. Will there be other arrangements so that amendments can be tabled in advance?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I always listen carefully to the views of right hon. and hon. Members, but as people will appreciate, we have set out that there will be an amendable motion, and we will bring that forward as soon as possible to enable amendments to be tabled.

**Mr Chris Leslie** (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): Can the Leader of the House elaborate further on the good point raised by the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone)? She will know that, to be frank, there have been trust issues with the Government on this, and opportunities for debate have been tabled and then pulled. Can she pin this down precisely? She is not saying that this will be a 90-minute motion in the standard form of a normal Government motion, so presumably the debate will be all day on 14 February. If so, will she confirm that the business of the House motion necessary to enable that will be tabled on Wednesday 13 February? If not on Wednesday, then when?

**Andrea Leadsom:** As I have tried to set out, if we are able to bring back a second meaningful vote, the vote to approve the deal will be on a motion under section 13(1)(b) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, and it will be an amendable motion, as it was in January. Any business motion that may be necessary will be tabled in the usual way, and will be debatable and amendable in accordance with the usual rules of the House. If there is no revised deal, the Prime Minister has set out that she will provide an update to the House next week, and if necessary I will provide a revised business statement. If there is not a meaningful vote, the debate next week will not be on a motion under section 13, but because of a commitment that the Government have made outside

[*Andrea Leadsom*]

the statutory framework of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. Any motion brought forward then will be tabled in good time for right hon. and hon. Members to amend it.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): At the recent British Education Awards, a student from Harrow College in my constituency, Venelina Urlachka, was awarded one of the top prizes. She achieved an Access to Higher Education Diploma in Business with a distinction. She has now not only gone on to an internship but a job. May we have a debate in Government time on the importance of further education in encouraging and enabling young people, who possibly do not want to go to university, to further their careers and ensure that they get a decent education and good job opportunities in later life?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I congratulate my hon. Friend's constituent. That sounds like an excellent achievement. He is absolutely right. The Government want to support those who wish to go on to university and those who prefer to go on to an apprenticeship or further education in an FE college. It is fantastic to see that not only are there record rates of 18-year-olds getting into university, but that we are committing millions of extra money to help teachers and leaders prepare to deliver T-levels, which will give young people the choice of a more academic or technical-based education.

**Tracy Brabin** (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): Last night there was a very substantial explosion in Batley, resulting in the attendance of 10 fire engines and a tri-service response. Five people are currently in hospital receiving treatment. Is it possible to have a debate on developing further capacity for West Yorkshire fire and rescue when responding to large-scale emergencies, against an uncertain financial backdrop post 2020?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am sure all hon. Members were very sorry to hear about that explosion. We should all pay tribute to those who go out and deal with the consequences, and send our very best wishes to those still recovering from that explosion. The hon. Lady is absolutely right. We owe a great debt to our fire and rescue services. They do a fantastic job. She might like to seek an Adjournment debate so she can talk about the specific requirements in her fire and rescue area.

**Rachel Maclean** (Redditch) (Con): My constituency is just down the road from Birmingham. It has very strong links with the West Midlands Combined Authority, the wider region and the city of Birmingham. May we have a debate about the regeneration of the area under the Conservative Mayor, Andy Street? Can we include in that debate the role of the Commonwealth games? I am a newly elected vice-chair for the all-party group on the Commonwealth games, and we want to see how the games can advance this agenda.

**Andrea Leadsom:** First, I wish my hon. Friend every success with the new all-party group. I think there will be great interest in it. It is fantastic that in Birmingham company formations have risen by 10%. The city is thriving under the new Conservative Mayor, Andy Street.

There is a new headquarters for HSBC. Birmingham is the test city for the 5G mobile network and, as my hon. Friend says, it will be the host of the 2022 Commonwealth games. I know she and I share the Government's belief in extending growth and opportunity right across the United Kingdom.

**Kevin Brennan** (Cardiff West) (Lab): May we have a debate on Facebook? This week we learned that the brilliant political comedian Matt Forde had his ads banned from Facebook because his show is called "Brexit through the gift shop". Should Facebook not be more concerned with blocking the fake news and Russian bots that are undermining our democracy, rather than being a slave to an algorithm that cannot recognise a simple joke?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman raises a really important point. We are all so deeply concerned about the way that social media giants are pushing harmful content to those who really must not see it. They should be doing the exact opposite to that. Yet, at the same time, because of the technical way in which these things work, they are unable to tell the difference between a joke and a piece of serious content. The Government are clear that much more needs to be done to tackle online harms. We are committed to introducing legislation. He will be aware that we will be bringing forward a White Paper soon to look very closely at what more needs to be done. In the meantime, the social media giants are being told very firmly that they need to take more responsibility for what they allow.

**Dr Matthew Offord** (Hendon) (Con): Since 2010, the national ophthalmology database has analysed the outcomes of cataract surgery—the most commonly performed operation in the NHS. The NOD enables a cataract surgeon to compare performances and allows the patients to do the same, while driving continuous improvement. The funding for that, from the Healthcare Quality Improvement Partnership, will cease in August 2019. The NOD currently costs £400,000 per year and requires an additional £100,000 to include age-related macular degeneration and glaucoma. Will a Minister come to the Dispatch Box to answer the request from the Royal College of Ophthalmologists for direct funding from NHS England to allow the NOD to deliver on the aim of the NHS's big data, driving the transformation of healthcare in the United Kingdom?

**Andrea Leadsom:** My hon. Friend raises a very important subject. He will be aware that more than 300,000 cataract operations are carried out every year in England alone. He will appreciate that NHS England's funding decisions are a matter for it, but I certainly welcome all action to improve outcomes for patients, including in the very important area of eye disease. I strongly recommend that he seeks an Adjournment debate so that he can raise this really important issue directly with Ministers.

**John Cryer** (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Further to the question from the hon. Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger), I and others were granted a Backbench business debate in Westminster Hall two weeks ago on knife crime, but the demand for time way outstripped supply. There were lots of speakers who could not be called or who could not attend the

debate. Like the hon. Gentleman, I think that there should be a full debate in Government time specifically on violent crime and knife crime, but failing that, could we have a statement from the Home Secretary on this wave of violent crime, which has swept London and the rest of England?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman raises one of the most significant issues that is raised at Business questions every week, and he is absolutely right to do so. The appalling problem of knife crime is something that the Government are absolutely committed to tackling. He will have seen that the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins)—the crime and vulnerabilities Minister—has just taken her place and has heard what he had to say. I know that she has undertaken to update the House on a regular basis.

The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Government have published the serious violence strategy and established a serious violence taskforce, and that the Offensive Weapons Bill is passing through Parliament in order that we can do much more to try to keep young people away from a life of gang and knife crime, which leads to such appalling outcomes for them and their families.

**James Cartlidge** (South Suffolk) (Con): I understand that the Government will shortly be publishing their proposed schedule of tariffs in the event of no deal. Does my right hon. Friend anticipate that that would be accompanied, if not at least by an oral statement, by a general debate? Whatever one thinks of the desirability of that outcome, I am sure that she agrees that for our business, farmers and consumers, it raises incredibly complex logistical questions to which we would all like answers.

**Andrea Leadsom:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right that this is an incredibly important area. He will be aware that we have just had Department for International Trade questions at which the subject was raised. There will be a further opportunity next Thursday, when we have the debate on withdrawal from the European Union, and I encourage him to raise it again then.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I understand that the Leader of the House's job is to look after Government business and represent the Government's view in the House of Commons, so will she guide me? I want an early debate where I can vote on the future existence of the Bank of England, because I have tried in two Question Times to get the Chancellor and the Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade even to mention the fact that the Bank of England has done a really thorough report stating that every region—every town and city in this country—will be dramatically poorer outside Europe. I want a debate on that so that we can grassroots the penalties of leaving Europe and have that clear, and have a Minister who would talk about the Bank of England. If it is not good enough to write independent reports, we should get rid of it.

**Andrea Leadsom:** First, I think the Bank of England is an incredibly valuable and valued institution. Its role, of course, is to prepare for all eventualities, as indeed is the job of Government—to be prepared for all eventualities.

What the Bank of England does in its forecast is look at different outcomes in order that it can take measures as necessary to protect the UK economy and UK jobs and prosperity, and it is right that it does that. The hon. Gentleman will, of course, have the opportunity to raise the question of Bank of England forecasts in the debate next Thursday.

**Chris Green** (Bolton West) (Con): A couple of years ago, Bolton Council's Labour leadership handed over £300,000 of taxpayers' money to now bankrupt Asons Solicitors. For the second year running, Labour has chosen to dodge auditing that handover of cash and a vast swathe of other moneys. Can we have a debate on the council's lack of openness over how it handles taxpayers' money?

**Andrea Leadsom:** My hon. Friend is right to highlight the need for local authority finances to be properly interrogated and for councils to take swift action to address any issues raised by auditors, but, as he will be aware, internal audit arrangements are a matter for each council to consider as part of its own governance arrangements. I am sure he will agree, however, that elected councillors must be transparent about financial arrangements, which are integral to local accountability, and I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate or to raise his concerns directly with Ministers in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

**Dr Philippa Whitford** (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): The Government's negative resolution statutory instrument on human medicines contains a serious shortage protocol to allow pharmacists to dispense a completely different drug in times of shortage but—critically—without consulting the prescriber, as is the rule now. It is clearly to prepare for drug shortages after Brexit. Does the Leader of the House not agree that such a radical change of medical responsibility requires debate and scrutiny?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Lady raises an important point, and I am aware of this long-standing protocol. She might be aware that the official Opposition have prayed against the human medicines regulations 2019 and that therefore there will almost certainly be the opportunity to debate them. She could also raise the matter at Health and Social Care questions on Tuesday 19 February.

**Robert Halfon** (Harlow) (Con): Last week, the *Harlow Star* newspaper closed its doors for the last time, meaning that for the first time since 1953 our town does not have a local newspaper. Can we have an urgent statement on the support for and revival of local newspapers? Thousands of elderly people will now be disfranchised from local news, despite there being an excellent online newspaper called *Your Harlow*.

**Andrea Leadsom:** My right hon. Friend raises an important matter on behalf of his constituents, and I am sure many hon. Members will have a lot of sympathy. High-quality journalism is vital to our democracy, and I am very sorry to hear about the closure of the *Harlow Star*. He might be aware that the Government have commissioned Dame Frances Cairncross, supported by an expert advisory panel, to conduct an independent review of press

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sustainability, and we expect the report to be published soon. Once it has been published, the Government will respond in due course.

**Nic Dakin** (Scunthorpe) (Lab): When we finish early, as we did yesterday, it raises the question of whether the Government are using the time available effectively. Can we have a statement on how the cancelling of the recess has affected staff and impacted on their caring responsibilities and other reasonable plans? What support and mitigation are the authorities putting in place to support the staff who do so much to support us?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise that question. I am assured that the House staff—those who provide us with a range of support in this place, from Clerk advice and digital support to support in the Tea Rooms, cleaning and so on—are almost all unaffected. If they have holidays booked or childcare or other arrangements they need to make, they will be able to continue to fulfil their responsibilities, so I am reassured by the House authorities that it will not impact significantly on the day-to-day work of those who support us.

**John Howell** (Henley) (Con): At the recent Council of Europe meeting, we heard details of how sharia law courts are being used in the UK to dispense alternative dispute resolutions, which particularly disadvantage women. Can we have a debate on that to determine how to deal with it without driving them underground?

**Andrea Leadsom:** That sounds very concerning. I encourage my hon. Friend to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can raise the issue directly with Ministers.

**Marsha De Cordova** (Battersea) (Lab): On Tuesday evening, a 19-year-old was fatally stabbed on the Surrey Lane estate in Battersea. That was another life lost, and another tragic example of how our young people are being failed. Figures published today by the Office for National Statistics show that the level of fatal knife crime is at its highest since records began. We cannot escape the fact that cuts in police, youth services and education budgets are feeding this rise in knife crime. In Wandsworth, the Tory council has cut youth services by just under £2 million. These cuts have consequences. May we have an urgent statement from the Home Secretary on the record rise in violent crime?

**Andrea Leadsom:** First, let me say how sorry I am to hear about yet another tragic knife-related death. The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise it here, and she will know that the Government are doing everything possible to try to tackle the increase in knife crime. She will be aware of, for example, the recently announced £200 million youth endowment fund to support children and young people at risk, and the significant new early intervention youth fund to encourage young people away from a life of knife crime and gang membership. However, she also raised the issue of police funding. She must ask herself why she did not support the additional funds—up to £970 million—for police budgets. If she feels that this is such a significant issue, she and her party must support increased resources for policing.

**Mike Wood** (Dudley South) (Con): Given the pressures on today's Order Paper to which the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) referred, might the Leader of the House find an opportunity—the earliest opportunity—for a general debate on beer taxation and pubs?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I believe that my hon. Friend chairs the all-party parliamentary beer group, so I well understand his disappointment at the decision to postpone that debate. I assure him that I will seek another opportunity for a debate on the subject.

**Angela Crawley** (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): Delays in pension reforms will mean that low-paid workers, typically women with multiple part-time jobs, will be worse off in retirement by tens of thousands of pounds. In 2017, the Government promised to boost the pensions of low-paid earners by scrapping the lower earnings limit, but they have given no concrete date for the change. May we have a debate in Government time on bringing forward that change?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Lady will be aware that the Government have sought to improve the incomes of pensioners and those on fixed lower incomes. She will also be aware that questions to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions will take place on Monday 11 February, and I suggest that she raises her point then.

**Helen Goodman** (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Yesterday, the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris), was unable to tell the Procedure Committee whether we would scrutinise 50 or 100 affirmative procedure statutory instruments. The front page of the *Financial Times* says that businesses are up in arms because the Government have failed to get the trade treaties through. And where is the Agriculture Bill? Its Committee stage ended before Christmas, and massive uncertainty is being created for farmers.

**Andrea Leadsom:** As I explained to the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), we have laid more than 400 of the up to 600 statutory instruments that need to be delivered by 29 March, and we are confident that all of them will be completed by Brexit day.

The hon. Lady also asked about Brexit primary legislation. All the Bills that need Royal Assent by the date of our leaving the EU will achieve it, and the Bills that do not will achieve it within the timescales that are required for them. All those Bills continue their passage through both Houses, and I remain confident that we shall have passed all the necessary legislation by the date of leaving the EU.

**Jim Fitzpatrick** (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): There have been several major and, indeed, tragic fires in recent days. Has the Leader of the House had any indication from Ministers at the Home Office, which is responsible for fire policy, or at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, which is responsible for building regulations, that they may wish to make a statement or, better still, find time for a debate on the value and advantages of fire sprinkler systems?

**Andrea Leadsom:** As the hon. Gentleman will know, we have had a number of debates in which the merits of fire sprinkler systems have been discussed, and there is no clear picture. In some cases they are incredibly helpful; in others they are not. I encourage the hon. Gentleman to seek an Adjournment debate so that Ministers can update him on exactly what the thinking is now.

**Jo Platt** (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): Last month I secured a Westminster Hall debate on social mobility to which the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), responded. During that debate, it became increasingly clear that if we are to transform the life chances of people in my town and others, there must be a whole-system, whole-Government approach. Social mobility is not just about schools; it is relevant to the remits of the Department for Transport, the Department of Health and Social Care, the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. May we have a debate in Government time on the cross-departmental organisation of social mobility to help areas to develop their local action plans?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Lady has raised the incredibly important—if not the most important—issue of how we can tackle and improve levels of social mobility. I am currently chairing an interministerial cross-Whitehall group that is considering the early years—the period between conception and the age of two—which is often held to be one of the most critical periods in which subsequent social mobility can be determined. The hon. Lady raises a valuable issue, and I encourage her to seek a Westminster Hall or Back-Bench debate so that all Members can present their own proposals.

**Paula Sherriff** (Dewsbury) (Lab): As the House will know, I have never shied away from dealing with issues that some people might consider taboo, and today I want to talk about incontinence. Last Friday, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin), I met Martin Kilgallon, who represents The Whole Autism Family. He told us that some parents face severe hardship because if their children need to use incontinence pads, they are allowed a maximum of four per day. There are limits to the number of pads that people can receive, largely owing to funding constraints. May we have a debate in Government time on that issue, and on maintaining the dignity of people who need incontinence aids?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Lady raises an issue that is critical for those who suffer from incontinence—it is the most awful thing to experience. She is absolutely right to say that we need to do everything we can to support those people. As she will know, Health and Social Care questions will take place on 19 February. I urge her to raise the issue directly with Ministers then, or perhaps to seek an Adjournment debate.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I often refer to matters of worldwide importance in the House, sometimes during business questions. It seems that every week we bring to the House something new and, unfortunately, something very tragic.

On Monday morning, Amnesty International reported that Boko Haram had killed at least 60 people in a “devastating” attack on the north-eastern Nigerian town

of Rann. Fighters on motorcycles drove through the town setting houses on fire, randomly shooting and killing people who had been left behind. Amnesty described the attack as one of the deadliest assaults by the extremist group in its almost decade-long insurgency. Given the importance of the matter, may we have a debate or a statement?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman has raised a horrifying problem. He often refers to the abuse of people across the world for their racial or religious beliefs, and he is absolutely right to do so. I pay tribute to Amnesty for its work in highlighting such problems, and I encourage the hon. Gentleman to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can raise this awful situation directly with Ministers.

**Thangam Debbonaire** (Bristol West) (Lab): The Leader of the House will know that I have been pressing her on missing legislation. My hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) has already mentioned the missing Agriculture Bill, and the Fisheries Bill is also missing, but what about those statutory instruments? The right hon. Lady says that she is confident of getting through 200 of them before Brexit day, but even with my simple mathematical skills, I can work out that that would involve getting through about seven per sitting day. The SIs are overwhelmingly concentrated in four Departments, and as Opposition Whip for one of those Departments, I can tell her that I have several box files of SIs that have yet to be scheduled. Why is she so confident that we are going to manage to do this, with proper scrutiny, in time for 29 March?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I say again that we have up to 600 Brexit SIs. In this Session we have introduced a whole new system of monitoring, specifically to ensure that we are in control of the order and flow of SIs, that we get the job done in time, that the quality of impact assessments and explanatory memorandums is absolutely right, and that the SIs get the required scrutiny of this House. I can only reiterate that we are confident that we will be able to get the necessary legislation through by 29 March.

**Conor McGinn** (St Helens North) (Lab): It is worrying but necessary that all horse-racing in Britain has been cancelled today after vaccinated horses were found to have equine influenza. Will the Leader of the House join me in commending the British Horseracing Authority for its swift action, and can she assure me that Ministers at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport are treating this as a priority and will come to the House to make a statement if necessary?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to pay tribute to the British Horseracing Authority. It has taken swift action following this concerning development, and it was right to cancel all horse-racing today. I can tell him that DEFRA is of course monitoring the situation carefully, and I will certainly pass on his view that a Minister might need to make a statement to the House, should there be any further developments.

**Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): An increasing number of my constituents are contacting me to express their concern about the potential disruption to essential medical supplies post Brexit. The Leader of

[Patricia Gibson]

the House will be aware that there are now only 50 days until our exit date, so will she make a statement on what contingency plans are in place if supply chains should fail, and on what steps are being taken to ensure that pharmaceutical companies are adequately prepared?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Lady is quite right to raise this issue. She will be aware that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health has made it clear on a number of occasions that measures are in place to deal with all outcomes, including a no-deal Brexit on 29 March. We have Health questions on Tuesday 19 February, and I encourage her to seek to have her question answered directly by the Minister again then.

**Christian Matheson** (City of Chester) (Lab): Can the Leader of the House confirm that the only reason for the light business and the extremely early rising of the House yesterday was that she and other Ministers had somewhere else to be—namely, going cap in hand to the dodgy Russian oligarchs and City hedge fund billionaires who are now the main source of finance for the Conservative party?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman is denigrating this House. Yesterday, we were talking about compensation payments for people who have suffered from asbestosis and other appalling conditions. The Government seek to provide adequate time for such debates, but we do not then take people by the scruff of the neck and insist that they speak in them. If individual Members choose not to contribute to those debates, that is not the fault of the Government. The Government provided time for some very important statutory instruments to be debated yesterday. I also think that it is extremely offensive of the hon. Gentleman to make the assertions that he does. I can tell him that I was in a meeting until 7 o'clock last night.

**Douglas Chapman** (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): Is the Leader of the House aware that 150 job losses at Babcock in Rosyth have been announced today following the Queen Elizabeth contracts coming to an end? Would she consider granting a debate in Government time on why the national shipbuilding strategy is not working for the industry, for my constituents or for the country?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am very sorry to hear about the job losses in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. I know that the Jobcentre Plus rapid support teams will certainly be available to help those who are looking to redeploy. He will be aware that the Government have a clear shipbuilding strategy to try to ensure that we have a thriving pipeline of future business, and I encourage him to raise his specific concerns at Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy questions on Tuesday 12 February.

**Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): Please may we have a debate on the situation of the Kurdish people in Turkey? I ask this question on behalf of Imam Sis in my constituency, who is currently on hunger strike, along with hundreds of people around the world, to raise awareness of the persecution of the Kurds.

**Andrea Leadsom:** I know that many hon. and right hon. Members are very concerned about the plight of the Kurds, and the hon. Lady is quite right to raise this matter. I suggest that she seeks an Adjournment debate so that she can get a rapid answer from Ministers as to what the UK's position is and what we are doing to offer support in these cases.

**Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I want to start by thanking the hon. Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood) for agreeing to the postponement of his Back-Bench business debate later this afternoon in order to allow the antisocial behaviour debate to go ahead and have sufficient time. However, this does raise the issue of the allocation of time for these important bread-and-butter debates that Members want to have in the House. Like many other Members, I was disappointed when the House rose early yesterday. I thought it might have happened because people had to go and get their posh frocks on for the event that has already been mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson), but I am reassured by the Leader of the House saying that that was not the case. Will she, however, ensure that sufficient time is made available for Members to debate these important issues? We know that Brexit is important, but these other issues that we want to debate are important as well.

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am incredibly sympathetic to the hon. Lady, and I pay tribute to her because I genuinely think that she is one of the hardest working Members in this place. She raises many varied and vital issues in business questions and at all other opportunities, and she is quite right to do so. I want to reassure her and the House once again that yesterday's business was a function of the number of Members who wanted to speak in those debates, and that there was certainly no attempt on the part of the Government or anyone else to try to finish the business early. It is vital that Members should be aware of that. I was also disappointed to see that today's second debate had been postponed, and, as I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley South, I will seek a further opportunity for it to be held.

**Melanie Onn** (Great Grimsby) (Lab): May we have a debate on financial barriers to accessing continuing healthcare? My constituents who receive cancer treatment at Castle Hill Hospital across the river in Hull get toll-free crossings until their chemo or radiotherapy ends, but when they go for all their follow-up checks, they have to travel for nearly an hour and pay for their petrol and parking, and they also have the additional cost of the bridge toll, which does not seem very fair or equitable for residents across the Humber area.

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Lady raises an important constituency issue, and she is absolutely right to do so. I was not made aware of that particular concern in advance, but I encourage her to raise it with Health Ministers at oral questions on 19 February.

**Mr Paul Sweeney** (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Leader of the House recognise the amazing work of Donnie Shaw, the butcher in Wallacewell Road in Balornock in my constituency? He has fundraised with the community to install a community defibrillator

on his premises, and it was installed in September last year. It has already been put into action, in January, in response to a 999 call when someone took unwell outside his shop, and it potentially saved that person's life. Community defibrillators can make the difference between life and death in many situations, as they can make a vital difference in those seconds before the first responders come along. The butcher is at the heart of the wider community activity, and the defibrillator is named in memory of a 19-year-old man, Marc Hegarty, who died in June 2018. This has been an amazing initiative, so may we have a debate in Government time on the vital role that community defibrillators can play and on what Government funding might be available to support such initiatives?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am glad that the hon. Gentleman has raised the importance of defibrillators; he is absolutely right to say that they can save lives. The more community and school-based defibrillators we have, the better, and I should like to join him in congratulating Donnie Shaw on his work to make this happen. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that we have Government time for a debate on connecting communities by supporting charities and volunteers on Wednesday afternoon next week, and I hope that he will raise this issue then.

**Colleen Fletcher** (Coventry North East) (Lab): The Coventry and Warwickshire year of wellbeing 2019 is now very much under way and was inspired by a unique partnership between Coventry and Warwickshire's health and wellbeing boards. The aim of the joint initiative is to emphasise the importance of positive action to safeguard health and wellbeing and of working collectively to address the challenges that affect us all, such as the rise in mental ill health, physical inactivity and less tangible problems, such as loneliness and social isolation. We are all guilty of taking the importance of wellbeing for granted—especially in this place—so may we have a debate in Government time on how to inspire everyone to recognise, celebrate and improve wellbeing?

**Andrea Leadsom:** All colleagues can be reassured by the hon. Lady's commitment to general wellbeing. She has previously asked for a debate in Government time on sport, which I was pleased to grant, and mentioned wellbeing and the health of the nation in so doing, for which I commend her. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport will be greatly interested in her thoughts on how the new initiative will help with general wellbeing, so I encourage her to raise the matter directly with Ministers.

**Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Has the Leader of the House seen early-day motion 2025 in the name of the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), signed by me and 58 other Members, about rates of pay for security staff on the parliamentary estate?

*[That this House notes the valuable work done by security staff on the parliamentary estate; further notes the current dispute between security staff represented by the PCS union and the House authorities concerning overtime rates; believes that security staff recruited in*

*summer 2016 should be paid in line with the original rates offered and not the incorrect ones specified in their terms and conditions; further believes that the decision to correct the rates for staff employed thereafter but not do the same for the staff already employed breaches basic principles of fairness; urges the Director of Security for Parliament to look again at this matter and bring the rates of pay for the cohort of staff affected by this error in line with the original offer on overtime rates; and calls on the House authorities to lead by example when it comes to the employment of security staff.]*

Has the Leader of the House considered the impact on the programme of House business if those staff take industrial action? Will she join me in encouraging the House authorities to resolve the dispute as a matter of great urgency?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I regularly meet the director general, and I received an update quite recently on this potential industrial action. I am assured that all steps are being taken to ensure that we are all kept safe and that actions are taken to reduce the concerns of members of staff.

**Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): The Leader of the House and I share a strong interest in early years and ensuring the best start in life, and she is doing tremendous work chairing the inter-departmental ministerial group. Will she give a progress report on the work of that group and perhaps provide time for this House to debate its findings?

**Andrea Leadsom:** My hon. Friend is right that he and I have for many years shared a huge interest in support for the early years, and I pay tribute to him for his work on the "1001 Critical Days" campaign. The ministerial group has conducted a significant amount of information gathering, and I had a fantastic visit to Manchester with the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) just a couple of weeks ago to look at the excellent work being done in children's centres in her constituency. We are continuing to gather data and hope to come forward with recommendations in the next couple of months.

**Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House categorically assure the House that our statute book will be ready for exit day?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am confident that we will have the necessary legislation in place by Brexit day.

**Dr David Drew** (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): While kicking and screaming, Gloucestershire County Council has had dragged out of it the true cost of the incinerator to be imposed on my constituency at Javelin Park. It now appears that there was some impropriety in the way in which the information was brought forward. Will the Leader of the House organise an urgent debate on how local authorities handle big contracts to ensure that proper checks and balances are in place?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman has raised this matter in the Chamber before, and I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can find out from Ministers whether some rules may have been breached.

## Points of Order

12.34 pm

**Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. You will not have heard my earlier exchange with the Secretary of State for International Trade when I asked him to provide the House with the information provided to businesses that was referred to in the *Financial Times*. As I understand it, businesses have been provided with a report on the progress being made on all the different trade deals that the United Kingdom is seeking to secure. The Secretary of State claimed that if I had only been at the International Trade Committee yesterday, I would have heard the answers there, because the matter was covered “extensively”.

I have now been able to listen carefully to the hour’s worth of evidence that the Secretary of State gave during that excellent inquisitorial exercise led by the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil), and the Secretary of State made no reference whatsoever to the information that was provided to business, nor did he offer to provide it to the Committee. Madam Deputy Speaker, what can I do to ensure that the Secretary of State comes back to the House at the earliest opportunity to put the record straight and, perhaps much more importantly, to provide the House with the information that he has been willing to give to business but is apparently unwilling to give to Members of this House?

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order. He will appreciate that a difference of opinion between a Minister and a Member is fairly routine. That is what we are here for. It is all about argument, accountability and so on, so it is not a total surprise to the House that there has been a difference of opinion about whether information was given or not given. The right hon. Gentleman knows very well that the Chair happily

can take no responsibility for what a Minister says when he is at the Dispatch Box or, indeed, in a Select Committee.

The right hon. Gentleman asks me how he might remedy the situation. He has partially remedied it by raising his point of order which, although not a point of order for the Chair, has allowed him to draw the matter to the attention not only of the Chamber but of the Treasury Bench. I am sure that his concerns will be repeated to those whom he criticises. There will of course be other opportunities for the right hon. Gentleman to ask questions about the matter, and he knows well, as a former deputy Leader of the House, just how to do that.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. In a good introduction to business questions this morning, the Leader of the House mentioned in passing something about National Pizza Day. She did not say anything else about pizza, and it was not an advertisement, but it could have led people to believe that she was extolling the virtues of something that is closely linked to obesity. In addition, many pizza delivery companies utilise cheap labour, and people on unlicensed motorcycles are being killed. I just wanted to ensure that the Leader of the House was not endorsing a product that is linked to obesity.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Gentleman has raised and listened to many points of order over many decades of service in this House. As I have just explained to the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake), the Chair has no responsibility for what Ministers say, and the Chair definitely has no responsibility whatsoever for pizza—although my teenage son would say that I quite often have some responsibility for pizzas in a personal or maternal capacity. The hon. Gentleman has drawn to the attention of the Chamber and of the Leader of the House his concerns about the effects of pizza not consumed in moderation. I fear that I can give him no further comfort than that.

## Legal Aid: Post-Implementation Review

12.39 pm

**The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke):** With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will make a statement to inform the House that we have concluded our post-implementation review of parts 1 and 2 of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012—better known as LASPO—as well as the outcome of our inquests review.

Earlier today, I tabled all three reviews for consideration by both Houses alongside a new legal support action plan, which sets out how we will build on those findings. After an extended period of expansion that resulted in an annual spend of over £2 billion, the coalition Government brought in part 1 of LASPO to make significant changes to the scope of, eligibility for and fees paid under legal aid. This was essential to bring spending under control and to target the limited resources available at the most vulnerable and the highest priority cases.

The extent of the changes introduced by LASPO meant that the Government committed to carrying out the comprehensive review I have published today. Throughout a year-long process of extensive evidence gathering and analysis, we have engaged with more than 100 different stakeholders, professionals, providers and, of course, many in this House and the other place, drawing together a wealth of research and evidence to inform this detailed review.

We have heard that the legal aid system has, for too long, focused solely on delivering publicly funded advice and representation, at the expense of understanding how we can help people to find early resolutions and avoid court disputes. Legal aid is, and will remain, a core element of the support on offer, and last year the Government spent £1.6 billion on legal aid funding.

We want to move forward with a new vision, focusing on the individual and their needs, whether that be through legal aid or otherwise. We will provide a breadth of tailored support that increases our ability to intervene earlier and catch people's problems sooner, before they escalate. We must deliver a system that enables people to receive the type of legal support that is right for them and at the right time.

I am therefore delighted to publish, alongside this review, our new legal support action plan. The action plan responds to the evidence and includes immediate action to ensure vulnerable people, particularly children, can access legal aid when it is needed. We will launch a review of the legal aid means-testing framework, specifically focusing on the thresholds and criteria in place for a person to qualify for legal aid; simplify the exceptional case funding scheme to ensure it works effectively; expand the scope of legal aid to include immigration matters for unaccompanied and separated migrant children, and to cover all special guardianship orders in private family law cases; and reinstate immediate access to face-to-face legal advice in discrimination, debt and special educational needs cases.

However, we also need to collect further evidence on what works and at what stage. We will invest up to £5 million of funding to encourage and support providers to develop new and innovative services; double support for litigants in person to £3 million for the next two

years; launch several support pilots that will test how effective legal support at an early stage can help people avoid the escalation of problems; and test and evaluate the benefits of early advice in an area of social welfare law.

Elsewhere, I am also announcing today that we will continue to support dedicated criminal legal aid practitioners by completing a comprehensive evaluation of the criminal legal aid fee schemes and structures. Separately, I have published the Government's review of the changes made by part 2 of LASPO, which introduced a number of changes recommended by Sir Rupert Jackson aimed at reducing costs in civil litigation. The evidence gathered indicates that those objectives have been met. Fewer unmeritorious cases are being taken forward and access to justice at proportionate cost is generally being met.

Today I have also published the outcome of a separate year-long review of the provision of legal aid for inquests. The review was commissioned in response to a number of key independent reports and their recommendations. This final report is the culmination of that thorough review, which was undertaken with senior coroners, the legal profession and other key stakeholders, as well as, most importantly, bereaved families themselves. It considers a number of specific concerns and looks to where we can make further improvements, including improving guidance and advice; ensuring that the inquest process is more sympathetic to the needs of bereaved families; looking into further options for the funding of legal support at inquests where the state has state-funded representation; and working closely with other Government Departments.

The publications I have launched today mark not only the completion of hard work already undertaken but the beginning of doing more to meet our challenges. I place on record my thanks to everyone who has contributed evidence and expertise to these three reviews. It is essential that this engagement continues, that we collect more evidence, exploring with our partners and stakeholders innovative ways of supporting people to access the justice system, and that we place early intervention firmly at the heart of legal support.

I commend this statement to the House.

12.45 pm

**Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab):** I thank the Secretary of State for the advance copy of the report. It is regrettable that journalists were briefed on the report's contents this morning, with new articles appearing on websites before this statement and before the report was available to me.

The Government announced their LASPO review more than two years ago, and it has since been delayed time and again, which is simply unacceptable given the human costs and suffering caused by legal aid cuts. The question is whether this report has been worth the wait. Sadly, the answer from the Opposition has to be a clear no. It has been a wasted two years.

Some of the review's conclusions call for more reviews. Does the Secretary of State seriously think that the measures outlined today will undo the damage done by his predecessors? LASPO set out to make savings of £410 million and, according to the Department's figures, it has saved almost £200 million more than that since

[Richard Burgon]

April 2013. Does he regret that his Department has cut even more than planned? Will he explain why it has happened? Will he confirm that the Government are going to provide just £8 million in extra legal aid investment?

Beyond the budget figures is the very real human cost behind these cuts. In the last few weeks alone, there have been yet more shocking press reports on the social damage they have caused. The number of people who have been refused legal aid to secure court orders against abusive ex-partners is at a five-year high. The number of parents forced to represent themselves in child custody battles has doubled in six years, and new analysis shows that up to 1 million people live in areas with no legal aid provision for housing. How will this report help people in such situations? Can the Secretary of State give more detail about how this review will offer legal help to those faced with a rogue landlord, a difficult family break-up or the Prime Minister's hostile environment?

Legal advice on welfare benefits cases has been cut by an eye-watering 89%. The UN special rapporteur labelled the legal aid cuts as a denial of those people's human right to a remedy. Does the Secretary of State believe that the very limited pilot outlined today for just one area of social welfare law will do anything substantial to reduce this inhumane suffering? Does he really think that a little investment in Skype services is the way to restore access to justice?

From the outset, the Opposition have sought to make reasonable demands of the Government's review. Labour initiated the extensive Bach review to inform how legal aid will be turned around under a future Labour Government. We accept that this Government will not deliver the widespread change recommended by the Bach review, so we called for emergency measures to ameliorate the worst effects of legal aid cuts through the restoration of early legal advice. The Government should accept that there are strong arguments for early legal help, so why does the Secretary of State not have the political will properly to address it? With increasing evidence that cuts to legal aid have been a false economy, can he confirm whether he has commissioned any independent economist to look at the savings that could be made through early legal advice? If not, why not?

This year marks the 70th anniversary of the Legal Aid and Advice Act 1949, introduced by that great Labour Government. Access to health and education is rightly recognised as the right of every single citizen. Access to justice should be recognised in the same way but today we see, with this delayed review, yet again how the Conservatives are not the party to restore to legal aid the respect it deserves.

**Mr Gauke:** I hope it will be helpful to the House if I put this debate in a little context. A significant rise in the cost of legal aid took place over a number of years, a point recognised by the last Labour Government. If the hon. Gentleman wishes me to, I could give him a long list of quotations from Labour Ministers raising their concerns about the increase in the cost of legal aid. That is why Labour's 2010 manifesto contained a commitment to cut the costs of legal aid, and I suspect it is the reason why in both 2015 and 2017 Labour gave no commitment to reverse those cuts. Therefore, there

has been a consensus that we cannot return to what happened in the past. What is important is that we find a way in which limited resources are directed in the most effective and proportionate way, and that is what this review has been about.

The hon. Gentleman raises the issue of early intervention. The conclusion from our research is that the empirical evidence is not necessarily clear that early intervention will make savings, but there is a strong case for wanting to explore this further. That is why we are proceeding with pilots in the area of social welfare. It may be in the context of housing that we should look to proceed in this area to see whether there is a case that early intervention can make savings and we can build that case. That is precisely what I want to do.

There will continue to be areas of disagreement with the hon. Gentleman. I am sorry that he has not been more welcoming of what has been put before the House, because this is a constructive attempt to address this issue, in an environment where there are not unlimited resources. I point the House to the comments made by the Law Society this morning about how there is much to be welcomed in what we have announced.

**Sir Oliver Heald** (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): I welcome the action plan. Particularly on the civil side, the Government seem to be improving the situation for those who need help. I welcome the extra help for litigants in person and the further reviews that are to take place. A lot of money was taken out of legal aid and it is right to see a building back, which is certainly happening on the civil side, with further reviews to come.

I note there is to be an evaluation of criminal practitioners and the way forward. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is important to our justice system to have a good pipeline of talented criminal lawyers? That is one of the strengths of our system and the fact we have that is widely admired around the world. In the evaluation, will he look to see that there is an adequacy of income for people as they come through the pipeline, so that we can continue to have the high-quality criminal lawyers we have in this country?

**Mr Gauke:** My right hon. and learned Friend raises an important point. It is important that we have a strong and vibrant criminal Bar and I want to do everything I can to support that. I make it clear that it is important that we have a vibrant situation for solicitors as well. He will be aware that last year we announced changes to the advocates' graduated fees scheme. I hope we have a constructive relationship with the criminal Bar, and we have been able to take steps and prioritise this area. We are also undertaking the review, which we anticipate will report in mid-2020.

**Tommy Sheppard** (Edinburgh East) (SNP): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement. As others have remarked, at the core of this discussion is access to justice, a principle enshrined not only in the common law of England and Scotland, but in the Human Rights Act that applies throughout the UK. The House will be aware that these matters are dealt with differently in Scotland, as they always have been, with the Scottish Government responsible for the provision of legal aid in Scotland. Not for the first time, people in

Scotland have reason to be grateful for this differentiation because in Scotland, despite cuts to the block grant available to the Scottish Government, they have maintained a system of legal aid that is more generous in its scope and application than any part of the UK. Some 75% of all civil cases in Scotland are eligible for some form of legal aid, whereas the corresponding figure in England and Wales is 25%. So although I am sure Members will welcome this as a step in the right direction to widening the scope of legal aid, I make the observation that there is still an awful long way to go. Will the Secretary of State consider emulating the targets that have been set in Scotland?

On the question of fees for those who provide legal aid, the Secretary of State will be aware that the Scottish Government have recently approved a 3% increase in fees across the board, whereas in England fees are to be increased by only 1%, and I believe that is just for barristers in the legal aid service. Will he consider bringing England and Wales into line with the more generous provision of fees in Scotland?

**Mr Gauke:** As I said a moment ago, we announced reforms to the AGFS last year, which see the biggest increase for some time in those fees. Let me make a point about the wider issue of access to justice. Access to justice is very important, but we should not consider that the test of that is purely about legal aid in the form that it has been. We need to be more innovative and to think ahead. I regret the dismissive tone taken by the shadow Justice Secretary about the potential for new technology in this area. To ensure that we can expand access to justice, we have to be prepared to innovate and make the best use of technology.

**Robert Neill** (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I welcome the considered and balanced tone that the Secretary of State has adopted, which is what the subject deserves. This is a substantial and thoughtful review, which the Justice Committee will wish to examine in some detail, along with its proposals. I wish to raise a couple of points. The additional funding is welcome, as is the extension of eligibility in a number of areas, which the Committee has highlighted in its reports, among other things. We also welcome the changes in relation to inquests and the approach to criminal legal aid. I know he will understand that there will be a concern in some quarters that, as this review has taken some time to prepare, the further review, for example, in relation to the means-testing framework and the setting up of the pilots, although all justified from the evidence in the text, might delay necessary changes even further. Will he assure us that those will be proceeded with in a timely fashion, that they will be sharply focused, and that there will be very full practitioner and judicial involvement in making sure that they are brought to an early conclusion and acted upon wherever necessary?

**Mr Gauke:** I thank the Chair of the Justice Committee for his characteristically thoughtful comments. It is worth pointing out that the means test was not fundamentally changed by LASPO, as he knows, but we do want to look at the evidence. We need to crack on with that straightaway, but this is a complex area and we are going to need to consider it properly and ensure that we end up with a sustainable position.

**Bambos Charalambous** (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State's acknowledgement that early advice is an issue, but I am disappointed that the pilot on social welfare law does not go far enough. It should go further and consider immigration law, family law and housing law. The report outlines how people with protected characteristics may not be able to access online or telephone help and signposting well enough. Will the Minister consider extending the pilot to cover the areas I have mentioned?

**Mr Gauke:** The technology pilots could apply to any area of law, so that certainly does not preclude their applying to the areas the hon. Gentleman mentions. The early intervention pilot is looking at social welfare law as the right place to start. That is where the case for early intervention making a positive difference is strongest, so we are looking into that area. The hon. Gentleman mentioned immigration; we are extending the scope to unaccompanied minors and immigration. I hope that is helpful to him.

**Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): The Lord Chancellor did not specifically mention the Legal Aid Board exceptional cases fund, although he did refer to inquests and the possibility of guidance, advice and support for bereaved families. He will know that I have raised the Shoreham air show inquest with the Prime Minister as well as with him and his Ministers. The inquest still has not happened. Hopefully it will happen this autumn, but that will be more than four years since that tragic accident. As it stands, the families have still not had official confirmation that legal aid will be available for their representation at the inquest, while all 18 other interested parties have legal representation. What among the changes the Lord Chancellor has announced will make it much easier for clearly exceptional cases with a clear wider public interest to gain legal aid funding? Is the Lord Chancellor able to confirm what I hope is the case, which is that those families will get the legal representation that they absolutely need and deserve for the inquest this year?

**Mr Gauke:** I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his work in this area. We are changing the process for the funding for exceptional cases to make it easier to apply. Fundamentally, I believe the inquest system should continue to be inquisitorial, but it is very important that bereaved families do not find themselves excluded or disadvantaged—my hon. Friend has made that point with great persistence. That is partly about ensuring that coroners and their staff are properly trained to protect the position of bereaved families, but we are also working with other Government Departments to ensure that there is not unfairness in the system. We continue to engage with other Departments to make sure that bereaved families are not put at a disadvantage.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Lord Chancellor knows of my long-term interest in this policy area. Let us be humble: no party or Government have got this right. It is a very difficult nut to crack. I welcome many of the things the Lord Chancellor has been saying this morning. We look forward to digesting his announcement and commenting and being helpful on this matter.

[Mr Barry Sheerman]

The central thread must surely be access to justice for all, not just the wealthy, privileged and well educated. That is of course the principle that we must have, and that is what I think about when I look at my struggling constituents in Huddersfield. The fact is that there are issues in particular areas of law. The Lord Chancellor will know that I and the Chair of the Justice Committee, the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), are involved in cases of miscarriages of justice, which is one area in which the lack of help in the form of legal aid has been really debilitating. I understand that the Ministry of Justice has had more cuts than any other Government Department, and he has my sympathy, but will he look in particular at the impact on miscarriages of justice? We have just launched a commission on miscarriages of justice and hope to publish a report to help the Lord Chancellor shortly.

**Mr Gauke:** I very much look forward to receiving that report. I thank the hon. Gentleman for the work he does in this policy area, which he and I have discussed in the past. As he says, he has a long-standing interest in this matter, and I hope we can continue to engage in a constructive way to address it. I agree with him about the importance of access to justice, but I stress that that access does not end with legal aid. There are other aspects to consider, and it is important that any sensible Government look into what can be done.

**Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con):** I once worked in a criminal legal aid practice, so the reference to that area of law in the Secretary of State's statement was particularly welcome. Will he outline how he will ensure that the evaluation takes into account the needs and views of those who provide criminal legal aid in places such as Devon and Somerset, where the challenges may be different from those associated with providing it in central London?

**Mr Gauke:** My hon. Friend is of course right. I believe that the process we have undertaken in the past year has been a thorough engagement with stakeholders from throughout the country, and that is very much the feedback I have been getting. It is important that we continue to engage. As my hon. Friend makes clear, there are different challenges in different parts of the country, and that needs to be reflected in our approach.

**Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab):** One consequence of the Government's deep cuts to legal aid has been the emergence of an unregulated legal advice sector, which has stepped in to fill the gap. What work have the Government done to look into the quality of advice and redress in the sector?

**Mr Gauke:** Of course, we have to keep this matter constantly under review to ensure that citizens are not misled or taken down a wrong approach. Innovation and competition should be part of the context, but the hon. Lady is quite right that we must ensure that citizens get the correct advice and that we are not in a position where the unscrupulous are able to take people in the wrong direction.

**Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab):** To what extent was the review able to consider the concerns raised at the time of LASPO about the impact on the diversity of the legal profession? He will know that in particular younger lawyers, those from black and minority ethnic backgrounds and women were more likely to undertake legal aid work; what is the situation now?

**Mr Gauke:** We have had a welcome from Young Legal Aid Lawyers, which said it would look positively at what has been set out and look to engage with it. I share the hon. Lady's desire to ensure that we have diverse legal professions in this country.

**Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab):** There is a paucity of legal advice in family law, which is complex, difficult and emotional. Is there any comfort in the Lord Chancellor's proposals that will address the difficulties caused by the blanket removal of such advice?

**Mr Gauke:** Let me highlight a couple of points in the review. I have already mentioned the proposals on unaccompanied minors in immigration cases. It is also worth pointing out that with special guardianship orders, we are extending the scope of legal aid. Those are all steps that go some way towards addressing the hon. Gentleman's concerns.

**Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab):** Will the Lord Chancellor confirm what everybody involved in legal aid knows, which is that the post-LASPO cuts have led to expenditure in other service areas, specifically the courts service? Does the report quantify that expenditure? Will he confirm that the report confirms that the Department does not know whether the reductions in legal aid have resulted in the service being targeted on those in greatest need? Finally, will he confirm that, welcome though it is, the extra money provided today represents less than 2% of the total reduction in the budget since 2013?

**Mr Gauke:** First, I pay tribute to the hon. Lady, who is among those who have worked tirelessly in this policy area and who, as ever, brings great expertise to this matter. In respect of evaluating the overall impacts, we do need more evidence, which is why we want to have pilots to bring in more evidence and test the system to see whether we can reduce costs on the system as a whole through, for example, greater and earlier intervention. I want to build up an evidence-based business case to see how we should move forward. In respect of evaluating the impact on particular groups, one has to consider the system on an area by area basis. It is important that we continue to engage and look at the evidence that emerges.

**Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC):** Wales has seen the largest decline in legal aid providers over the past five years, with a decrease of some 29%. How will the Lord Chancellor ensure that citizens in Wales, particularly those in rural areas, are not put at a greater disadvantage and are able to access legal aid without having to travel prohibitive distances?

**Mr Gauke:** For rural areas as a whole, this review underlines the need to ensure that we are prepared to look at technology and innovation so that access to justice is greater and we have the ability to point people in the right direction. There is a real opportunity here, and it is important that we embrace it. The innovation

fund of up to £5 million will encourage investment in this area so that we can find new and better ways of ensuring that, wherever a person is in the United Kingdom, they are able to access justice.

**Thangam Debonnaire** (Bristol West) (Lab): Although I welcome the inclusion of separated children in legal aid for immigration cases, the plan otherwise does little to deal with the many problems faced by people in the asylum and immigration system in getting good quality advice. Inadequate legal advice has a damaging impact on people with a right to sanctuary, but no advice is worse, so will the Lord Chancellor please reconsider the decision to keep legal aid for refugee family reunion out of the scope of civil legal aid?

**Mr Gauke:** As I have said, the change that we have announced today in the context of unaccompanied minors is an important step. I am grateful to the hon. Lady for welcoming that. We do spend money on the legal aid system—I think it is something like £40 million on immigration and asylum—and it is important that we provide support in this area. There is a wider point that must be accepted: there are limited resources available, and we need to ensure that they are targeted in the best way possible. It is right that we have announced changes today in the particular context of unaccompanied minors and immigration.

**Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith) (Lab): May I ask the Lord Chancellor two things? First, will he use his considerable influence to get us a whole-day debate on these reviews? The Act took about a year to get through. We have had three reviews and an action plan—almost 500 pages today—and this review has taken two years. With the best will in the world, I do not think that this statement will do justice to that.

Secondly, can we look at the overall cumulative effect on his Department of the 40% cuts that will take place in legal aid and the courts? Will he sit down with the profession and the judiciary to discuss that? I was the shadow legal aid Minister during the passage of the Act. We did warn about many of the consequences, but we probably underestimated the overall effect on the court system. This is very important to individuals who are seeking redress. There is also a dysfunctionality in the courts now, particularly in areas such as the family courts, and we have to sit down seriously and address those issues.

**Mr Gauke:** First, on the matter of a whole-day debate—it sounds as if this were a continuation of business questions—the hon. Gentleman has made his point. I know that the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. and learned Friend the Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Lucy Frazer), has been replying to Westminster Hall debates on this matter fairly regularly, but I am sure that his point has been noted, and we will of course give consideration to it.

On the overall effect on the courts and justice system, let me make two points. First, it was widely accepted that, after the financial crash, there was going to be a need to bring public spending under control, including in this area, and any responsible Government would have had to make some difficult decisions, including in this area. Secondly, the Government are investing £1 billion in a court reform programme, making sure that we bring our system up to date. In ensuring careful stewardship of public money while also ensuring that we have a world-class legal and justice system, we will have to embrace innovation and technology and do things differently, and I do not shy away from that in any way.

**Louise Haigh** (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab) *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** The prize for patience and perseverance goes to Louise Haigh.

**Louise Haigh:** Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

In the past six years, there has been a shocking 134% increase in the number of parents facing child custody cases without legal representation. Surely the Secretary of State agrees that no parent should find themselves forced into that situation, so what steps is he introducing today to remedy that?

**Mr Gauke:** We are taking adoption cases out of the means test, so that is a change. I have already addressed points about special guardianship orders and unaccompanied minors, so there are steps that we are taking in this area. We already spend considerable sums of money in this field, and I hope that when the hon. Lady has an opportunity to look in detail at some of our proposals, she will see that we are trying to address those concerns. We do not have unlimited sums of money—there is no bottomless pit—but we are taking steps to ensure that the system can work as effectively as possible.

## Venezuela

1.15 pm

**The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan):** The House will now be familiar with the plight of Venezuela. It is suffering from economic devastation, starvation and malnutrition. The flight of more than 3 million Venezuelans to neighbouring countries is the largest migration crisis in Latin American history. The systematic dismantling of freedom, liberty and justice by the kleptocratic regime of Nicolás Maduro has marked it out as a country where people's rights have been stolen.

In the past few weeks, the overwhelming majority of us in this House have condemned the political repression and electoral malpractice of a regime that is increasingly desperate to cling on to power. On Monday, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary announced that the UK will now recognise Juan Guaidó, the president of the National Assembly, as the constitutional interim President of Venezuela. The UK is one of 19 EU member states to have done so after the deadline for new elections to be called passed on Sunday.

It is worth reminding ourselves how events have rapidly changed the situation in Venezuela and have led the UK and our international partners to take action. Last May, Nicolás Maduro claimed a victory in a presidential election that was widely considered to have been deeply flawed. In January, a day after his so-called presidential inauguration, which was boycotted by the international community, the Venezuelan National Assembly declared Maduro's tenure illegitimate. The Venezuelan people have shown their discontent in massive protests across the country. They have been demonstrating against the continued trashing of their country by the grossly incompetent, criminal and corrupt governance caused by Maduro's warped version of socialism.

On 23 January, the president of the National Assembly, Juan Guaidó, announced, with constitutional authority, that he will act as interim President of the country until free and fair elections take place. He spoke with the full backing of the National Assembly which, as an institution, is the sole legitimate survivor of Maduro's systematic dismantling of the country's democracy. This moment saw Venezuela's democratic leaders taking courageous steps to set things right and to put the needs of the people before themselves. It was legal and gave the international community a responsibility to act immediately, as the US, Canada and the Lima Group countries did by supporting Juan Guaidó and Venezuela's legitimate representatives.

For our part, the UK worked closely with our EU partners shortly after Juan Guaidó's announcement. On 24 January, the Foreign Secretary said that Nicolás Maduro was no longer the legitimate leader of Venezuela. Two days later at the UN Security Council, where I represented the UK, I set out our position, which is shared by France, Spain, Germany and others, that if new presidential elections were not called within eight days, the UK would also recognise Juan Guaidó as the constitutional interim President.

The arrogance of Nicolás Maduro is such that those calls have not been answered. He has instead called for early new elections for the last remaining democratic

institution, the National Assembly, supposedly so as to "bring peace", which we can assume actually means to snuff out the remaining source of challenge to his grip on power, so this was a false promise. The National Assembly has already been duly elected and Maduro wants it to be overseen by the Constituent Assembly, which is his imposter alternative and which has no equivalent legitimacy.

The international community has taken significant steps in response to these events. As I said, I represented the United Kingdom at the UN Security Council when I set out the UK's call for elections and made clear the responsibility of Council members to demonstrate the UN's leadership on this issue. We look forward to further discussions there. On Monday, I went to Ottawa at the invitation of the Canadian Foreign Minister to join the meeting of the Lima Group countries, where I discussed the situation with Foreign Ministers from across the region. We also discussed the importance of getting humanitarian aid into Venezuela and also to the neighbouring countries which are bearing the brunt of receiving over 3 million migrants. It was during my trip to Ottawa on Monday that the Foreign Secretary formally announced that the UK recognises Juan Guaidó as interim President of Venezuela, in accordance with the Venezuelan constitution. The UK was one of 19 EU member states, including France, Germany, Spain and the Netherlands, to take similar simultaneous action. So we are not alone in our views of the Maduro regime. We continue to work in concert with the Organisation of American States, the Lima Group, the United States and like-minded European and international partners.

Our thoughts now turn to the next steps. First, we remain clear that Maduro is illegitimate and that we now recognise the National Assembly president Juan Guaidó as constitutional interim President of Venezuela until credible, free and fair elections are held. We are providing support to multilateral organisations such as the UN, the EU and the Red Cross Movement through our existing contributions. Last year, the UK was the largest donor to the UN's central emergency response fund, which has allocated \$26 million to the region, including \$9 million for emergency health and nutrition support.

We must also keep up the pressure on Maduro with one united voice. The UK has taken a lead in the EU by calling for a tougher response to the regime in the light of the failure to call new elections. This may include further targeted sanctions, in co-ordination with recent steps taken by the United States. The UK also stands closely alongside our Lima Group partners. Outside Venezuela, they have borne the brunt of this crisis, and earlier this week their Ministers made clear to me in no uncertain terms the severity of the situation for them.

In speaking with one voice, I sincerely hope that this House proves united in expressing its condemnation of Nicolás Maduro and in asserting its support for the Lima Group's determination to design a better future for Venezuela by working with Juan Guaidó and the National Assembly. I commend this statement to the House.

1.22 pm

**Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab):** I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement.

I hope that the Minister will today rule out the prospect of military intervention or some other form of outside interference, whether from the United States or anyone else, in Venezuela. I agree with him that the economic and humanitarian crisis in Venezuela is all the more unacceptable because it has been so utterly avoidable. The United States has enforced devastating economic sanctions on the country and has constantly intervened to support opposition forces. The former UN rapporteur Alfred-Maurice de Zayas called these sanctions “crimes against humanity”.

None of this means blind support for the Maduro Government. It is true that between 2012 and 2016, the oil price collapsed. That was clearly a problem. Mismanagement by the Government has totally compounded it, leading to hyperinflation, the collapse of the currency and desperate shortages of food, medicine and other essentials. As a result, there is malnutrition and more than half a million cases of malaria, and refugees in their millions are leaving the country—more than 1 million have gone to Colombia, which puts at risk that country’s peace process.

If the Maduro Government’s response to all that was to work tirelessly to resolve the problems with assistance from the international community, they might have our sympathy and support, but instead their response has been to answer rising public anger at the crisis with increased repression, violence and abuse of human rights. Amnesty reports the widespread excessive use of force against demonstrators and the torture of detainees.

So, it seems clear to us on this side that the essential starting points in resolving the crisis in Venezuela, and in restoring peace, democracy and stability, must be: first, for all parties to engage in dialogue to overcome the crisis; secondly, in the interim, for all parties to respect the rule of law, human rights and democratic processes; and ultimately, in due course, to allow the Venezuelan people themselves to decide the way forward through free and fair elections. As I have said, the way forward for Venezuela must not be military intervention or some other form of outside interference, whether from the United States or anyone else. The future of Venezuela must be a matter for Venezuelans.

We have all heard Donald Trump say repeatedly that all options are on the table when it comes to Venezuela. Indeed, the Minister of State used similar language himself in October, so can he give us some clarity today? Do the UK and the President of the United States include in their list of all options the possibility of military intervention in Venezuela? Has that been discussed with the Trump Administration, and has the UK promised any support in the event that the US takes action? I hope and trust that the answer will be no, but it would be useful to hear that directly from the Minister of State.

May I ask four further questions? First, we all appreciate the huge challenges for neighbouring countries in dealing with the influx of refugees from Venezuela, especially in Colombia, so will the Minister tell us what efforts are being made to ensure that those refugees receive the humanitarian support they need? Secondly, can he tell us what plans he has to use the Magnitsky powers that we gave him several months ago and impose targeted sanctions against those who are abusing human rights in Venezuela? Thirdly, in our recent proceedings on an urgent question about Venezuela, the Minister of State gave a somewhat blithe answer to the question from my

right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (John Spellar) about the need for a Marshall plan for Venezuela in any post-Maduro era. The Minister said it would not be necessary because Venezuela is sitting on such large oil reserves, but does he accept that it is not oil it need reserves of, but foreign currency, which has been the main cause of the food shortages and hyperinflation that has left the Venezuelan economy so crippled? If, as he says in his statement, he wants to see a new Government in place in Caracas, can he say again what economic and humanitarian support there would be from the international community to help to resolve the current crisis? *[Interruption.]* I am glad the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) finds this so amusing.

Finally, it was also interesting when we considered the recent urgent question that the shadow Foreign Secretary asked the Minister of State why he was speaking out against human rights abuses, rigged elections and repression of political protests in Venezuela, but had absolutely nothing to say about exactly the same issues in Honduras, where the British Government are selling arms and surveillance equipment to the Honduran Government and sending them trade delegations. The Minister failed to answer the shadow Foreign Secretary’s question then, so may I ask him now to explain that double-standard between Venezuela and Honduras? Why are the Government not consistent, as we are on this side of the House, in condemning all Governments that abuse human rights?

**Sir Alan Duncan:** I can only say to the hon. Lady that when she sits down and reads the record of the response that she has just offered the House, she will look upon it with a high degree of embarrassment. She has been given the words to speak by her party, but those words are, to a large extent, not shared by most Members of her party. Let me just go through what she said and answer her comments.

First, the hon. Lady said, in a rather weak turn of phrase, that this was not just avoidable. No, it was avoidable; but, more than that, it was actually created by one man and his cronies who have destroyed the prosperity and wellbeing of an entire country and its people.

Secondly, let me turn to the question of sanctions. The hon. Lady may wish to be aware that, as a former oil trader, I do know a little bit about oil. Anyone who does not will know enough to know that what she has been saying this morning simply does not hold together. US sanctions on oil cannot be blamed for destroying the country when they have only just been announced, so blaming the collapse of Venezuela on US sanctions is absurd and wrong. The person to blame for the collapse of the Venezuelan oil industry is Nicolás Maduro himself. He has destroyed the greatest foreign currency-earning resource, which the country could be benefiting from had he not completely destroyed it.

Yesterday, the shadow Foreign Secretary endeavoured to make a wide-ranging speech about her party’s approach to foreign policy generally, within which she said that she was a great believer in sanctions. Yet, not only does the shadow Minister seem to disagree with that, but the Leader of the Opposition also seems to disagree with that policy statement.

This is not about outside influence, although the supportive pressure from the Lima Group is welcomed by all Venezuelans. This is about empowering the legitimacy

[*Sir Alan Duncan*]

of Venezuelans themselves inside Venezuela. We want to empower Venezuelans, not tell them what to do from outside. Help, yes—instruction, no.

I am also rather perturbed that the hon. Lady appeared very weak and feeble in her support for the Lima Group. This group of neighbouring countries, led by the previous and current Foreign Ministers of Peru, have been very courageous and thoughtful in designing their support collectively for the legitimate forces of Venezuela. We should give them our full support, and that is what the United Kingdom has been doing in the United Nations and in Ottawa on Monday.

There are many countries around, including the United Kingdom, who are doing their utmost to supply humanitarian aid into Venezuela. But what could be more disgusting than what we saw yesterday—pictures of the Maduro regime having blockaded the way into Venezuela, and streets within it, in order to stop humanitarian aid getting into the country? That man is in denial about aid even being needed, even though he has driven that country to total destitution.

On the question of the Marshall plan, I fully understand the concept behind the idea. Very honestly, it is too early to say whether that is appropriate for the country or able to be pieced together. I was part of many pledging conferences for Yemen and for Syria when I was the Minister for International Development, and I have no doubt that there will be a high degree of international support for Venezuela. But one of the great advantages of Venezuela compared with the other two countries that I have mentioned is that those millions who have fled will want and, we hope, be able to go back. The country also has the largest oil reserves in the world, which—if they are properly organised and managed—can give a massive inflow of the foreign exchange and resources that the country so desperately needs.

**Helen Whatley** (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Some of us will remember a Venezuelan MP at November's Women MPs of the World conference who spoke in this very Chamber about her battle for her country, and specifically for the rights of women and transgender people there. Her words are very much in my mind as I ask my right hon. Friend this question. Will he give us his view on the prospects for a peaceful transition to a new democratically legitimate and economically literate regime in Venezuela?

**Sir Alan Duncan:** Perhaps I can answer my hon. Friend with the words used by a female Venezuelan politician, María Corina Machado, this morning on BBC Radio 4. She said:

“On behalf of the Venezuelan people, I ask and demand every single democrat around the world to understand that this chaos and tragedy we are living in in Venezuela stopped being an ideological discussion between left and right a long time ago. It's between life and death. It's between a criminal state and justice. It's between oppression and freedom. Being indifferent amounts to being part of the regime that wants to impose silence, death and violence in Venezuela.”

With those words in our minds, I totally agree with my hon. Friend that we want to see the return of legitimate government, and women are going to play a very important part in taking Venezuela on that new journey.

**Kirsty Blackman** (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I thank the Minister for providing an advance copy of his statement.

The situation is deeply concerning, and I want to make it clear that we condemn the violence and the regime that is carrying out the violence. The political and economic crisis gripping the country is spiralling into a regional humanitarian disaster, and we are at risk of allowing a lost generation of Venezuelans. I am pleased that the Minister discussed the importance of getting humanitarian aid into Venezuela and the neighbouring countries when he was in Ottawa. Will he please give us some more information around the specific measures that are in place to ensure that the aid does reach the right places? As he says, 3 million people have had to flee, and many of them have had to flee on foot—over 1 million to Colombia, for example. It would be helpful if he could give us some more information on that.

The right to self-determination is one owed to people in every country in the world. In the end, it will be for the Venezuelan people to choose their own political future, and there is a need for there to be free and fair elections in that regard. Will the Minister tell us what steps he has taken to support the Venezuelan people in strengthening their democratic institutions, so that they can have a democracy that is actually a democracy in reality, not just in name?

**Sir Alan Duncan:** I am very happy to say that I agree with the hon. Lady in all respects. On humanitarian aid, while I was in Ottawa I spoke at some length to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development, and I will be meeting her again next week. We are discussing how we can anticipate the way in which aid might be delivered once the country is, as we hope, again opened up. We are planning to try to work with multilateral organisations for when Venezuela can be properly assisted. I rather think that, although we know there is a humanitarian problem, when we lift the lid and look more deeply into what has been wrought upon the Venezuelan people, we are likely to find out that it is far more severe than we even contemplate at the moment. We need to be ready for that eventuality, and I know that the International Development Secretary and the whole Department for International Development apparatus are now looking at this very deeply.

On the question of helping Venezuela to get up and running in a legitimate way, I would make one simple point, which is that the country does have a constitution. The problem is not the constitution, but that Maduro has not upheld the constitution. He holds up the little book and then bends all the rules that are written inside it. All we need is to uphold the proper process and principles of that constitution. That is exactly what Juan Guaidó and the National Assembly are doing, and they are now the foundation for reasserting the proper workings of the constitution through free, fair and effective legitimate elections.

**Peter Heaton-Jones** (North Devon) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend the Minister for his statement, which is extremely welcome. It stands in stark contrast to the contribution by the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), which was regrettably, I am afraid, ill-judged in both its tone and content.

Will he assure me that we are doing everything we can to condemn the persecution and intimidation being meted out by this socialist regime to opposition activists?

**Graham P. Jones** (Hyndburn) (Lab): It's not socialist—it's Marxist.

**Peter Heaton-Jones:** In particular, can we also ensure that we are doing everything we can to secure the safety of journalists, who need to have the freedom to report what is happening there safely and securely?

**Sir Alan Duncan:** I am sure the House will hope that I do not get into a semantic argument about the use of the words “Marxist”, “socialist”, “Leninist” or “Trotskyist”. I am not as great an expert on such words as some Opposition Members are. My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The freedom of journalists who are getting in is absolutely essential. We will do our utmost to uphold human rights there, but also to bring to account those who have abused them.

Let me say two things. First, on the use of the Magnitsky clause, I apologise to the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) for not answering her question about that, but let me do so now. We would like to be able to do this now, but the process of getting the application of the Magnitsky clause workable within the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018 will take a few more stages of parliamentary approval. It needs to go through certain statutory instruments and things like that, so it is not yet up and running, but we would like it to be. We would obviously like to do that as soon as we can, within the broader snowstorm of Brexit SIs.

Secondly, the Lima Group countries have referred Venezuela—the state and not just individuals within in it—to the International Criminal Court, citing some 18,000 extra-judicial killings and many other such instances that they believe create a very strong case against Maduro and his entire regime under the rules of the ICC.

**Jo Swinson** (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): I very much welcome the Minister's and the UK Government's recognition of Juan Guaidó as the interim President of Venezuela. I think that the response by the shadow Minister was frankly astonishing in almost seeking to absolve the Maduro regime of the responsibility that it should have for this crisis in the country that is causing misery to millions.

Will the Minister tell the House a little more about how further sanctions might be invoked, both in making sure that they are so finely targeted as not to have a negative impact on the people who are already suffering, and in using them to put pressure on individuals, particularly senior members of the military, to stop their backing for the corrupt and illegitimate Maduro regime, as that is what is enabling it to maintain its stranglehold on the country?

**Sir Alan Duncan:** I welcome the hon. Lady's welcome, if I may put it that way. I am glad that so many in this House find themselves in agreement. She is absolutely right. If we can apply some more targeted sanctions against individuals at the top in a way that does not undermine the wellbeing, such as it is, of the people themselves, we will of course want to pursue that.

At the moment, that still requires EU sanctions. We do not yet have our autonomous ability to impose sanctions in that way. I hope that we will discuss further EU sanctions. We are not quite there yet because there are one or two elements within the EU who are resisting such pressures, but I hope we can overcome that.

The other respect in which we might be able to be more effective is to try to make sure that the money dries up. At the moment, the ever more isolated Maduro regime is held together by the support, primarily, of the military. In order to maintain that, he needs the money with which to pay them. I hope that in the coming weeks we will see the gradual erosion of support within the military for this increasingly isolated President. I hope that they will peel off and that we can help them to do so by making sure that the money flows that allow him to buy their support disappear as quickly as possible.

**Trudy Harrison** (Copeland) (Con): The economic collapse in Venezuela has left 90% of its population in poverty. Will my right hon. Friend join me in condemning those in this House who have actually praised the Venezuelan regime for conquering poverty?

**Sir Alan Duncan:** I totally agree with my hon. Friend. This goes back a long way. Indeed, the Leader of the Opposition was an enormous fan of Maduro's predecessor, Mr Chávez. He went out of his way to praise him for his inspiring leadership and

“for showing that the poor matter and wealth can be shared.”

That sharing of wealth allowed Chávez to amass a fortune of over \$1 billion while his people pretty well had to go and lick the streets in order to feed themselves. This allows me to point out, I hope very clearly, that anyone who says that Venezuela's plight is down to the action of the Americans and their sanctions ought to read my Chatham House speech from last November, which maps out in great detail the steps that Chávez and Maduro took, over many years, that have led to the complete collapse of the Venezuelan economy, almost all of which had nothing whatsoever to do with the United States.

**Mr Chris Leslie** (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister understand that the problem with those on the political extremes of the spectrum is that they tend, in an ideological way, to see the world in terms of black and white, oppressor and oppressed? There is a real problem in seeing Maduro and his regime as the victim of others—America or whoever it may be. The truth is that the direct cause of the mass starvation and the 3 million refugees is the Chávez-Maduro corrupt communism that has been pursued in that country. A better illustration we could not get than the picture of the blockaded bridge that is still leading to starvation in the country. The doctors, by the way, are not allowed to designate people who die from malnutrition as having done so because they are banned from putting that on the death certificates.

What can we do to influence and put pressure on the regime? Can we get the Russian Administration to do more, or the Chinese or the Cubans? Are there individuals, perhaps even the leader of the Labour party, who have a close relationship with Maduro who could at this stage pick up the telephone and implore him—beg him—to stop this appalling approach and to leave government immediately?

**Sir Alan Duncan:** If that were to work, we would all absolutely welcome it. Any influence that can be brought to bear should be used, out of basic human decency. This is not an ideological conflict, although some who seem to be more inclined to support Maduro than is the rest of the world have been accused of guilt on a number of counts—of supporting economic insanity, of indifference to intense human suffering, of a refusal to accept any measures to alleviate it, of an adherence to an ideology and a hatred for any leadership that is offered by the United States and the western world. Those attitudes have to be set aside. If there can be a practical course of action along the lines that the hon. Gentleman describes, we should encourage it. That is what is needed. We need this man to hand over power to the legitimate authorities in Venezuela so that his people can be rescued.

**Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): The Minister mentioned the fact that food aid is being blockaded. Are there any alternative plans to get the food aid through to the Venezuelan people? There is also the issue of Venezuela's gold reserves in Turkey that has been mentioned in press reports. What is the position in relation to that?

**Sir Alan Duncan:** I hope that pressure from neighbouring countries can have some effect in getting humanitarian aid in. Looking at the pictures we saw on our screens yesterday, I think it inevitable that there will be ever-deepening popular outrage in Venezuela itself that is likely to express itself increasingly strongly if Maduro remains in denial about humanitarian aid to the point of blocking it and forcing his people to starve in front of the world's television cameras at the border.

On gold, there are gold reserves held by the Bank of England. It holds them under a contract; it is entirely down to the Bank, as an independent Bank of England. It is nothing to do with this Government. We are not empowered to, nor should we in any way attempt to, influence the decision of the Bank of England. I am sure that the Bank will be looking at unfolding events in Venezuela to work out who is legitimate and who is not.

**Angela Smith** (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): I start by distancing myself from the remarks from the Labour Front Bench in relation to the blame for the crisis that Venezuela is suffering, which is destroying the fabric of the country. The responsibility for that does absolutely lie with Maduro and his predecessor, Chavez; most of us in this House are certain about that.

What worries me at the moment is the blockade on the border between Venezuela and Colombia. The people of Venezuela need that aid urgently, so what are the UK Government doing to bring pressure to bear to ensure that it can get through? Will the Minister convey a message from the vast majority of the Members of this House that we will not tolerate efforts by the Venezuelan regime to stop aid getting through to its people? It is deplorable.

**Sir Alan Duncan:** I absolutely and totally agree with the hon. Lady, and totally share her decent human concern for the plight of Venezuelans, who are being denied the offer of desperately needed aid. May I make it absolutely clear that I, and I think all on the Government side of the House, are actually far less interested in

pointing out the absurdity of some of the views held by those on Labour's Front Bench than we are in wanting to find unity across the House in a way that can make the United Kingdom's voice strong and loud in trying to help the people of Venezuela at this critical time. I therefore applaud what the hon. Lady and very many—indeed, the majority—of her colleagues have said, and are continuing to say, on this issue. When it comes to aid, we will do all we can. We have limited muscle, if you like, but the best way to do our best is to work with other countries, such as the Lima Group, which are there, as a strong neighbouring presence, to keep up the pressure on Maduro and Venezuela.

**Dr Matthew Offord** (Hendon) (Con): I thank the Minister for coming to the House today to make a statement. This is the second time that the House has debated the issue in the last 10 days. Really, we are talking about two different things here. First, this is being used as a subject to beat the Leader of the Opposition with for his defence of a Marxist regime. Secondly, it is being used by the Government side to increase the Government's influence on the world stage. The Leader of the Opposition is not here to defend his Marxist views, and that is fine, but I would like to hear what the Minister has to say—where does he really think the role of the United Kingdom is upon the international stage—because anything we say about dialogue, empowerment and recognition of opponents will have no tangible benefit for the people of Venezuela, who are genuinely suffering.

**Sir Alan Duncan:** I do not wholly agree with my hon. Friend's suggestion that our influence and efforts amount to so little. I actually think that the UK has managed to establish itself as a very strong voice within the European Union, and as the head of the "EU pack", on this. I have been working with the Lima Group since it was led by the previous Peruvian Foreign Minister; it is now led by new Foreign Minister Popolizio. I think that has helped to galvanise world opinion in a way that is making a difference. The one thing it may show itself to have done is to have given Juan Guaidó the confidence to make the stand that he has in asserting the workings of the constitution and declaring himself the interim President. If that then leads to elections, we will look back and say that it has made a difference.

I urge my hon. Friend to be a little more optimistic about how effective international diplomacy can be when it is wrestling with an issue such as this.

**Graham P. Jones** (Hyndburn) (Lab): Is the Minister as concerned as I am about some of the displacement rhetoric and nonsense that has been put about on TV stations in the past few days? It is simply anti-American. Does that not cause us a more significant problem when we look at Maduro using that anti-American nonsense and rhetoric—sanctions that do not exist, military invasion that is not happening; there are no troops there—as an excuse to stop US aid going in across the Colombian border to help those poor Venezuelans? Does the Minister agree that that nonsense rhetoric is damaging the poor people of Venezuela, and that we should be concerned and should be welcoming the United States' aid getting in to help those Venezuelan people? That should be our priority—not anti-western, anti-American bashing.

**Sir Alan Duncan:** I echo the cries behind me and around the House of “Well said.” The hon. Gentleman speaks enormous sense because under the guise of anti-imperialism, those on the far left have made themselves useful for actual imperialists, as long as they are not American. They have used the spectre of western intervention to ignore or downplay real interventions on the part of other powerful imperial nations. “Displacement rhetoric”, as the hon. Gentleman puts it, is a good way of describing it, and it is culpable because it displaces the focus that we need to have on what positively can and must be done to rescue that poor beleaguered country.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** And finally, Mr John Spellar.

**John Spellar (Warley) (Lab):** I would certainly have hoped that Andrew Neil’s recent demolition of Ken Livingstone had put to bed any claims that there had been general sanctions on Venezuela, rather than targeted ones on regime individuals. So I welcome Britain’s recognition of Juan Guaidó as the lawful President of Venezuela, and I welcome the announcement of the current aid effort. My hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) kindly referred to my call for a Marshall plan for Venezuela, so may I again urge imaginative and detailed plans for the rapid subsequent reconstruction of Venezuela’s economy and infrastructure? Are the Minister’s Department and the Department for International Development getting on with that work, and if not, why not?

**Sir Alan Duncan:** I fully acknowledge the right hon. Gentleman’s point. He is very wise to be thinking ahead in this way, because the inevitable need for rapid delivery of resources can suddenly become apparent, and it is important that the world is ready to leap straightaway into action. As I said earlier, I have seen this through pledging conferences in various countries, and I have no doubt that there will have to be extensive multilateral assistance to help Venezuela to rebuild, after which I think they will be able to rebuild themselves; but a bit of pump-priming and basic food and medicine and the addressing of disease and malnutrition needs to start as soon as possible. As I said, first that will be multilateral; there will need to be a lot of UN effort, to which we are a major contributor. I am due to see my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development next week, having spoken to her on Monday, and I will convey, as strongly as I possibly can, the views of the right hon. Gentleman to ensure that she is aware of the sort of plan that may be necessary.

## Social Media and Screen Use: Young People’s Health

### SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY COMMITTEE

#### *Select Committee statement*

1.58 pm

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** We now come to the first of today’s Select Committee statements. Mr Norman Lamb will speak—

**Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD) *rose***—

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I am sorry; I have to give a little explanation, as these matters are still fairly new to the House, so we will make sure that we get the procedure correct. Mr Norman Lamb will speak on his subject for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of his statement, I will call Members to put questions on the subject of the statement, and call Mr Lamb to respond to these in turn. Members can expect to be called only once. Interventions should be questions, and should be brief. Front Benchers may, if they so wish, take part in this questioning.

1.59 pm

**Norman Lamb:** I rise to make a statement on our report on the impact of social media and screen use on young people’s health. Before I cover our key findings, I want to pay tribute to Ian Russell, the father of Molly Russell, who tragically took her own life. The decision of Ian Russell to speak out and raise concerns about what Molly saw online, through Instagram, has had a profound impact in raising public consciousness of the potential risks, but also in galvanising the debate and the call for action to ensure that children are protected from harm.

I thank the 174 organisations and individuals who provided us with written evidence, and the 37 individuals who gave oral evidence. I am particularly grateful to all the young people who took part in our survey and told us of their experiences of using social media. We received over 3,000 responses from schools across the UK, which was amazing. This is an evidence-based report, and it would not have been possible without the input of all those people. I thank the parliamentary outreach and education services for facilitating the responses from schools. I would also like to thank the brilliant team who support the Science and Technology Committee in the work we do.

Throughout our inquiry, we heard repeatedly that children no longer make a distinction between the online and offline worlds. The boundaries between the two have become blurred. In 2015, almost a quarter of 15-year-olds in the UK spent six hours a day or more online outside school, and much of that time was spent on social media. At its best, social media can be a positive, transformative force in a young person’s life. It is a way of keeping in touch with friends and of connecting instantaneously with people across the world from different backgrounds. Crucially, it has given many young people an opportunity for their voice to be heard on the issues that they care most about.

[Norman Lamb]

At its worst, however, social media has been linked to cyber-bullying, grooming, sexting and the promotion of harmful information and behaviours. Those risks are not new and they are not caused by social media. We are clear throughout our report that social media can act both to amplify and to facilitate those risks. For example, we heard how bullying no longer stops at the school gate. Instead, it finds its way into children's homes via social media, sometimes taking place in front of a large online audience.

Frustratingly, we do not have a good enough understanding of the scale of the problem—be it cyber-bullying via social media or grooming—nor do we have robust academic evidence of the relationship between the use of social media by young people and its effect on their health. That is not an acceptable situation. It cannot be right that we do not yet have a good grasp of who is at risk of experiencing harm from using social media and why, or of the longer-term consequences of that exposure on children.

Social media is, of course, still a young research field, but the more pressing problem is that researchers lack access to key data on social media and its use. That valuable data is held by social media companies. It has the potential to provide the types of insights that are so clearly needed, yet social media companies have not readily shared it with bona fide researchers. It is deeply disappointing that we continue to grapple around in the dark on this issue when the answers could be forthcoming.

In our report, we call on social media companies to make anonymised high-level data available for research purposes to bona fide researchers, while also respecting data protection principles. We also stress that the Government should consider what legislation needs to be in place to make that happen. Incidentally, I very much welcome the chief medical officer's report today and her call for access to data for research, which matches the Committee's call. I also very much welcome her guidance to parents and others.

The lack of good-quality academic evidence does not give us a licence simply to sit back and do nothing. We heard repeatedly from parents, carers, teachers and children themselves that they were worried about the detrimental effects of social media. Arguably, we have waited far too long for social media companies to step up to the plate and address the risks that their platforms facilitate. Successive voluntary codes of practice and guidance have not delivered effective protection for children online.

Legislative progress, too, has been patchy and achingly slow. Most online content is still subject to little or no specific regulation, creating, in effect, a "standards lottery", as the regulator, Ofcom, has described it. Change is long overdue. Sometimes the opportunity to enact vital changes feels infuriatingly out of reach. I hope that will not be the case on this occasion. The Government's forthcoming online harms White Paper, with the prospect of legislation to follow, presents a crucial opportunity to put a world-leading regulatory framework in place. This chance must not be squandered.

First and foremost, a principles-based regulatory regime for social media companies should be introduced in the forthcoming parliamentary Session. The regime should apply to any site with registered UK users. At the core of this new regime must be the principle that social

media companies have a duty of care towards their users who are under 18. In essence, that means that children must be protected from harm when accessing and using social media sites. It should be achieved through social media companies acting with reasonable care to avoid identified harms. If enacted, it would be a powerful, game-changing step, and it is one that my Committee urges the Government to take.

Social media companies must also be far more open and transparent in how they operate and particularly how they moderate, review and prioritise content. To achieve that, the Government should introduce a statutory code of practice for social media companies to provide consistency on content reporting practices. This will require primary legislation. We were particularly encouraged by the German example of the Government setting a clear 24-hour timeframe in which social media companies must respond to reports of potentially illegal content. A similar approach should be put in place in the UK.

To uphold the new regime, a regulator should be appointed by the end of October 2019. We believe that Ofcom, working alongside the Information Commissioner's Office, is well placed to perform this role. Ofcom should not only monitor compliance with the proposed code of practice, but have the necessary teeth to take enforcement action when warranted. Enforcement actions must be backed by a strong and effective sanctions regime. Consideration should be given to whether directors ought to be held personally liable.

Finally, the digital literacy and resilience of children, as well as of their teachers and parents, must be improved. Young people in particular must be equipped with the skills that they need to navigate and assess what they are seeing on social media and beyond. To achieve this, personal, social, health and economic education must soon be made mandatory by the Government for both primary and secondary school pupils. It should deliver an age-appropriate understanding of the harms and benefits of the digital world.

I want to finish on an optimistic note. I am encouraged by the sheer amount of interest in and the work that is currently being undertaken on this matter, which is occurring both inside and outside Government. What we need now is action—effective action in the form of new primary legislation that brings forward a robust regulatory regime, underpinned by strong sanctions. What we do not need is more toothless voluntary codes that can be ignored by social media companies.

Success depends on sustained leadership and commitment from the Government, even when it is difficult. At the core of this, there needs to be a legal duty of care, with the clear understanding that there are consequences for their actions if social media companies fail to protect children. Without leadership and perseverance, the worst that social media has to offer will continue to blight the lives of children. This must not be tolerated.

**Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con):** I thank the Chair of the Science and Technology Committee for coming to the House and making a statement, and other members of the Committee for their work. I welcome this report. It is a fantastic piece of work, and I look forward to researching the issue in more detail. Did the right hon. Gentleman consider the concerning and tragic case of the teenager, Molly Russell, who allegedly took her own

life after viewing images on Instagram? Did the Committee consider the concerning issue of social media companies that will not release the data concerning a young person who has died, possibly as a result of images that have been seen in that way, and did it form a view on what should be done?

**Norman Lamb:** Molly Russell's father, Ian Russell, spoke out after we completed our report, and what he said about the experience of his daughter is central to our recommendations. There must be much greater transparency, as well as mechanisms to ensure that the very harmful materials that Molly saw on Instagram do not come in front of children online. Children must be protected from such harm, and the hon. Lady is right to highlight that issue.

**Martin Whitfield** (East Lothian) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to serve on the Committee chaired by the right hon. Gentleman, especially with regard to this report. I wholly agree with its conclusions, but draw particular importance to the point about data access, which is vital for future knowledge, as well as the duty of care. Does he agree that our conclusions about parental engagement are of equal importance? Parents have a key role to play in empowering their children and giving them resilience online, but they themselves need huge support to educate their children. The onus is therefore on Governments across the United Kingdom to ensure that parents have the right remedies, right knowledge, and right access to information to be able to educate their children and protect them online.

**Norman Lamb:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind remarks, which I entirely share as I enjoy working on the Committee with him. He is right to highlight the need for guidance and advice from the parents' perspective, which is why I welcome the chief medical officer's report today. One thing she highlights, which is potentially uncomfortable for us all, is the fact that children report being concerned about parents who use social media in front of their children, rather than engaging with them. In a way that makes the point that we all have a responsibility. The Government have to act, because the time for legislation is long overdue, but as we grapple to cope with the social revolution that has happened over the past five years, we as a society all have a responsibility.

**Robert Halfon** (Harlow) (Con): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on this incredibly important report, which complements some of the work done by the Education Committee. Does he support the request made to the Chairman of Ways and Means to make arrangements to question Ministers in Westminster Hall, in order to test how joined up the Government are in tackling the serious problems that he and other hon. Members have raised?

**Norman Lamb:** I think that is a brilliant idea. I completely support the right hon. Gentleman's suggestion and would be happy to work with him to ensure that it happens. The opportunity for us across Committees to challenge and question Ministers and ensure effective action is a valuable one.

**Thangam Debbonaire** (Bristol West) (Lab): I, too, commend the Committee and its Chair for this excellent report. I have not yet had the chance to read it, but I

wish to ask the right hon. Gentleman two questions. First, is he aware of the excellent work being done by my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) and the all-party group on social media and young people's mental health and wellbeing, which he chairs? It recently held an inquiry into social media and young people's mental health, which will be published in March, and I urge the right hon. Gentleman to take note of that.

The second point is about the potential for social media to be a force for good in relation to young people's health. I chair the all-party group on children, teenagers, and young adults with cancer, and we are keen for good health messages to go out on social media because, as the right hon. Gentleman says, young people today see no difference between the online and offline worlds, and social media is potentially a powerful force for good. Would he consider holding a further inquiry, if necessary, to explore that issue?

**Norman Lamb:** I would be happy to work with the all-party group to ensure that our collective learning on this issue feeds into decision making by the Government, so that we get the legislation right and as quickly as possible. The hon. Lady makes the important point that social media is often a force for good. It is important to have a balanced view of this issue, and although we must recognise the powerful potential good impact that social media can have, we must also recognise its risks and harms and take action to protect children from those harms, while not throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

**Trudy Harrison** (Copeland) (Con): I wish to follow on from the point raised by the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) about the potential force for good of social media, and I thank the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) and his Committee for this report. I also wish to reflect on comments made yesterday by the Suicide Prevention Minister, who referred to the opportunity to use algorithms to promote things positively. As a parent of four daughters aged between 15 and 20, and as a mother who works away, I can say that social media has provided a very positive influence in my daughters' lives. One particular YouTuber, Zoe Sugg, was almost a virtual big sister in our household, and I echo those comments and encourage more positive stories around social media and the opportunity for positive algorithms to support its use in the future.

**Norman Lamb:** The hon. Lady makes a valuable point, and I am conscious that teenagers and young people can get online access to advice, guidance and support to help them through difficult periods of their life, and encourage them to seek help from others. We must recognise that and ensure that our approach to this issue is balanced, both recognising the potential harms and understanding the positive aspects of social media.

**Jo Swinson** (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): I congratulate my right hon. Friend and his Committee on the production of this excellent report. Does he agree that as new technology develops, and particularly as we hand more control over to algorithms, there is an urgent need to ensure that ethical considerations are fully thought through at the design stage? In addition to the specific regulation that he envisages, we also need a more general

[Jo Swinson]

code of data ethics—a sort of Hippocratic oath, perhaps, for developers and data scientists—to ensure that those principles are thought through as technology is developed. Would he support my campaign for such a code to be named after Ada Lovelace?

**Norman Lamb:** I thank my hon. Friend for that contribution, and I would support her campaign. I also agree about the importance of designing ethics into the way that algorithms operate. Indeed, this week our Committee took evidence from the head of the Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation, and there is an important discussion to be had. Although there are rapid developments on the ground with the Government using algorithms in all sorts of different ways, we do not fully understand how to ensure an ethical framework that protects people from bias and can be built into the data used by algorithms. If such bias become embedded into the algorithms there are very dangerous potential outcomes, and my hon. Friend is correct to say that we need to get this right.

**Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab):** May I join the right hon. Gentleman in congratulating our Committee Clerks on helping us with this extensive and high-quality report? Does he agree that in traditional regulated sectors, the idea that a regulator should be able to see data to assess harm on behalf of consumers and take action in an appropriate way is perfectly normal? Not just our report but that by the chief medical officer, reports that we are expecting from the Government, and announcements made yesterday by my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson) and by others, indicate that this is merely an incremental change as we adjust to the new online world. This is something that should be welcomed, and positively and proactively taken forward by the Government without many hurdles.

**Norman Lamb:** I echo the hon. Gentleman's comments about the amazing support that we get from an impressive and able team, and I very much agree that data must be available to regulators and researchers so that we gain a much greater understanding of where the risks are and which children are most at risk of harm. By improving our understanding in that way, we are much more likely to protect children from harm.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies):** This is the second time this week that I find myself in the same room as the right hon. Gentleman, agreeing on many issues and focusing on our children's mental health. That feels very appropriate in Children's Mental Health Week. As we have heard today, social media is one of many factors that may contribute, in both a positive and negative way, to our children's mental health. We recognise that social media and technology can bring huge benefits for our young people, but we need to recognise and manage potential harms.

I welcome the Science and Technology Committee's report and the opportunity to better understand the relationship between young people's mental health, excessive screen time and the use of social media. We will consider the Committee's findings ahead of the publication of the online harms White Paper. The report calls for media companies to have a duty of care. We are seriously considering all regulatory options as part of the White Paper. In the meantime, the Government are very clear that we need to hold companies to account. They have a responsibility to their users. We will be setting out plans for both legislative and non-legislative measures in our online harms White Paper.

We continue to work with our colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care on all possible policy options to take forward on young people's mental health in relation to all areas of health and social media. All relevant Ministers across Government will see and react to this very good report.

**Norman Lamb:** I thank the Minister very much. Just to be clear, the other occasion when the Minister and I were in a room together was when we talked about the national lottery's work on children's mental health. It is making a very significant investment, in six places around the country, in looking at how we can give children the best possible start to life. That is worth applauding.

I welcome the Minister's response. All I would say is that I encourage her to get on with it. We have been waiting for quite a long time now, and we need the White Paper to be published as soon as possible. Harms continue to happen while we wait for the legislation to be introduced.

## Tackling Disadvantage in the Early Years

### EDUCATION COMMITTEE

#### *Select Committee statement*

2.22 pm

**Robert Halfon** (Harlow) (Con): Social justice is the defining issue for our country and is a fundamental aspect of the Education Committee's work. We published our report on "Tackling disadvantage in the early years" this morning. I thank my Committee colleagues, a number of whom are in the Chamber—my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) and the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows)—and I am grateful to the Committee's officers and to the witnesses to our inquiry, as well as to the stakeholders and practitioners we met on our evidence-gathering visit to Manchester.

We started our inquiry last year by exploring the effect of the early years on children's life chances. We were concerned about the apparent absence of strategy in this area. The life chances strategy promised by the Government under the previous Prime Minister was never published, and the Government's social mobility action plan did not fully address the importance of the role of the early years. Even more concerning were reports that the Government's flagship policy of 30 hours' childcare appears to be entrenching disadvantage. Despite the Government's efforts, good intentions and some good policy—I often talk to the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), and I know he is passionate about these issues—we found that their approach is confused and lacking in direction.

Let me take the 30 hours' childcare policy as an example of this confused approach. A policy that is intended to help parents to get back into work is a positive aspiration, but we heard that the policy is having perverse consequences that I imagine are intended. What are those perverse consequences? We heard an overwhelming message that the policy is widening the gap between disadvantaged children and those from more advantaged backgrounds. Disadvantaged children are having their hours reduced so that children from more advantaged families can have a place. The policy makes it financially difficult for nurseries to take on disadvantaged two-year-olds while more childcare is offered to more affluent parents.

It seems strange to me that an MP with children can have 30 hours of free childcare for three and four-year-olds, yet a lone parent in my constituency can have only 15 hours. Why does that matter? Because time spent in high-quality early education supports children's development. It improves children's cognitive and social development outcomes, and narrows the gap between the most and least disadvantaged children. Paragraph 33 of our report states:

"The introduction of tax-free childcare and 30 hours of free childcare has tilted public childcare spending towards better-off families; while in 2016 a two-parent family on the national living wage with annual earnings of £19,000 received 6 per cent more in childcare support than a two-parent family earning £100,000 a year, the former now receives 20 per cent less in childcare support than the latter."

That seems to me to be a social injustice. One of our witnesses called the 30-hours policy a "car crash". Despite the good intentions, it is entrenching inequality rather than closing the gap. The Government should review the 30 hours' childcare policy, reduce the earning cap, and use the extra funds to help fund the disadvantaged.

We heard compelling evidence about maintained nursery schools. We were fortunate enough to visit Martenscroft Nursery School and Sure Start Children's Centre in Hulme, Manchester. In January 2018, all maintained nursery schools but one were rated as outstanding or good by Ofsted—the jewel in our education system. We were told that they achieve extraordinarily successful outcomes for children. As of 2015, 64% of maintained nurseries were in 30% of the most deprived areas. They are working really well, transforming the life chances of our very young children, and the Government should be supporting them. They are in danger at the moment because there is not a funding settlement that guarantees that they can survive. Some 67% of nursery schools believe they will be unsustainable if the transitional funding provided by the Government until 2019-20 comes to an end. Maintained nursery schools cannot wait until the spending review. Funding decisions regarding staff and places for the next academic year are being made now, and transitional funding is running out. Our report urges the Government to commit to fully funding maintained nursery schools by the end of the financial year.

Parenting and the home learning environment are key for improving children's life chances. We heard about the significance of the role of health visitors in supporting parents in the period after birth. They are the most common source of guidance for parents, and they play a wider role in prevention and early intervention. We want local authorities to collect full and complete data on the number of home visitors and home visits conducted in their area. We asked witnesses about the best way of getting important messages about the home learning environment through to parents. One witness argued for public health campaigns to support the home learning environment, for example to help parents to understand that talking to their baby is important even if the baby cannot talk back. One witness said:

"We have public health campaigns for fruit and vegetables, why not for speech and language?"

Children's centres have a key role to play in the co-ordination of services. I was hugely grateful that the children's Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon, who is now in his place on the Front Bench, came with me to Harlow to see an integrated children's family hub, which is a model of an excellent children's centre. The Government planned to hold and publish a consultation on the children's centre problem, but it was scrapped by the Department for Education. Our report states that the Department should explore promoting family hubs as a wider model for integrated services. We need to remove barriers to progression for staff. We need proper apprenticeship schemes that are clear, not confused as they are at the moment, and graduate schemes that remove barriers to progression so that we encourage the brightest and the best to continue to work on early years education.

We are excited that the Leader of the House—she is very passionate about life chances—is chairing a cross-Government working group that is reviewing how to

[Robert Halfon]

improve the support available to families in the period between birth and the age of two. We hope that the Leader of the House will be truly ambitious, working with the children's Minister, and truly radical with her recommendations.

Our Committee is dedicated to seeking to improve social justice across society, and our report flags up a failure by the Government to deal with disadvantage in the early years. It states:

"children who attended high quality pre-school for 2-3 years were almost eight months ahead in their literacy development compared to children who had not attended pre-school."

We know that life chances and early intervention for our early years will dramatically transform the lives of those children, and that disadvantaged children are four and a half months behind their better-off peers at the start of school. They are over nine months behind at the end of primary school and over 19 months behind by the end of secondary school. That is why this area is incredibly important.

We look forward to the Government's response to our report—as I said, I know that the children's Minister is passionate about these issues—and we hope to see a proper, cohesive and considered approach to tackling disadvantage in these crucial early years of children's lives, so that we make sure that the youngest children from the most disadvantaged communities have a chance to climb the educational ladder of opportunity.

**Thangam Debbonaire** (Bristol West) (Lab): I thank the Chair of the Committee very much for the report. I echo his concerns about the perverse consequences of the funding regime, which have been shared with me by nursery schools in my constituency. They also petitioned the Government this week, with those petitions presented on Tuesday. Will he join me in urging the Minister to look again at the funding structure and to consider whether it might be worth tilting the funding of early years more in favour of funding the supply side than the demand side, because that might help to even out some of the bumps in the road? After all, there would be a return on our investment if we had a structure in which parents could dip into free childcare when they needed it—for instance, to attend training and job interviews—and then eventually move into employment, rather than having the upwards cliff edge that appears to be in place at the moment.

**Robert Halfon:** The hon. Lady proposes an interesting idea. I was in the House of Commons the other night when Members on both sides of the House presented one petition after another—I have never seen that before—on maintained nurseries. Yes, this is certainly something that we should be looking at.

**Norman Lamb** (North Norfolk) (LD): I very much welcome the report and the right hon. Gentleman's comments. In particular, I welcome his highlighting of the fact that Government policy is increasing the divide between the most disadvantaged children and others, which is precisely the opposite of what Government policy ought to achieve. Equal opportunity for all should be the vision that we share across the House. What is striking is the link between his Committee's report and

that of the Science and Technology Committee on early intervention regarding adverse experiences suffered in childhood and the need for a national strategy, as well as the work of the Health and Social Care Committee. The Department for Education's response to our report was deeply disappointing, effectively rejecting the case for a national strategy. It seems to me that we Select Committees should be working together to make the case for clearer action from the Government.

**Robert Halfon:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman and he is absolutely right. When the 30-hours policy was devised, it was all about the labour market and perhaps trying to create incentives for people to go into work, but the problem is that it just entrenches disadvantage for those who are not able to work, for one reason or another. Although I did not talk about this much in my statement, a significant part of the report is all about the home learning environment. There is a lot of collaboration, and I have no doubt that the Minister will be listening to what the right hon. Gentleman's Committee has said and what our Committee is saying.

**Tracy Brabin** (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Chairman of the Education Committee for his statement, and I give him and his very hard-working and diligent Committee huge congratulations on the report. I know that it really has committed its time to this. I support a number of points that have been made, particularly on support for disadvantaged children and upskilling the early years workforce.

The report mentions level 3 qualified staff—the starting rung for the early years ladder. Does the right hon. Gentleman believe that we need a more comprehensive approach in encouraging settings to put their staff through this qualification? If so, should there be Government support to cover the costs, particularly in disadvantaged areas? I echo his concern about funding for maintained nurseries. Has he had any indication from the Government that there may be a bridging loan or some support before the end of the financial year?

**Robert Halfon:** I thank the hon. Lady for her questions and remarks. We talk a lot about the problems of the workforce, which need to be recognised. There needs to be proper progression and clear qualifications, as opposed to confusion, and we need to get that right. For example, if there was a proper apprenticeship scheme, people would be paid while they were on that scheme, so the issue of the financial support bursary would be different. Once the graduate scheme is sorted, it is possible that one could look at how disadvantaged would-be professionals could be looked after and one could encourage people to teach in disadvantaged areas.

On maintained nurseries, although our report has been quite critical, there is no doubt in my mind that the Minister is very supportive of them. He understands the problems. I suspect that the House is being helpful to the Minister by allowing him to make his case to the Treasury. I suspect that if he can convince the Treasury, all will be well with maintained nurseries, but they need emergency transitional funding in the meantime so that they will still be there and some will not have to close, as has been suggested.

## Antisocial Behaviour

2.37 pm

**Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered antisocial behaviour.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for the opportunity to debate an issue that affects every constituency, all over the UK. Certainly in the last couple of years, antisocial behaviour has become one of the biggest issues in my constituency. It is absolutely vital that Parliament continues to debate these bread-and-butter issues when our time seems to be squeezed solely on discussing Brexit.

Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary and the fire service found in 2018 that 40% of respondents nationally think that crime and antisocial behaviour is a problem in their area, up from 25% in 2015. Of course, antisocial behaviour appears in many forms, such as gangs of youths hanging around parades of local shops, convenience stores and off-licences, public drinking, vehicle damage and theft, aggressive begging, drug dealing, noise nuisance, and attacks on public transport. In my constituency recently, stones have been thrown at buses in the Orchard Park area, meaning that the bus companies have had to divert buses from there. Of course, antisocial behaviour is also about vandalism, graffiti, fly-tipping and rubbish.

As a constituency MP, I want to make some observations about what is happening locally in my patch of Hull North, but I also want to draw out some of the common themes that are developing around the United Kingdom, challenge the Minister on what the Government need to do, and make some suggestions about sharing good practice.

My home city, Hull, is a fantastic city, with many good, hard-working people—they are the salt of the earth and proud of their communities. Many believe in the best community values of solidarity that we see in friendly societies and trade unions. Very sadly, this is currently typified by the way the community has come together in the search for the missing university student Libby Squire, in the work the emergency services are doing with the University of Hull, students and local people. It is also shown in work being done with young people by Steve Arnott and his Beats Bus crew and by the boxer Tommy Coyle.

Like any city or town, however, Hull has its problems, and sadly we now have a generation of young people who have grown up in the austerity years. We could call them the austerity generation. Some have become very difficult to reach. On a visit to a local primary school in my constituency, the year 6 students told me they did not feel safe in their local area. They mentioned youths hanging around the park who were aggressive and intimidating and they mentioned drug dealing, and they did not like the rubbish and fly-tipping blighting their area.

Nationally, 2.2 million children aged 10 to 17 are worried about crime and antisocial behaviour, and 950,000 children have experienced crime and antisocial behaviour. When I asked constituents to tell me about their experiences of antisocial behaviour, this is what some of them said:

“Youths on motorbikes screaming around North Bransholme at all hours making lots of noise and driving dangerously in and out of cars and other motorists causing them to brake hard.”

Another one said:

“Groups of intimidating youths also hanging around shops being verbally abusive and displaying anti-social behaviour around people trying to use the shops, always the same ones, I've stopped going now – it's got beyond a joke.”

And this:

“One of our Neighbours banged our door for quite a few times with his guests, they were shouting as they were all drunk. I called 999 (because I didn't have a credit to call on 101). The operator said that it's not an emergency and disconnected my call by advising to call on 101. Few minutes later they urinated inside my house through the door”.

Or this comment:

“Spat at, threats to 'slit my f\*\*\*ing throat', threats to 'smash my f\*\*\*ing face in'”.

Feeling safe where we live, work and play is important to us all, and antisocial behaviour can make people's lives miserable. As our local police and crime commissioner Keith Hunter, who is also the national lead for police and crime commissioners on antisocial behaviour, says, antisocial behaviour is often the start of what can lead to serious criminal behaviour if not checked and dealt with. It is clear that we need to reclaim our public spaces for the law-abiding majority.

Keith Hunter has also said:

“When public services and policing retreat from public spaces there will always be a section of society who will seek to use that void for their own criminal or anti-social purposes. That hard core encourages others who under different circumstances would not be a problem. Then law-abiding people don't go to those areas, reinforcing the takeover by the bad element”.

I have to reflect on the fact, therefore, that since 2010 there has been a cut to the Humberside police budget of 31%. Until recently, policing levels in Humberside were down to levels not seen since the 1970s. We have stopped seeing police, special constables and police community support officers on our streets, especially outside the city centre. We have also lost our excellent Hull community wardens, who provided an extra reassuring presence on the streets all over Hull.

It is not just about police numbers; equipment has been cut too. For example, we no longer have our own helicopter based at Humberside airport, which could respond quickly, track suspects and identify cannabis factories with its heat-seeking capability. We now share a helicopter with other Yorkshire forces. Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary reported in 2017 on the substandard response to ongoing police incidents resulting from the decline in the number of national helicopters. I am aware of reports that Lincolnshire police are using police drones. I wonder if the Minister could reflect upon drones as a cost-effective idea that other police forces should consider using more widely.

The police grant settlement this week sadly does not produce the central Government funding that police forces need. Humberside's PCC says that

“services are stretched to breaking point”

and is now having to consult on a 6.4% council tax precept increase—a regressive tax, let's remember, on the “just managing”—to raise the money he needs to stabilise police numbers and meet the increasing costs of the force. Thankfully, we have a PCC who is actively recruiting and training police officers in order to restore some of the numbers lost since 2010. He recognises the reassurance of having a presence focused on the frontline.

**Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making some vital points about antisocial behaviour. She mentioned the role of community support officers and the cuts to their numbers. The Welsh Government stepped in to fund community support officers across Wales when the UK Government cut the funding. Is that not a stark reminder of the difference between Labour and Tory Governments' records on policing and local government?

**Diana Johnson:** My hon. Friend's intervention sets out very clearly the difference and how the role of PCSOs is valued in Wales.

There are some good initiatives happening in Humberside to tackle antisocial behaviour, particularly where the police are working alongside active Labour councillors such as Rosie Nicola, Gary Wareing, Steve Wilson, Gwen Lunn, Marjorie Brabazon and Anita Harrison, who are all determined to tackle antisocial behaviour in their areas—for example, by using a mobile cop shop to move to areas where problems develop. With the current problems with attacks on buses, there are also plans to use a Trojan bus with police aboard who can take action if stones and other items are thrown at the bus. They can stop the bus, get off and deal with it.

The police are showing a video in local schools demonstrating the effects of antisocial behaviour. I think the video came from Dundee and contains the example of a child throwing a stone at a driver who then swerved, hit a pram and killed a baby. That kind of video is useful in educating children and young people about the effects of what they think might be a prank. Humberside has also pioneered Operation Yellowfin to combat crime with motorbikes—another big problem in my area—and has received national recognition for its work with local petrol stations to prevent people who commit antisocial behaviour on motorbikes and mopeds from being able to buy petrol. That said, we need a routine long-term police presence to deter and detect antisocial behaviour, not just special one-off operations when things get really bad.

**Rushanara Ali** (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the fundamental problem is that, with 21,000 police officers having been taken out of the system, along with PCSOs and others, it is an uphill struggle and that the Government must take seriously the need to put in significant resources if we are to tackle antisocial behaviour? At the moment, the police are having to deal with violent crime, which has gone up by 19% in the last year, and so of necessity are deprioritising antisocial behaviour, which is making people's lives a misery and terrorising our constituents.

**Diana Johnson:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I could not agree more.

We should recognise the important work that my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) has been doing in identifying the off-rolling of school pupils. Owing to changes in the education landscape and the academisation of schools, there has been an increase in the number of children who are being home-educated. They disappear from the school system, and many then become part of the antisocial behaviour problem. I should be interested to know the Minister's view. I should also like to know

whether she is willing to speak to her colleagues in the Department for Education, and whether she thinks that including education representatives in the community safety partnerships might be a way of dealing with the problem.

We also need to do much more in relation to mental health. We need to understand what antisocial behaviour does to people's health and wellbeing, to understand that mental health issues can be one of the reasons why perpetrators become involved in antisocial behaviour, and to understand the help that they require.

One idea that could be rolled out nationally came from New York in the 1990s, when the mayor adopted a zero-tolerance approach to antisocial behaviour, fly-tipping, rubbish-dumping and graffiti. The outcomes were very positive. If a window was broken it was fixed, if rubbish piled up it was moved, and if people behaved in an antisocial way they were dealt with. If that is to work here, however, it will need stable funding, and, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali), the money must come from central Government. It will also need a multi-agency approach, and strong political leadership both nationally and locally. I understand that there is a plan to adopt this approach in Beverley Road in my constituency, where there are multiple issues connected with antisocial behaviour, but sadly, although it has been much talked about, not much progress has been made so far, and communities are still suffering from the blight of antisocial behaviour.

I should also like the Minister to consider the effects of supported housing for those who have drug and alcohol problems or mental health issues, or have recently left prison. In Hull there are many projects in Victorian terraced housing in tightly packed neighbourhoods, with limited support. I often receive complaints about shouting, swearing, drinking, drug-taking and threats of violence in those properties. There is also a large hostel, Westbourne House, in a residential area. Along with the police and crime commissioner, we believe that the hostel is in the wrong location and causes antisocial behaviour problems in the neighbourhood. Establishing such hostels and supported housing in settled communities can cause real problems. I hope that the Minister will be able to say something about better guidance on where they should be located, better monitoring and better enforcement of contracts, and will also consider whether the Care Quality Commission needs more powers.

A report by the National Audit Office shows the scale of the funding reductions in my city since 2010. There has been a 37% decrease in Government funding for the council. Early intervention schemes have been cut back, and now focus only on those who are most desperately in need and in crisis. Children's centres no longer have their original purpose of providing a universal service for all families, and voluntary and youth groups have been cut. Those cuts, along with all the others, are creating a perfect storm in our most disadvantaged communities. Cuts in services are often a false economy, because they will cost taxpayers much more in the longer term.

Another aspect of antisocial behaviour involves neighbour disputes. Constituents tell me that they have to fill in numerous diary sheets, and nothing ever happens. Hull City Council has told me that it has to demonstrate a "pattern of behaviour", and needs the sheets in order

to do so, but even then the behaviour may not be serious enough to lead to enforcement action, namely eviction. I am also told that owing to the current pressure on the courts, when the council does go for eviction and has all the evidence to hand, it can take as long as eight months—or more—for that to happen. Even when dates are given for hearings, they are often adjourned. Antisocial behaviour of that kind causes real upset and distress, and I should like to hear from the Minister what more she thinks she could do to tackle it.

When the coalition Government took office in 2010, they changed antisocial behaviour legislation. I believe that that action was led by the Liberal Democrats, who thought that Labour's legislation was too draconian, and obviously felt that they should be more on the side of the perpetrators than on that of the victims. Community protection notices can work quite well, but they cannot be issued to those under 16. In the case of under-16s, the only option is the use of injunctions. The council tells me that the problem with injunctions is that they are very hard to enforce. Hull City Council has to get good evidence and signed affidavits and it has to apply to the court and pay fees. It has to bear the burden of getting the injunctions, but if they are breached, very little happens.

This is linked to my concern about criminal behaviour orders, which are available only when a conviction has been achieved. I recently came across a young man who had been given a CBO and who had breached it multiple times. He went to court, but no action was taken even though he was terrorising the local community. I have written to Justice Ministers about this several times, but I have not had a satisfactory response, so I hope that the Minister will be able to help me to get one. I suggest that it is time for a review of the legislation and of the training of the judiciary and their understanding of the effects of antisocial behaviour.

In conclusion, I want to remind Members of a story that my friend, the former right hon. Member for Holborn and St Pancras, Frank Dobson, used to tell about Lena Jeger when she was campaigning as the Labour candidate in the 1953 by-election. Canvassing a woman in a block of flats in a Camden Town, Lena launched into the great left-wing issue of the day: German re-armament and the threat that it posed to international peace and security. When Lena paused for breath, the constituent asked: "Did you come up in the lift?" "Yes dear," replied Lena. "Stinks of piss, doesn't it?" said the woman. "Yes dear," said Lena. "Can't you stop 'em pissing in the lift?" asked the woman. "I don't think I can," said Lena. "Well," said the woman, "if you can't stop them pissing in our lift, how can you expect me to believe that you can stop the Germans re-arming?" In 2019, if we cannot get all our agencies working together to stop youths throwing stones at buses in Orchard Park or to tackle aggressive begging in Newland Avenue on my patch, how will voters believe that we can sort out the big challenge of Brexit?

2.56 pm

**Chris Green** (Bolton West) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson), who touched on many important issues. I thank the Secretary of State and the Policing Minister for the additional resources that have been given to Greater Manchester police recently. That is

very welcome, although I would not like to suggest that we would not appreciate more. The additional money is important as it will enable the police and crime commissioner of Greater Manchester, who is also the Mayor, to ensure that there is a fair distribution of resources right across Greater Manchester. There is often concern that Greater Manchester police put too much focus on Salford, Manchester and certain parts of Greater Manchester, rather than the parts of the boroughs of Bolton and Wigan that I represent and have an interest in. There is a strong feeling locally that there needs to be a fairer distribution of policing resources.

The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North was right to put getting this right in the context of Brexit. After Brexit, antisocial behaviour and law and order more generally is the single most commonly raised issue. Brexit will hopefully be done and dusted in a matter of weeks, but antisocial behaviour and law and order are significantly longer-term issues that need more focused and concerted action over the long term. People write to me, email me and raise issues on social media and at the public meetings that I hold, and antisocial behaviour is a very frequently raised concern.

Recently, the communities in Ladybridge and Westhoughton have held very well attended community meetings. I always think that, if people are prepared to come out to a community centre on a beautiful sunny evening when they could be spending time with their family and enjoying life, it really does show their strength of feeling. The meetings have been incredibly well attended, and people have been very vocal about antisocial behaviour such as the behaviour of their next-door neighbours, and about the inability of the police and other agencies to deal with those disruptive neighbours or with events and activities that take place on the high street and more widely. They sense that there is an inability, or perhaps an unwillingness, to deal with these concerns. Over time, what may be a low-level or relatively small concern can develop and get worse. As the hon. Lady pointed out, if problems can be nipped in the bud early on, that prevents them from getting worse.

In Allerton, a few serious incidents of violent crime, including a stabbing at the library and other incidents on the high street, have led to a greater feeling that things are getting out of hand. I had a meeting with the local superintendent and chief superintendent, and I was reassured to hear that they were confident about reorganising, having a stronger community focus and restoring the relationship with the community. That can help local police to better understand what is going on, but the local community also get to know the local police. Increased visibility has a deterrent effect and improves people's confidence. We want people to be confident when going around the community so that they feel part of the community. If people do not feel confident about being out and about and getting involved, that can lead them to withdraw. As people withdraw from the community, problems can easily get worse and then out of hand, turning into a bigger challenge for the police.

I recently spent some time with the police on a Saturday night shift. Both the bobby on the beat and an officer in a patrol car can deal with an immense number of different situations. It speaks to the quality and ability of our police that they can deal with such things. One of their biggest worries is alcohol on our high streets and the effect of people who have had a little too

[Chris Green]

much to drink. However, we should also reflect on good pubs, good pub management and good landlords and landladies and the influence that they and the community can have on drinking. Pubs are an important part of our local community, and good management from good proprietors can help to create a good healthy pub environment, which can help to reduce issues that occur on the streets.

**Siobhain McDonagh** (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that some communities are not interested in going to the pub and want to drink in the street? The street then becomes their drinking place, which leads to antisocial behaviour that frightens residents away from their town centres.

**Chris Green:** I entirely agree. On a slightly different note, residents in Horwich have told me about a small fishing lake where people sit around late into the evening. Whether drugs or drink are involved, that presence of people and the rowdiness and noise that goes with it is upsetting and off-putting. People who want to take their children to the high street should not have to avoid it after a certain hour. They should not have to avoid parts of my constituency due to inconsiderate behaviour.

That is where the police have to react and get involved, because a police presence—a bit of visibility every now and then—can tone down people's behaviour so that they have more respect, which can improve the environment. If we can get more people and more families on to the high street and elsewhere in the community, that can have a civilising impact, which is better than the sense that people have to evacuate such areas, leaving them to the people who drink in the street.

How the police manage antisocial behaviour links in with sentencing by magistrates courts. The approach needs to be more robust. Constituents frequently raise with me their concerns about sentencing and the opportunities for rehabilitation in prison. We should be looking at the whole criminal justice system and, whether it is policing, the courts or prisons, more resources are required in all those areas.

3.5 pm

**Graham P. Jones** (Hyndburn) (Lab): I concur with the previous speakers. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) on securing this important debate. Antisocial behaviour is a significant matter for a considerable number of residents in our constituencies and we need to find some better answers.

I did not want to say a lot but, as there is a bit more time, I will try to say a bit more. Antisocial behaviour is so frustrating for our constituents. People without a lot of money, living on terraced streets, have their wing mirrors kicked off and then have them kicked off again a month later. Youths on the street think it is entertaining to act in an aggressive or surly manner that brings about fear in others. Noise nuisance. Neighbours who just want to argue endlessly and disrupt other people's lives. People who just want to deny others an amenity; they may not do something in person. The actions range from doing graffiti, to destruction, to vandalism, to the way they keep their property or neighbourhood, with open spaces and playgrounds forever being vandalised.

That loss of amenities and that threat destroy communities, yet we do not take it as seriously as our constituents do. This debate is extremely serious to me because antisocial behaviour blights so many communities. My constituency—including Accrington and Hyndburn—is no different from many others. Antisocial behaviour is a bugbear. I listen to constituents who come to my surgeries to talk about issues that are very frustrating or that are being dealt with in an exceedingly slow way. I know that individual is suffering.

I always say to my staff that antisocial behaviour is the No. 1 issue that I want us to tackle for people who come into my office or surgery. I tell them that I want them to give it the highest priority because it is so destructive hour by hour, day by day. There is a dysfunctional family on my cousin Vicky's terrace. They think it is appropriate to play loud music and shout at 4 o'clock in the morning. She works, so you can imagine the implications. It is driving her around the bend and very little can be done. Resolving the issue is very slow and difficult, which is typical of many of the antisocial behaviour issues that my constituents face.

Antisocial behaviour blights lives in many ways. A lot of the time these incidents are not considered to be serious enough, but they have a huge, scarring and detrimental impact on victims' lives. I appeal to Members to escalate the issue. The damage often does not affect MPs—how many MPs live in a deprived area and have to suffer the consequences of antisocial behaviour?

**Siobhain McDonagh:** I feel a sense of déjà vu. When I became an MP in 1997, antisocial behaviour was one of the biggest issues and, under the guidance of Prime Minister Tony Blair, we took huge action to try to tackle it, whether through safer neighbourhood teams, basing police teams in town centres, introducing antisocial behaviour orders or discussing what to do about antisocial tenants. We are now going backwards on all those issues and we are reinventing the wheel—it was there, but we have resiled from it.

**Graham P. Jones:** I concur with that. Indeed, I think my hon. Friend has seen an advance copy of my speech, as I want to raise a number of those issues. I will not address them directly now, except to say that, on council estates, we have moved away from having the old tenant manager and collecting rents at the door. I do not suggest we should have that now, but the system had some advantages and we have replaced it with one where there seems not to be as much supervision, which brings difficulties and an increase in antisocial behaviour.

I was not highlighting the MPs who are sitting here today, as they are clearly exceedingly concerned about antisocial behaviour in their constituencies. It is worth mentioning that this week we voted on the police funding settlement, which is at the heart of all this. I do not think there is any escape from the fact that if police numbers are reduced—I will go on to comment on other aspects of the police and criminal justice system—police presence is reduced and of course that will have a detrimental impact. As my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North said, where there is a vacuum in policing, there will be an opportunity for those with a malign or malevolent attitude to others to behave in a way that is not conducive to the wellbeing of the victim, the neighbourhood or the community. We therefore have to put that right. It is wrong that the Government

have cut policing so significantly, as the consequences are considerable. I asked my local police and crime commissioner in Lancashire, Clive Grunshaw, who is doing a very good job, about this situation. He said that he has lost a considerable number of officers. He has lost 800 officers in Lancashire and 450 members of police staff—that is never mentioned, but it diverts resources.

In 2002, or thereabouts, the Labour Government under Tony Blair introduced neighbourhood policing. After seeing rising crime year on year, decade on decade, we began to reverse that cycle, no more so than in terms of antisocial behaviour and low-level crime, with the introduction of neighbourhood policing. That was a positive, progressive approach to some of these issues. I know that we must have sanctions, and I will address those in a moment, but at the heart of reducing antisocial behaviour was neighbourhood policing.

I often talk about Peel ward, which I represented as a councillor before I came here. In 2002, it had 120 antisocial behaviour incidents a month. The neighbouring Spring Hill ward had slightly more—it had nearly 130 a month. We can only imagine having that many incidents, and we must remember that the wards are small in my constituency. There was constant harassment of residents, day after day. When neighbourhood policing was introduced in Lancashire—it came in in my ward at the very beginning of the roll-out—we began to see huge reductions in antisocial behaviour. Within about three years I think we were down to 10 or 15 incidents a month of recorded antisocial behaviour, which is 10% or 11% of what it had been. The residents breathed a sigh of relief, but they were angry. I remember holding a public meeting in Accrington at the council offices just prior to the introduction of neighbourhood policing. The room could hold about 140 people, but nearly 200 turned up and we could not get everyone in. It was dangerous, as people were packed at the back and pushing to get in, and the anger was incredible.

I do not want to return to those days. I do not want to return to the days when I got a telephone call after midnight and was so sick of antisocial behaviour that I just rocked up out of the house and went round to a neighbour's house where there was a gang of 20 yobs, and confronted them myself on Bold Street. I think there is a video tape somewhere of me confronting them. Residents thought it was the end of it when their councillor was going out to confront these yobs after midnight. I confronted another group of 25 at the bottom of my street and one of them threatened to glass me there and then. That was where we were in 2002. When neighbourhood policing was introduced, it was a progressive answer that caused a huge reduction in antisocial behaviour. It was not, though, only about the police presence on the ground.

I say openly—my constituents may be watching—that I have asked my local police and crime commissioner to increase the police precept by as much as he possibly can. That is my view, and I am going to tell the truth. We have to put police officers back on the beat and get policing back to a neighbourhood level. If the Government want to continue with their cuts, all we will be able to do by increasing the precept is replace officers we have lost.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins):** If the hon. Gentleman is going to ask his local police and crime commissioner

to make the sort of changes he is suggesting—of course, he is absolutely right to do so as the local MP—will he also ask him why he is keeping £37.9 million in reserves in a savings account, and why those reserves have increased by £17.8 million since 2011? He is getting the money, but it seems he is not spending it.

**Graham P. Jones:** Let me explain to the Minister how finance works. Most public authorities usually keep back around 5% to 10%—that is the Audit Commission's advice—because there are peaks and troughs in what they pay out each month. They need to have money there in case what they pay out rises. There is also a capital investment programme. The Minister may not know, but I know, that Blackpool police station is crumbling and needs replacing. The police and crime commissioner needs to know that he has the money. If he is prudent—he is a Labour police and crime commissioner, so he is prudent—he will be saving, year on year, to replace Blackpool police station. *[Interruption.]* The Minister is chuntering, but Blackpool North and Cleveleys is a Conservative constituency. If she does not want Blackpool police station to be done up, she should stand up at the Dispatch Box and say so.

**Victoria Atkins rose—**

**Graham P. Jones:** I will give way to the Minister, and if she does not want Blackpool police station doing up, she should just say so.

**Victoria Atkins:** I visited Blackpool North on Friday and sat in a meeting with some of the people who make the most difference in the local area, including my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard) and the local police officers, community groups and councillors. We were not talking about buildings; we were talking about the great work that officers, community groups and the council do to keep that area safe. I concentrate on people rather than bricks and mortar.

**Graham P. Jones:** I think that is what I have talked about so far. The Minister had no answer to my question; it seems she does not really care about Blackpool police station.

**Victoria Atkins rose—**

**Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con) rose—**

**Graham P. Jones:** If the Minister wants to get up and speak about Blackpool police station, I would be more than happy to give way, but I give way to the hon. Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies).

**Mark Menzies:** Just for the record, the Bonny Street police station in Blackpool is indeed crumbling—it is an absolute disgrace—but a shiny new replacement has already opened, probably around six months ago, right on the edge of my constituency. I hear what the hon. Gentleman is saying in his stout defence of the Labour police and crime commissioner, but perhaps the Bonny Street police station in Blackpool and its new replacement, which has now opened, is not the best example.

**Graham P. Jones:** I was using it as an example of why a police and crime commissioner would retain reserves. The hon. Gentleman has just proved the point that I

[*Graham P. Jones*]

have been making: the police and crime commissioner in Lancashire, Clive Grunshaw, does a wonderful job by making sure that there are reserves so that, as the hon. Gentleman says, Blackpool and the Conservative MP there can get a brand new shiny police station to replace the crumbling one. That is what I call fiscal responsibility. The Minister should think about that when she gets to her feet and makes these points—well, she did not actually make any point in response to my point about the police station; she was saved by one of her Back Benchers, to be fair. This is about prudence. The Minister talks about people, but perhaps she should have listened to the points I made earlier about this being about staff, people, communities and neighbourhoods.

To return to the point that I was making, we have lost 800 staff—this is not just about the savings. By the way, I say to the Minister that there is a difference between capital and revenue—another obvious point. However, cutting 800 staff means that antisocial behaviour will increase. A total of 450 staff have been removed from the back office, which has an impact, and neighbourhood policing units have basically collapsed; they no longer exist. We have gone back to 1990s response policing, with police increasingly driving around areas in their panda cars. I have been out with the police at night on several shifts and seen how policing has become a blue light operation. That is what Lancashire constabulary has been reduced to. When there is serious knife crime in an area or some big incident happens, the police cannot deal with antisocial behaviour. We cannot have a progressive solution if we strip out neighbourhood policing.

I want to touch on one other point, which relates to the coalition Government. I sometimes get sick and fed up with Liberal politicians saying that we should not have CCTV cameras. They talk all this nonsense about catching criminals. I ask Ministers to please listen to constituents and residents and to be on their side—do not be on the side of those Liberals. I say gently to the Minister that our constituents and residents suffer and would like to see CCTV cameras working; they do not see it as a problem.

I have asked for the precept to be raised, and I say that quite openly. The public have been asked about that, and 78% of those surveyed support that move. I like to say that I am in touch with the people, but in this particular instance I obviously am. The public want to see more police on the beat. They want to see our police tackling antisocial behaviour.

The cuts have really affected our areas of Hyndburn and Haslingden. We have no presence, apart from a blue light presence, on the streets. I know that sometimes the chief constable does not want to send out that message, and he may well have something to say in my ear. I say back to him, “I’m sorry Andy, but unfortunately, that is what is happening.” There are no PCSOs or beat constables out on the street any more. Our neighbourhood policing teams have been seconded to other duties, causing the neighbourhood policing units to collapse in Lancashire. It is simply not fair.

In the past few weeks, a vigilante group has moved in. This is where we end up. Antisocial behaviour is exceedingly aggravating to so many people. The Accrington vigilante group is called, I think, Hyndburn Watch. It has its own

uniform and various other semi-official regalia, and it is out patrolling the streets at night. Is this what we have come to? We cannot deal with antisocial behaviour and we cannot protect the public, so people have to protect themselves and they have to pay for the privilege of having a non-existent service through their taxes. I am deeply concerned that these people are putting themselves in danger. It is not the right approach.

These nine years of police cuts have affected Lancashire. I know that there are Members on the Conservative Benches who privately, and occasionally publicly, agree with that and who do not agree with their own Government on the scale of the cuts that have hit our communities. Antisocial behaviour continues to worry me, and it worries more and more people around this country.

The Office for National Statistics has published information showing that, between October 2017 and September 2018, there was a staggering 13% increase in people experiencing or witnessing antisocial behaviour. The links with further austerity and cuts are clear when the figures are broken down into categories. There was a 28% rise in the number of people experiencing or witnessing groups hanging around on the streets.

I want local authorities to find a progressive solution to this, but what have we got? Youth clubs are closing in my area—I think we have consolidated five clubs into one. There is no progressive offer for people. They are roaming around the streets saying that they have nowhere to go, and in truth now they have nowhere to go. It is very difficult for them. We should be trying to find progressive answers for the vast majority who really want to abide by the law. Perhaps on a bad day, or on a few bad days, they and their mates get carried away and disrupt other people’s lives, but they are not intrinsically bad people.

I will come shortly to those who are the worst offenders and how we should deal with them, but we must have a progressive solution. It is worrying that the crime statistics are up, because I have to say—the coroner also says this—that there has been a massive increase of drugs in Hyndburn and Haslingden from county lines. The streets are awash with cocaine, and young people are getting involved through county lines. People can get cocaine anywhere at its purest level; never has it been available on the same scale as now. I ask for police sniffer dogs to go in, but there is a lack of policing; the police say they are unable to do that to try to resolve some of these issues. But young people involved in antisocial behaviour are slipping into a life of crime, so we need to be very concerned about the worst antisocial behaviour because of how that will manifest itself further on.

In all of this we need to go back to some basic principles. When we were tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime we had the right policies. We need to get back to being tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime; we have never controlled antisocial behaviour more than when we had that policy. As my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North said, the architects of that policy should be congratulated, because it was a breakthrough, but instead we have seen a roll-back in the last few years.

As has been said, a reformed ASBO needs to be reintroduced; I do not want to see people go to prison, so that is where the reform needs to be. Local authorities and police should be able to impose ASBOs where necessary on some of these individuals—the worst elements.

We need to go back to what matters and listen to people; we need to have a community-centred approach to tackling this issue.

As the hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) said, we need to look at the criminal justice system. For the worst offenders—not the majority, but those who repeat antisocial behaviour—we need to look at the criminal justice system. Community payback does not particularly work in some instances for repeat offences, and prison does not work, so we need to find something in the middle that does not send offenders back to hang around with their mates again and commit more antisocial behaviour. We need to look at other aspects of the criminal justice system so that we have a system that is progressive, that trains people, and that gets them out of this behaviour, but that also sanctions those who want to carry on. It must be punitive, but with some progressive or educational elements.

**Martin Whitfield** (East Lothian) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the changes and amendments that need to happen in the justice system are part of a very complex solution, and that no one golden bullet is going to solve all problems?

**Graham P. Jones:** I agree with that. As I have said, we should always start with the progressive answer, but for those who are regressive and refuse to behave we need to look at a reformed and tougher criminal justice system.

3.27 pm

**Martin Whitfield** (East Lothian) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn (Graham P. Jones). I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for securing this important debate and the Backbench Business Committee.

I think that most Members will agree that antisocial behaviour forms a huge part of their caseload. It is perhaps not the part of their caseload that they came into politics to deal with, but it is the reality of what our individual constituents face, frequently day to day. Indeed, the constituents who come to see us are merely the tip of the iceberg of those who suffer from antisocial behaviour.

I pay credit to Citizens Advice Scotland, which has an excellent website that helps people by guiding them through the world of antisocial behaviour, which is incredibly complex. The website starts by giving a list of definitions of what amounts to antisocial behaviour, including what we have heard about in the debate: noise, shouting, swearing, the gathering of groups, harassment—including, of course, racial and sectarian harassment—verbal abuse, and the bullying of children both at school and beyond, such as at public recreation grounds. Indeed, we have had the benefit today of hearing about two excellent Committee reports on social media, through which bullying takes place, and on the need for intervention early in young children's lives to give them the best possible support for the future.

I want to discuss two aspects of antisocial behaviour: antisocial behaviour that is perpetrated by an individual, which is frequently described as neighbour disputes; and antisocial behaviour that is occasioned by groups. Neighbour disputes are incredibly difficult to provide help for, and it is frequently the case, as my hon. Friend

the Member for Kingston upon Hull North said, that mental health problems sit behind individual cases. Indeed, mental health problems are often passed on to the recipient of antisocial behaviour. Dealing with the situation can be challenging, difficult and, unfortunately, expensive.

I would like the Minister, if possible, to extend a view on situations that occur among people in freehold accommodation, rather than rental or leasehold properties. In such cases, the recipients of antisocial behaviour frequently get to the stage where they say, "I'm just going to move. That's the simple answer—I'll admit defeat and move away." However, under existing law, both north and south of the border, there is an onus to disclose neighbour disputes in sale documents, which will of course make selling a house incredibly difficult. I wonder whether the Government have had any thoughts about how to facilitate a method of addressing that, because sometimes the only answer for the person who is suffering antisocial behaviour is to move away.

**Siobhain McDonagh:** Does my hon. Friend agree that the exponential growth in private renting has exacerbated the problems of antisocial behaviour? Landlords often do not care about the behaviour of their tenants because they do not live next door to them. All they care about is that the rent is getting paid, and they see that as the end of their responsibility.

**Martin Whitfield:** I cannot better my hon. Friend's intervention. Indeed, the only reason why I chose to raise the issue of freehold premises is that it is rarely mentioned. Within my constituency, there have been challenges for people who have admitted problems and subsequently found great difficulty in selling their houses, but that in no way downplays the antisocial behaviour, and the pain, suffering, mental health anguish and challenges, faced by families in rented and leasehold accommodation.

As we have heard, groups can also choose to behave antisocially, and there is one aspect of that which needs to be addressed, because it might be the key to solving the problem. Let me describe some examples from where I live in Prestonpans in my constituency of East Lothian, which is of course in Scotland, where these matters are devolved. There have been great challenges involving our early teenagers who hang around in groups. I know a significant number of the individuals involved, having had the privilege of teaching them at primary school. They are not bad people, but sometimes when they group together, a group mentality takes over, with actions and behaviours becoming acceptable to the group that, in all honesty, its members would never, ever contemplate doing as individuals. Much work needs to be done to address this group mentality, and to aid and abet some of the very best work that is going on to defeat antisocial behaviour.

Let me raise another example from my community. A new playpark was put up predominantly for children under 10, and particularly those of pre-school age. There was a big discussion about how to stop the equipment being damaged, and that was achieved by bringing older brothers and sisters into the park to explain why the equipment was so important to their younger brothers or sisters. Suddenly feeling an identity among the community that was going to use the facilities

[Martin Whitfield]

empowered the older children to look after it. A significant number of those children and young people said to other young people, “Don’t damage the park. It’s for my little brother and sister.”

Antisocial behaviour is occasioned, in the main, by people who become dissociated from others in their communities, be they their neighbour who is playing the television too loud, a group that has nothing to do because of the closure of after-school clubs, or groups of vigilantes who have lost faith in the community, in society and in their politicians—the people they have elected to govern them to look after them and solve problems. There are no simple answers. I could stand here and rail against austerity, because withdrawing assets and funding is a huge problem and it has caused this isolation to increase and become magnified. Responsible leaders and a responsible Government need to admit that that withdrawal has gone too far. We need to re-empower our communities and our society, and that will cost money. Empowerment should come through giving local authorities more devolved power and responsibility so that they, in turn, can devolve that back into communities, with people again feeling connected to what happens around them. They will then not have to phone their councillor after midnight and say, “Come and speak to these 20 people,” but may instead be able to speak to the person in question and say, “Look, you can’t really have a party and invite all these people.” The connection between people will be such that antisocial behaviour reduces.

**Graham P. Jones:** Will my hon. Friend consider the fact that one of the this Government’s failures is the number of NEETs—those not in education, employment or training—that we have, with the figure running between 6% and 10% across every county and area? Where are these young people? What are they doing? Why are they not in education and training? [Interruption.]

**Martin Whitfield:** I am grateful for my hon. Friend’s intervention. That is true, regardless of any dispute of those statistics that I feel may be coming. If someone becomes dissociated, and disconnected from their education and from their family and friends—for whatever reason—why should they buy into the society that they find themselves in? If their rented housing is inadequate—if they have water coming down the wall—and they have a landlord who just does not care, why should they buy into society and what their neighbour needs?

When we look at young children’s behaviour and sense of responsibility at school, we see that people innately care about each other. They lose that feeling because of the experiences that they face in life. One of our responsibilities as leaders is to ensure that the funds, assets, skills and strategies are in place so that people do not lose that in the first place, and so that if they are at risk of losing it, there is support to guide them back, such as after-school clubs and mentoring. Then they will understand their responsibilities, from something as simple as not dropping litter all the way through to not being part of a vigilante gang that feels that it is its right to foster justice in a community.

I am reminded of Orlando’s great phrase in “As You Like It”:

“I do desire we may be better strangers.”

One of the problems that we have found in our communities is that, for a whole lot of reasons, it is becoming much easier to become a better stranger than to become a better friend. There are no simple answers, but I have respect for a Government who face up to trying to solve these problems. I think that there individuals, answers and strategies out there that can make our constituents’ lives, families, schools and communities better. In that way, we will drive down antisocial behaviour—not excusing bad behaviour, but showing why it is not acceptable in our society.

3.38 pm

**Mohammad Yasin** (Bedford) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) on bringing this very important debate to the House.

Last November, Bedfordshire police had to suspend its 101 call service for a few hours because of budget cuts and a steady rise in emergency 999 calls. Faced with difficult choices, the police have had to prioritise serious violent crime at the cost of others, especially those related to antisocial behaviour, even though those crimes are still very important. There simply are not the resources to tackle antisocial behaviour properly. The funding formula for Bedfordshire police has failed. Bedfordshire is funded as a rural force, but with the force’s responsibilities ranging from an airport that requires a complex and expensive counter-terrorism strategy to a town centre prison that places high demands on police and emergency services, and with two large and expanding urban centres, it faces all the problems a force such as the Met would expect to deal with.

The community is still reeling from the spate of fatal knife crimes. I have concerns about knife crime prevention orders, because they risk criminalising a generation of young people. The police do not need more powers; they need more officers. Bedford is a particular target for county lines crimes, and gang culture is a fast-growing problem in our area. The emergency funding grant, which is designed to be used in periods of acute crisis, had to be used by Bedfordshire police to meet the costs of day-to-day policing. The force is still overstretched and under-resourced. Tough choices have to be made.

Channel 4’s “Dispatches” reported in October that 57% of burglaries in Bedfordshire had to be screened out as there were not enough resources for the police to attend them. That is the highest proportion in the country. If police are unable to attend burglaries or car-related crimes, they will not be able to turn up to a group of teenagers who are street drinking or someone who is urinating in a public place. There is no police presence on the streets to deter such behaviour, yet antisocial behaviour is one of the most important issues for my constituents by far. It makes them feel that their home is unsafe and their town no longer belongs to them. We must tackle the root causes of antisocial behaviour. In the Bedfordshire area, we require early intervention and some work to prevent these issues.

Bedford has done well to retain its support services, against all the odds, given the cuts to Bedford Borough Council and social care funding, but we need more, not less. We need to fund local authorities properly and to provide adequate youth and sport services, which have been proven to work well as a driving force against antisocial behaviour. That cannot be done until the

Government recognise that the level of antisocial behaviour on the streets is due to their failed policies, and until the Government really end austerity and fund our police properly.

3.42 pm

**Siobhain McDonagh** (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): For me—and, I imagine, for you, Madam Deputy Speaker—some of the issues that we have been raising this afternoon were ones that we were discussing back in 1997, and considering how to tackle them. Although nirvana never came, certainly progress was made in many of our town centres and cities. In a way, we have lost our way and forgotten what was successful, but we do know what worked.

My constituency of Mitcham and Morden is not unique as a place. Over the past few years, we have again seen a steep rise in antisocial behaviour on our streets. We have always had our problems, but never before has antisocial behaviour, street drinking and petty crime felt as pervasive or hard to tackle. I am afraid that, particularly around Mitcham town centre, the climate of antisocial behaviour has become so intense that the difficulties of suburban shopping centres have become much worse. A multimillion-pound regeneration of the town centre should have meant that Mitcham began to get better, yet when speaking to local businesses I have been dismayed to hear stories of shopfronts vandalised, staff abused and intimidated, and once loyal customers choosing to shop elsewhere, feeling that their local town centre had become unsafe, or was simply an unpleasant place to shop. Mums—principally mums—did not want their children to be in an environment where men urinated in the street or brawled because they had drunk too much.

Antisocial behaviour is a problem that residents often feel powerless to change, but they are by no means apathetic. When I welcomed Sophie Linden, London's Deputy Mayor for Crime and Policing, and Sally Benatar, commander of our south-west London Basic Command Unit—because we no longer have borough police services in London—to a public meeting in my constituency in June 2018, hundreds of residents turned up. The place was packed. They were spilling out into the playground outside. They stood for hours to make their point in the sweltering heat, and the concern raised time and again was, “We just don't see police on our streets any more. We don't see the police community support officers who used to get to know us. We cannot get through to the police.” Anybody who has tried to ring 101 knows exactly how difficult it is just to get the phone actually picked up.

**Martin Whitfield:** On the point about police officers, it is frequently said—by, I must say, somewhat older residents—that previously police officers, who were part of and understood the community, knew the stories behind what was frightening them. There is clearly much evidence saying that it does not matter whether we have police on the beat, but the truth is that police officers who understand their community have a community that understand the police officers as well.

**Siobhain McDonagh:** I completely agree with my hon. Friend. We got a kickback on this in 1997-98—principally from the police, who felt that the best way to

deal with crime was in fast cars—but there was a resulting reduction in crime. That came about from the safer neighbourhood teams, which proved substantially the success of having police on the beat and of having police community support officers, who initially were often rejected by the police and the community, because they had the time to build relationships and get to know people. When people, especially young people, began to get into trouble, as my hon. Friend says, such officers could bring agencies together and start to provide the support that many of those individual youngsters and their families desperately needed.

**Graham P. Jones:** I just want to put this point on the record because my hon. Friend may have somebody in her constituency that she thinks the same about. I would like to say a big thank you to PC Dave Pearson, a local beat manager, because he has done a fantastic job. He has sorted out a lot of antisocial behaviour, and he deserves to have that put on the record.

**Siobhain McDonagh:** I am delighted that I gave way to my hon. Friend. Thanking our public servants and our police who go the extra mile to make our areas better is really important.

All too often, disgraceful antisocial behaviour just goes unchecked. It goes unchecked because it is not seen as a serious crime. It goes unchecked because the local police teams simply do not have the resources to follow up every last incident of vandalism or drunken hooliganism. It goes unchecked because we no longer have the bobbies on the beat to control it. However, when a drunken altercation led to the tragic murder of a young man in my constituency last year, it served as a poignant, painful reminder that the gulf between antisocial behaviour and serious crime is not as large as we often allow ourselves to believe.

Mitcham and Morden has been my home all my life, and I am deeply proud of it. I sincerely want each and every one of my constituents to share this pride in our local area, but it can become desperately hard to ask them to do so when they do not even feel safe in their own community. The simple truth is that there is no substitute for a visible police presence in the community. Mitcham needs more bobbies on the beat, and I suspect we are far from alone in that regard.

We did not arrive here from nowhere. The rise in antisocial behaviour we have seen in so many of our communities is the regrettable but inevitable consequence of more than eight years of indiscriminate cuts and biting austerity at the hands of successive Governments. In real terms, central Government funding for the police has decreased by 30% since 2010. We have lost roughly 20,000 police officers in that time, or 14% of the workforce.

In the London Borough of Merton—a small, suburban borough that is the third safest in London—we have lost 90 police officers since 2010. The safer neighbourhood teams, which used to have five officers, a sergeant, two PCs and three PCSOs, are now down to two PCs and one PCSO, and that is when we can get them, because when people go on long-term sick leave or have to move on somewhere else, those vacancies are not filled.

The important Mitcham safer neighbourhood team has gone, so there is now no longer a team for the town centre. Amazingly, the police officers who used to be based in every secondary school in Merton have also gone,

[Siobhain McDonagh]

because the police cannot recruit quickly enough to fill those posts. Retention rates have plummeted because our police do not feel valued. How could they when, year after year, they are asked to take on more work with less support, fewer resources and, in real terms, lower wages? Even when they are offered more money, it is difficult to fill those posts. Detectives in the Metropolitan police area have been offered £4,000 a year more, but they still cannot recruit detectives. The consequence of that for our safer neighbourhood teams is that many police are forcefully transferred into those roles, and are not available to walk our streets and do the basic policing work that we know our communities need.

The Conservative party has always taken great pride in its image as a party that would put the police first, come down hard on crime, and keep the men and women of Britain safe. With police disappearing from our streets, violent crime on the rise, and many of us feeling more vulnerable than ever before in our communities, I find myself asking the same question as many of my constituents: whatever happened to the party of law and order?

3.51 pm

**Mhairi Black** (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): I apologise for being held up at the beginning of the debate.

I thank the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for securing a debate on such a substantial issue. As we have heard, Scotland has a separate legal system, but the Antisocial Behaviour etc. (Scotland) Act 2004 remains in force and covers police and agency powers regarding antisocial behaviour. The Scottish Government have always been clear in their belief that there must be a partnership approach if we ever hope effectively to tackle antisocial behaviour, and that includes the police, local authorities and court services.

One thing we can all agree on here is that everyone has the right to be and feel safe in their own home—that should be the benchmark for the kind of society we are aiming for. But that also includes an element of compassion, because that right also applies to those individuals who sometimes find themselves participating in antisocial behaviour. I applaud the comments by the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield), who spoke very eloquently about the need to see individuals as people who need help, rather than simply to chastise them as a problem. That is important because if we want to move forward as a society, we have an obligation to understand why people do the things they do, and why they behave as they do at certain times.

This is about stopping and asking whether a young person is roaming the streets because they are trying to escape something horrible in their own home. Or are they lashing out as a cry for help? If we find someone who is intoxicated or aggressive, someone should assess their mental health at some point, and if their health is not okay we should find out why and figure out how these factors affect their decision making. Only then can we begin to develop meaningful preventive measures, which includes looking holistically at our judicial system, our social security set-up and our health structures, because all these things play into people's lives.

That is what the Scottish Government have tried to do whenever they have had the power. For example, since 2008 they have committed £92 million to CashBack for Communities, which funds a wide range of projects and facilities throughout Scottish communities. In my constituency, I have had the pleasure of seeing the essential support that so many local organisations provide, including—to name a few—RAMH, the Kibble, Spark of Genius, and the council's team to combat antisocial behaviour. I have played football with Street Stuff, which is brilliant because people take the time to sit with an individual and treat them as a human being who matters, as opposed to simply a problem that needs to be solved. They take the time to do that, seeing past all the bravado and any aggressiveness, and finding out what is actually going on in that person's head and life at that moment in time. Making that effort and taking the time to sit with someone, treating them as a human being who matters even if they are off the wall, is about finding out where their mind has taken them and finding ways that we can help to bring them back into the real world and support them.

On the whole I am pleased that those measures seem to be having a positive impact in Scotland. Experiences and perceptions of antisocial behaviour have been reduced over the past 10 years under the SNP. The percentage of adults who felt that people behaving in an antisocial manner was a common issue in their area has fallen from 46% in 2008-09 to 29% in 2016-17. The Scottish Household Survey 2017 also reflects that trend. The estimated percentage of adults who experienced vandalism has almost halved between 2008-09 and 2016-17. Fewer adults now think that violence between groups of individuals or gangs is common in their area, falling from 26% to 10%. We seem to be heading in the right direction, even if we are not fully there yet.

Ultimately, we have to recognise that it benefits society as a whole when we do our best to ensure the welfare of absolutely everyone. I think that is exactly the point made by the hon. Member for East Lothian, when he said that we have to find a place for everyone. No matter how challenging or difficult that person is—I have no doubt that everyone here has had dysfunctional and difficult constituents come to them—we have to offer some kind of assistance and a way of legislating better on these issues in the future. We need to treat people as though they matter and understand where they are coming from. I hope that this Scottish perspective has offered some sort of substantial help to the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North. I thank her again for bringing this debate forward.

3.56 pm

**Carolyn Harris** (Swansea East) (Lab): I too congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) on securing the debate. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) and my hon. Friends the Members for Hyndburn (Graham P. Jones), for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield), for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) and for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) on their excellent speeches.

Antisocial behaviour covers a wide range of unacceptable activity which causes harm to an individual, to their community or to the environment. Anything from vandalism and littering to street drinking and drug usage, from nuisance neighbours to begging, are all

examples of antisocial behaviour. If an action leaves somebody else feeling distressed or harassed, or if it causes concern for public safety, then it is deemed to be antisocial behaviour. Individual occurrences of antisocial behaviour can appear to be quite minor, but the cumulative impact of persistent incidents in communities can have a highly damaging effect.

The most recent Crime Survey for England and Wales reports that almost 36% of respondents had experienced or witnessed antisocial behaviour in their local community, an increase of 5% from the previous year and the highest figure since data were first collected in 2012. I am not surprised by those figures. Drink-related crime was one of the highest types of antisocial behaviour that respondents said they had experienced. Drinking on streets and on public transport can lead to others feeling intimidated, and to verbal and physical attacks.

Acts of vandalism are all too common in many of our communities. We see endless graffiti on public and private property. Unfortunately, they are not all Banksy's. I hear many cases of homes that have been attacked, property damaged and car tyres slashed. We need to seriously crack down on the perpetrators of these crimes. While many, although not all, antisocial behaviours do not physically hurt individuals, the emotional and psychological damage they cause can be just as harmful.

The availability and use of drugs in our communities is also a real worry. County lines has been responsible for a rapid rise in the accessibility of drugs on our streets up and down the country. Gangs are targeting our most vulnerable young people: kids in the care system or those trapped in poverty; kids who maybe do not have somebody waiting for them at home wondering where they are. These youngsters are being manipulated into gang culture, which is a key factor in much of the antisocial behaviour and more violent crime that is becoming far too normalised across society today.

The use of synthetic drugs is still a major cause for concern. Despite the blanket ban on them having heavily diminished the supply, we would be very naive to think that the problem is anywhere near solved. Criminals will continue to produce these highly toxic drugs, and people—often the most vulnerable people—will continue to use them and keep up the demand. Individuals and groups hanging around on streets with nothing to do and nowhere to go, those who are high on drugs and those in need of their next fix or under the influence of alcohol are all potential threats to our local communities. Boredom, desperation and rivalry can all be the catalyst for a wide range of antisocial crimes.

While all that is going on, police cuts continue and local authorities are seeing big reductions in their Government funding, despite unprecedented pressures. All of that means there are not enough resources to deal with the ever-growing problems. While the headlines read that an additional £970 million funding will be available through the police grant for 2019-20, it does not take long to realise that the reality is very different: £509 million of that will come from doubling the police precept for council tax payers, meaning a further burden on our already hard-pressed constituents. It will also mean that areas with a low council tax base, such as south Wales, will be hit hardest.

Alongside that, the £142 million of pension grants for local forces from central Government funds falls alarmingly short of the £311 million pension liability.

This means that, despite core central Government funding for local forces increasing in theory by £161 million, the reality is that this, together with the pensions grant, does not even cover the pension liability. Taking all that into account, the harsh truth is that however the Government try to manipulate the figures, central Government funding for local police forces has been cut for the ninth consecutive year.

Police numbers are now at their lowest for three decades. Since the Conservatives came into Government in 2010, the number of police officers has fallen by 21,000, 16,000 police staff have been axed, and community support officer numbers have declined by 6,000—all this while the Government continue to promise to protect the frontline. Public safety should be a priority, but as things stand, some forces are so stretched that tackling antisocial behaviour on their streets is a battle that they are struggling very hard to take control of.

But it does not need to be like this. The Welsh Labour 2011 manifesto promised more funding for community support officers, and it delivered. While the Conservative party has been scaling back and cutting jobs, the Welsh Government, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden), has invested in 500 more community support officers across Wales. Labour has a plan to make Britain safer—to recruit more police officers to take back control of our streets. We need to tackle antisocial behaviour and make sure that our constituents feel safe in their communities. Warm words and manipulated figures do not make our communities safe. Resources, action and funding are what we need to make our citizens feel safe, our communities feel cared for and our country protected.

4.3 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins):** It has been a pleasure to be here, although it has been difficult to hear some of the accounts that hon. Members across the House have shared of experiences that their constituents have suffered at the hands of those who act antisocially. I join the thanks and congratulations to the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) on securing the debate. We share a television news programme, so I know of the work she does in her local area. I join her in thanking the officers and all those involved in looking for Libby Squire. We are all conscious, of course, that it is a live investigation, but our thoughts are with the family.

I thank hon. Members for participating in this debate, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Chris Green), as well as the hon. Members for Hyndburn (Graham P. Jones), for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield), for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin), for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) and for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black), and I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies) for his intervention.

As we have heard, antisocial behaviour can have a significant impact on both individuals and communities, and it can affect people in their own homes and our public spaces, which everyone should be free to enjoy safely. Left unchecked, persistent antisocial behaviour, whether it involves littering, vandalism, public drunkenness, aggressive dogs, noise, threats or abuse, can have a

[Victoria Atkins]

debilitating impact on people's quality of life. As I say, hon. Members have taken care to describe various examples, and I am sure we were all perturbed to hear about the experience in Hyndburn of the noise in the middle of the night. Sadly, such offending can lead to a journey to even more serious crimes, as outlined by the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden.

The police and local authorities have available to them a range of powers and actions. We tend to focus on the 2014 Act, but the police and councils also have general operational powers. For example, the police in the constituency of the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North have been working alongside Hull City Council to install 17 CCTV cameras on the Orchard Park estate to drive down the number of crimes. I understand also that the police have been working with communities to make sure they feel safe, including by visiting schools to speak to pupils about the impact of behaving antisocially. That is not part of the 2014 Act, but it is part of their general powers and actions.

The hon. Lady also mentioned the use of drones by Lincolnshire police. These are proving to be useful in many ways. Obviously, Lincolnshire is a vast rural area, and my police and crime commissioner, Marc Jones, is pleased with their use in tackling hare coursing, which is not a form of antisocial behaviour that has been mentioned today, but believe you me its impact on local communities is frightening and intimidating. It might be an example of one of the more serious types of antisocial behaviour.

I am pleased to say that under the 2014 Act we have reformed the tools and powers available to local areas. Mention was made of ASBOs. Initially, they were of use, but they became a badge of honour among some protagonists, which is why the coalition Government reviewed the law on antisocial behaviour and introduced the 2014 Act.

**Graham P. Jones:** It strikes me that the point the Minister has just made is a very middle-class view. What do working-class communities think about ASBOs? Were they asked if they were beneficial before they were taken away?

**Victoria Atkins:** I am talking about the children subject to them. Among them, they were becoming a badge of honour, which is why we increased the range of powers under the 2014 Act not just to target individuals behaving antisocially, but to give much wider powers to protect whole communities and public spaces, which I will come on to in a moment.

We had an urgent question this week on knife crime prevention orders, which are a very targeted form of preventive order that we are introducing through the Offensive Weapons Bill to help to catch the small cohort of children who may be susceptible to knife crime before they start accumulating criminal convictions or causing even more harm in the community. I very much hope that the orders will enjoy the support of the House when the Bill returns.

**Diana Johnson:** On the introduction of those preventive orders, which the Minister spoke about at the Dispatch Box earlier this week, a person did not have to have a

conviction to be given an ASBO, but they would need a conviction to get a criminal behaviour order, and, as I explained, there are problems with enforcement. Is it not time to look again at whether the changes introduced in 2014 are really working?

**Victoria Atkins:** As I have said, we are reviewing the powers in the 2014 Act. Towards the end of my speech I shall talk about the reviews that are being undertaken. I fully acknowledge the work that was done in the noughties to tackle antisocial behaviour, but we wanted to improve on it. We thought that increasing the range of powers available in the Act would help to address some of the problems that had arisen over the years since the introduction of ASBOs.

The powers in the Act can be scaled up or down depending on the nature of the antisocial behaviour. They are flexible, they enable local agencies to tailor their approach to the individual circumstances, and they range from tools for early intervention to those that can be used to address the most serious and persistent antisocial behaviour. Whenever possible, such behaviour should be stopped before it escalates. We therefore introduced a civil injunction which may impose prohibitions or positive requirements. It may, for example, require the perpetrator to repair damage to someone else's property.

As the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North just mentioned, when behaviour becomes more serious and involves or occurs alongside criminal activity, a criminal behaviour order may be made. It can impose prohibitions and requirements to stop the antisocial behaviour: for example, it may prohibit the offender from entering a particular area.

Unfortunately, some areas can become hotspots. My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West gave a vivid description of antisocial behaviour in Horwich, and, like others, focused on the role that alcohol can play in some forms of it. One of our actions to tackle antisocial alcohol consumption was the introduction of local alcohol action areas. Multi-agency work is conducted in 32 areas in England and Wales. Wrexham, for example, is taking part in a "Drink Less Enjoy More" initiative to reduce alcohol sales in pubs, bars and clubs to intoxicated individuals. We have given new powers to relevant authorities to tackle alcohol-related crime and harms. We have, for instance, placed cumulative impact policies on a statutory footing, made changes in the late-night levy that will make it more flexible and fairer to businesses, and given immigration officers new powers to tackle illegal working in licensed premises.

We have also introduced a range of powers to deal with antisocial behaviour in hotspot areas. The dispersal power can be issued by the police to require an individual who engages in antisocial behaviour, crime or disorder to leave the area for up to 48 hours. The community protection notice can be used by the police and local councils to address unreasonable behaviour affecting a community's quality of life, involving, for instance, graffiti, rubbish and noise. The public spaces protection order can be used by a council to put restrictions on an area in which behaviour has, or is likely to have, a detrimental effect on the local community. I know that several councils have considered using those orders to try to control alcohol consumption in public places.

As we have heard, it is local communities that suffer as a result of antisocial behaviour, and we wanted to enable them to speak out and “call out” the authorities when they believe that they are not being listened to. The community trigger enables victims of persistent antisocial behaviour to demand a formal case review when a locally defined threshold is met, and the community remedy gives victims a say in the out-of-court punishment of perpetrators.

The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North asked about guidance. We want to help local agencies to understand the powers and informal measures they can use to tackle antisocial behaviour, which is why we have published statutory guidance for frontline professionals. We updated that guidance in December 2017 to reflect feedback from those who are working with these powers, and to remind people of the importance of proportionality and transparency in the use of them.

I reassure Members that the Home Office keeps these powers, and the Government’s overall approach to tackling antisocial behaviour, under review through a national strategic board. This brings together representatives from key agencies and across Government to consider our approach and to identify any emerging issues. This debate is timely, as the board will meet again next week and will no doubt consider the points that have been raised today. I am grateful to agencies and associations such as the Local Government Association, which very kindly invited me to an event last year to discuss antisocial behaviour and the use of public space protection orders. Our multi-agency work programme will help to bear down on antisocial behaviour in local communities.

Opposition Members were keen to address the issue of police funding. I always regret that I have to give people a mini history lesson whenever I tackle this issue, but it is important to put the decisions that have been made over the past few years into context. We inherited a very difficult economic picture in 2010, and we had to make tough decisions to address the mess that we were in economically because of the way in which things had been run in years gone by under the Labour Government. That is why we made tough decisions—*[Interruption.]* I hear Labour Members saying, “Well, you’ve had long enough.” In 2015, the then Home Secretary was able to say to the Chancellor, “We must protect police funding” because we had managed the economy in such a way that we could begin to make those changes in police funding and in other areas. Police funding has been protected since 2015, and last year Conservative Members of Parliament voted for a funding settlement that increased police funding by up to £470 million. This week, Conservative Members voted for the Government’s proposal to inject a further £970 million into policing, with the help of police and crime commissioners, but sadly, Opposition Members did not feel able to support that.

I want to outline what the funding settlement will mean. Humberside will have £11.5 million more than last year as a result of Tuesday’s settlement. It has reserves of £28.9 million, which is higher than the national average. Greater Manchester will receive £34.7 million more than last year because of Tuesday’s vote. It has £75.6 million in its reserves—an increase of £25 million since 2011. The reason that I keep talking about reserves is that I want to equip all Members on both sides of the House to hold their police and crime commissioners to account and ask them how they are spending their reserves.

**Graham P. Jones** *rose*—

**Victoria Atkins:** I am about to come on to Lancashire, but I would be happy to give way to the hon. Gentleman—*[Interruption.]* I am sorry. I am getting conflicting requests. I am being asked to speed up. I must mention Lancashire, because I was delighted to visit it last week. My hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy) and I met the chief constable in Hutton, and my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard) and I met community leaders. My hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris) and I met people in Morecambe to discuss crime and policing issues in the local area. Lancashire does have £37.9 million in reserves, and that has increased by £17.8 million since 2011, which is higher than the national average—

**Graham P. Jones** *rose*—

**Victoria Atkins:** I am not sure that the hon. Gentleman had that information to hand. I will happily give way to him.

**Graham P. Jones:** The police and crime commissioner for Lancashire is watching this debate, and he has just sent me a very informative message to say that he has published his reserves, which are actually £25 million. I ask the Minister to correct the record at the Dispatch Box.

**Victoria Atkins:** I am happy to say that the reserves are £37.9 million as of March last year. If the PCC has decided to spend some of his savings, the Government welcome that, because we give money to PCCs to spend on policing in the local area, not so that it can sit in savings accounts. I will not trouble Members with the figures for Bedfordshire, the Met or South Wales, because I know that the House is eager to move on to the Adjournment debate.

Turning to education, we are conscious of the role of alternative provision when it comes to county lines. I hope that hon. Members know that we are expecting a report from Edward Timpson on alternative provision, because we are conscious of the impact that it can have on serious violence. I am pleased that we have raised the age at which children can leave education from 16 to 18, but I am aware that some children still fall through the net, which is why the report will be so informative and important.

I am extremely grateful to all Members for their contributions to this debate. Antisocial behaviour still affects communities—

**Martin Whitfield:** Will the Minister give way?

**Victoria Atkins:** I am being directed not to take the hon. Gentleman’s intervention, so I hope that he will understand. I thank everyone for today’s robust debate.

4.20 pm

**Diana Johnson:** I thank the Minister for her kind words about the ongoing Libby Squire investigation. I am pleased that we had the opportunity to have this debate this afternoon and I thank all Members who took part. It was particularly interesting to hear what

[Diana Johnson]

my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) said about parts of the debate leading to a sense of déjà vu and that we were talking about reinventing the wheel. It is clear that mistakes have been made, particularly around police cuts since 2010. The thin blue line now really is too thin.

No one can seriously say that the fact that Labour increased police numbers when in government, meaning we had neighbourhood policing, more officers on the beat and PCSOs, was the reason we had a banking crisis and the sub-prime mortgage crisis in the USA. So to try to argue that that had to be dealt with by an incoming coalition Government is, frankly, tripe.

I remember Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary saying in 2010 that police budgets could be cut by up to 12% without affecting the frontline, but we have reached a point at which over 30% of police budgets are being cut. Choices made by the coalition Government and then successive Conservative Governments gave tax cuts to the rich and did not protect policing. Combine all that with cuts to local authorities, and it should come as no surprise to anyone that we are seeing such levels of antisocial behaviour today.

I ask the Minister to reconsider the legislative change that came in after 2010 that removed the victims of antisocial behaviour away from the centre, seemingly giving more rights to the youths who were not behaving well and engaging in criminal activity. We need to review that. The victim must be at the heart of antisocial behaviour legislation and protections.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered antisocial behaviour.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** I remind the House that the motion on beer taxation and pubs will not be moved.

## Closure of Santander Banks

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

4.23 pm

**Angela Crawley** (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): I thank those Members who have stayed behind for this important debate. The Lanark High Street branch of Santander is just one among 15 branches in Scotland that will be closing their doors. The Lanark branch will close on 4 July this year. That news has come as a shock to many of my constituents who rely on their local branch.

For the people and businesses in Lanark who depend on the face-to-face service they get in their local branch, especially those who are elderly, vulnerable, or live in the rural parts of Clydesdale, the nearest bank is in Lanark, so the closure of the branch is not just an inconvenience but a blow to the community, bringing new challenges for a town centre that is already struggling. Many local businesses depend on having quick access to their bank, and the closure will cause difficulties for many businesses in not only the town centre but the surrounding areas. For some customers, without the branch there will be no reason to visit the town centre at all, which is ultimately bad news for the local economy—footfall in shops, restaurants and cafés on Lanark High Street will drop.

I am sure I am not alone in this House in trying to tackle the decline of town centres, and I am sure many Members will agree that bank closures will only worsen the situation on our high streets.

**Mary Glindon** (North Tyneside) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. For customers, as she says, it is not just the banks but the other shops on our high streets that will be affected. Taking away this resource does not help older people or people who do not want to use internet banking.

**Angela Crawley:** That is exactly why I have secured this debate. It is important that the Government provide answers on how they hold these businesses to account, especially big businesses like Santander.

I have continued to campaign actively on town centre decline and regeneration in areas such as Hamilton and Carlisle. The consequences of further closures of banks and high street stores in the Clydesdale area cannot be overestimated. The wider impact they would have on Lanark are all too obvious and cannot go unrecognised.

Santander wrote at the end of last month to inform me of the decision to close its Lanark branch, with the rationale being that its internal review had found the branch to be no longer viable. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that it had already removed key services such as specialist mortgage advice and financial advice from many of its branches during the internal review.

According to the letter, 89% of customers using the branch are also using additional ways to complete their banking. That includes 26% using another Santander branch and 53% using online or mobile telephone banking. I fully accept that the changing nature of the digital economy and the increased use of online banking have changed how we use branches. However, Santander's own figures suggest that it is content to let down the

nearly three quarters of customers who are unable to travel to another bank and who rely on that service, and the nearly half of customers who do not or cannot access their bank online or through their phone.

**Mhairi Black** (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): The Santander branch on Renfrew High Street is the sixth bank branch to close in the last three years across Renfrewshire. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is simply not good enough for banks to up sticks and leave without taking account of the digital and geographical constraints that are a reality for far too many of our constituents?

**Angela Crawley:** I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend, who drives home the point of this debate. In my constituency of Lanark, the rural issues go to the heart of why these closures are so impactful and, ultimately, why we are calling on the Government to do something about it.

This Government have stood on the back of the financial industry for years, yet they have done little to regulate it, to the point where banks are now closing right, left and centre and nothing is being done to improve local economies. None of the measures being taken has considered the impact on rural economies.

**Liz McInnes** (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for securing this important debate. It has been announced that the Santander branch in Middleton in my constituency will close in July and that customers can use the Middleton post office, but the Middleton post office is earmarked for closure as well. I am grateful to her for bringing up the effect this is having on our town centres, which are dying.

**Angela Crawley:** The hon. Lady is absolutely right, and this is why we are drawing this issue to the Minister's attention. I am sure he is cognisant of these issues, and I am keen to hear what he intends to do about them.

As I explained earlier, I am using Santander's own figures, which show that 10% of customers exclusively use face-to-face services in the branch. They also suggest that Santander has used this internal review to make a series of decisions at board level that will have a huge impact on local economies across the country and on the livelihoods of the staff working in the branches marked for closure.

It is regrettable that Santander chose not to undertake a full consultation with staff and the local community. Instead, it will follow a process of writing to customers to tell them when their bank will close, without adequately consulting the customers and staff who will be hardest impacted by the changes. Clearly, this decision has been taken behind closed doors, in the hope that no one would try to challenge it. I have spoken about only one story of a bank closure in my constituency, but this picture has been replicated all across the UK, as we have heard from other hon. Members.

Santander has announced its plans to close 140 branches across the UK, of which 15 are in Scotland. I wrote to the Secretary of State for Scotland, who is in the neighbouring constituency, so he is only down the road, asking him to meet a cross-party delegation of MPs to discuss how he and his Treasury colleagues could come together to mitigate the effects these closures will have

in Scotland. Unfortunately, he has written to me today declining our invitation and laying the responsibility squarely with the Treasury, so it is all on the Minister here today—he can blame his pal. I hope he will have no more platitudes for me today and will give my constituents real answers on how the Government intend to hold big business to account for its rupturing impact on local economies and towns.

I warn the Secretary of State for Scotland, who was once upon a time the only Tory in Scotland—he now has some friends: ignore these cross-party calls at your peril. The cross-party calls from the Scottish National party, Lib Dems and Labour are clearly asking him, although he is not here to answer—and the Treasury, the Department he believes should be answering—what will you do to help my constituents? Scotland will not forget those who have let it down, and Members on the Government Benches have failed repeatedly to live up to their responsibilities. These closures will put 1,270 jobs at risk and will likely cause 840 redundancies, as Santander expects to redeploy only a third of the staff.

This is just the latest crisis for bank branches in the UK. The consumer magazine *Which?* reported at the end of last year that 60 bank branches were closing each month in the UK. Santander alone has closed 230 branches since 2015. People are being left behind without proper access to services. Post offices and mobile banking trucks do not offer the same range of services or the same convenience as branches. Some people, particularly the elderly and the vulnerable, are unable to use online services. For people who live in rural areas such as Lanark and many other constituencies that will be affected by these closures, it can be a challenge to access banking services when branches close. The Santander closure in Lanark means that my constituents in Auchengray, Tarbrax and Woolfords will lose out on one of their relatively close services. This might mean that they have to travel into town and then for another hour on a train to get to the city to bank, or travel to their neighbouring town assuming that a connecting bus service is available.

Leaving aside the restrictions in digital connectivity faced by some of my constituents in rural areas, Santander has failed to take into account the wider ramifications that the closure will have. I must pay tribute to my constituency neighbour on the other side, the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Ged Killen), for his work in campaigning to keep ATMs open in rural areas, which mitigates some of the effects of bank branch closures. I recognise that Santander has made a business decision based on changing patterns of banking, but there must be a better way than to simply pull the plug on branch services, especially for rural communities.

The issue of transport, which I have raised, and the built environment should also play a key role in big businesses' considerations when they are making such decisions. I believe these are real problems, and I must ask the Minister: what steps will he be taking to halt the effects of these closures on our communities? If he cannot halt them, how will he hold businesses to account in the future? This will only continue to happen in many places. Santander is but one example. RBS was another, and I am sure many more banks will do similar things unless the Government clamp down. These closures will have a deflating effect on local economies across the country, especially in small towns and rural areas, and I

[Angela Crawley]

wonder what effects the Minister thinks that will have on the UK economy as a whole, especially at this moment in time.

I accept that Santander has made a commercial decision, but I know also that its decision will have a huge knock-on effect on other businesses in the communities it serves, and I cannot just stand back and allow it to go ahead. I know the closures will negatively affect many people, including the elderly and the vulnerable in our communities. I know that our town centres will struggle to recover from the damage caused by losing yet another branch. Rural communities will be less connected than they currently are, and businesses will suffer from the loss of their local branch.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), who could not be here today, has secured a Westminster Hall debate on the subject, so I assure the Minister that we will not be going away and this issue cannot be ignored. As I have said, I accept that this is a commercial decision by Santander, but I urge the Minister to take any action he can possibly take to halt the effects or hold the banks to account for this closure and the many others that will affect towns and rural communities. I hope he will pay heed to the comments of all Members who have spoken.

4.35 pm

**The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):** I commend the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) for securing the debate. Just before I came over from the Treasury, I noticed that there will be a three-hour debate on the matter next Thursday, in which rather more Members will be able to contribute. I know that bank branch closures can be difficult for the communities affected, and particularly for the most vulnerable customers. The Government are keenly aware of that, and later I will go into more detail on what support is in place for those customers. After lobbying from SNP Members, I had the opportunity to visit Scotland last autumn, when the Royal Bank of Scotland was carrying out a review, so I am very engaged in this matter.

It is clear that the way we bank is changing. More and more of us—the process is very rapid—are choosing to bank online or through an app, and fewer people are choosing to visit a traditional branch, as we used to. Between 2011 and 2016, branch usage declined by 42%, whereas mobile banking usage increased by 354% between 2012 and 2017. That is unprecedented consumer change, and banks have obviously had to adapt to remain competitive in the circumstances. That adaptation has involved virtually all the main banks taking tough decisions about their respective branch networks.

Decisions on branch networks can be unpopular, and I understand why, but they are not ones that the Government can make. To be fair, the hon. Lady recognised that in her observations on the Santander decision. Branch network decisions are commercial decisions for the bank's management team, and the Government do not intervene in them because we believe that commercial firms are best placed to make commercial decisions. The flexibility to respond to changes in the market is what makes the UK's financial services sector one of the most competitive and productive in the world.

**Dr Philippa Whitford** (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): The closure in my constituency will be the fourth bank that my town has lost, and the town has a high proportion of retired people who do not bank online or use their phone for contactless payments. My mother will never bank online. It is really two decades too early to withdraw these banks. Their ATMs go, too, so there is a problem for people who want cash in our town.

**John Glen:** I will talk in a few minutes about the ways in which we have intervened to try to find solutions to the circumstances in which the hon. Lady's constituents find themselves. As I am sure those Members who have spoken are aware, the UK financial services sector is a whole-UK phenomenon, and Edinburgh in particular is important to financial services. The Government want to protect the sector, which is why we do not make the direct intervention that some may be looking for.

The Government firmly believe that the impact of branch closures should be understood, considered and mitigated, where possible, so that all customers, wherever they live, can continue to access over-the-counter banking services. The first step is to ensure that customers feel informed and supported when a branch closes, which is why the Government support the industry's access to banking standard. All the major high street banks have signed up to the standard, which commits banks to a number of outcomes when a branch closes. First, they commit to give at least three months' notice of a closure and explain their decision clearly; secondly, they commit to consider what services can still be provided locally, and communicate alternative ways to bank clearly to customers; and thirdly, they commit to ensure that support is available for customers who need extra help to bank online or, where that is not possible, to access services at the local post office. The standard is not just a checklist that banks need to go through; it is about being considerate of customers' concerns when a branch closes.

In the case of Santander, I am pleased to inform the House that it took a number of steps when announcing the restructure of its branch network. Not only did it proactively contact all customers, as per the requirements of the standard, but it set up a dedicated phone line for customer queries about the changes for the duration of the closure programme. Furthermore, its branch teams will be proactively contacting known vulnerable customers to ensure that they are properly supported and advised on how to continue to bank locally. This includes all customers over the age of 75 who have visited the branch in the past 12 months, as well as those customers who have sight impairments or mobility issues, power of attorney, or are known by the team to be vulnerable. Where needed, this support can include: walking customers to the post office to introduce them to the post office team and demonstrate how they can carry out their banking; introducing them to staff in a neighbouring Santander branch; or helping customers to switch their account to another nearby provider. The teams will also take the time to talk to vulnerable customers about how they bank, changing the frequency of their statements and ordering cash cards, and to demonstrate how to use ATMs and contactless cards.

I acknowledge the point made by the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford). My father died a couple of years ago and I have been trying to migrate my mother to do more of this stuff online, otherwise

the burden falls to me. I recognise that there are limits to that process but, in this case, a great deal of sensitivity has been shown to help customers to adapt to the new environment.

**Angela Crawley:** I appreciate what the Minister has said about the measures that Santander has taken. It is very noble of the bank to offer to walk someone to a post office—or to take them on the train to Glasgow in my case—but I am not hearing from him what the Government are doing to regulate financial services when they continually close branches across the UK. That is what I want to hear from the Minister.

**John Glen:** I promise the hon. Lady that I will come on to talk about that. It is about the relationship between the banks and the post office in the instance where it is the last bank that is closing. I am not here to defend the commercial decisions of banks, but I do think that the measures taken in this case look quite comprehensive with respect to dealing with vulnerable customers.

**Liz McInnes:** I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. He paints a rosy picture of what Santander is doing to help vulnerable customers, but the fact is that it told my constituents in Middleton that they could bank at Middleton post office, which is earmarked for closure and will be moving into a branch of WHSmith, so in my constituency it most certainly is not in touch with what is going on in the town centre.

**John Glen:** I am not seeking to paint a rosy picture. I am setting out plainly the facts about what the bank has undertaken. I obviously cannot account for the way in which every single branch has handled things. I note the hon. Lady's observations and I am very happy to look into what she says, or to make a link to Santander for her.

I hope that the hon. Lady will agree that this support demonstrates that there is a commitment to the spirit, not just the letter, of the standard, which is warmly welcomed. To ensure that all banks meet the requirements of the standard, the Lending Standards Board monitors and enforces it. Last year, it published its annual report on banks' adherence to the standard and found that, overall, firms' engagement was positive and genuine. However, there were some areas where banks could do even more, and the Lending Standards Board is using the full range of tools and sanctions at its disposal to work with banks where they fall short.

**Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP):** I thank the Minister for giving way. I wish to raise again the kind of work that Santander is doing in introducing people to post offices. Is he aware of the appallingly low rates of pay given to sub-postmasters for doing banking work, especially in places where there are no banks left?

**John Glen:** I am aware of the concerns raised in that area and I have met postmasters about that. That area is the responsibility of my colleagues in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, but I note the point the hon. Lady has made.

I have recognised when I have participated in debates over the past 13 months that there have been some concerns around the provision of post office banking services.

The Government recognise that some customers just prefer, or need, to carry out their everyday banking over the counter. That is why we support the Post Office's commercial agreement with 28 high street banks and building societies, which enables 99% of personal banking customers and 95% of small business banking customers to carry out their everyday banking at one of the 11,500 post office branches. While I concede that the range of services offered by post offices may be more limited than that offered in a traditional bank branch, the services provided through the extensive post office network ensure that essential banking facilities, such as depositing and withdrawing cash, or depositing a cheque, remain available in as many communities as possible.

**Marion Fellows:** I know that this is a Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy fiefdom, but the Minister is saying that banks are closing and post offices are good, yet post offices are also closing simply because of the low return that sub-postmasters are receiving for doing banking business. That takes so much of their time and they are earning much less than the minimum wage per hour.

**John Glen:** I note the points that the hon. Lady raises but, as I have said to her, I cannot comment on this matter directly from my vantage point in government. However, I would just point out that since 2010, post office branch numbers have been at their most stable for decades, and 99.7% of the national population now lives within 3 miles of a branch and 93% lives within a mile of their nearest post office. I am very sympathetic to discussions of rurality, given the nature of my constituency, and almost 99% of the rural population live within 3 miles of a post office.

The Government believe that too few customers know about these excellent services so, at my predecessor's request, UK Finance and the Post Office have been working together to launch a five-point action plan to raise awareness of post office banking services. Members may have seen posters in post offices or advertisements for the services in papers, or noticed the Post Office logo on their bank's leaflets and websites. When I was new to office last year, there were concerns about the execution of that relationship, and I followed up and wrote to both parties to ask for assurances about the delivery of the programme.

The Government cannot reverse the changes in the market and in customer behaviour, nor can they determine firms' commercial strategies in response to those changes. Today's debate has focused on the loss of traditional banking channels, but it is important that we do not lose sight of a range of innovations in the retail banking market. They are bringing real benefits to consumers of all types, as I saw for myself on my visit to Scotland last summer.

No matter how the market changes, however, the Government will continue to take positive action to maintain access to vital banking services and ensure that banks support communities across the UK when their local branches close.

**Dr Whitford** *rose*—

**John Glen:** I was about to conclude, but am happy to give way again to the hon. Lady.

**Dr Whitford:** I thank the Minister for giving way.

The banks that have already left my town did not leave any ATM behind. Because of the low fees earned through the LINK system, more and more ATMs in rural locations, particularly across Scotland, are also closing. Many people are not remotely ready to live in a totally cashless system, so is there anything that the Government can do at least to ensure that there are ATMs in every community?

**John Glen:** I am grateful for that intervention. The Government recognise that widespread free access to cash remains extremely important in the day-to-day lives of many people up and down the country, and LINK, the UK's cash machine network, is committed

to maintaining free access to cash through its extensive footprint of ATMs. The Government set up the payment systems regulator to ensure that the UK's payment systems work in the interests of their users. The regulator is closely monitoring the situation and holding LINK to account for its commitments to maintain the broad geographic spread of ATMs across the UK.

I draw the attention of the House to the debate to which I envisage I will be replying next Thursday. I hope that it will give hon. Members an opportunity to make further points, which I will be happy to take on board.

*Question put and agreed to.*

4.49 pm

*House adjourned.*

# Westminster Hall

Thursday 7 February 2019

[MR VIRENDRA SHARMA *in the Chair*]

## BACKBENCH BUSINESS

### Rough Sleeping

[*Relevant documents: Third Report of the Communities and Local Government Committee of Session 2016–17, Homelessness, HC 40; Fifth Report of the Communities and Local Government Committee of Session 2016–17, The draft Homelessness Reduction Bill, HC 635, and the Government response, Cm 9443.*]

1.30 pm

**Neil Coyle** (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered rough sleeping.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma.

I have just arrived in the Chamber from my first ever blood donation. I am a little giddy, so bear with me—I have the sugary biscuits just in case. If anyone has not given blood, please do so. A donor drive is on in London, #giveblood, because we need more regular donors.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for giving us time to have the debate. I thank the Minister for being present. It is good to see her here, and I know that she attaches a lot of importance to the subject. I also thank the shadow Minister—it is always a pleasure to serve alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn)—and everyone else who is present for making time for this debate.

I extend a bigger thank you to everyone who has contacted me about the issue in advance of the debate and since I was first elected in 2015. News UK is in my constituency, so it is rare for me to plug other papers—I do not usually do so anyway—but I will quickly plug the *Daily Mirror* for a fantastic campaign on tackling rough sleeping and homelessness. It deserves credit for humanising a debate that can be a bit statistical when, actually, it is about the lives of real people in devastating circumstances.

**Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I am sure that I cannot be the only Member who has been surprised—or perhaps not—at the number of constituents who have never experienced homelessness writing to me about this problem. They feel, as I do, that it is a shocking indictment that a society such as ours has so much visible street homelessness. Does my hon. Friend agree?

**Neil Coyle**: I agree 100%—there is nothing higher than 100%. There is a contrast here, because the public will and interest in solving rough sleeping and homelessness more widely have not, sadly, been matched by Government action to date.

**Paula Sherriff** (Dewsbury) (Lab): Virtually every evening, as we walk out of this place into the tube station, we pass a number of homeless people. The Government must take time to reflect on which of their policies makes the situation worse. Does my hon. Friend agree, however, that this is not only a problem in London? It now infests towns and villages throughout our nation.

**Neil Coyle**: Absolutely. No part of the country is not affected by homelessness in all its forms, but in particular rough sleeping. Of course, the numbers are disproportionately large in metropolitan areas such as London, Birmingham and Manchester, where people are attracted by additional opportunities to get money and food. The bigger cities also have more organisations, so people are naturally drawn to them. It is shameful that we walk in and out of this building past those people.

Not everyone—even among those who want to take action—is comfortable trying to support someone who is rough sleeping, but StreetLink and its partners across the country are amazing. Anyone can refer someone to it—it has an app, it is online and people can phone to ask it to intervene in support of someone they have seen rough sleeping. They can say where the person is, give a rough description and say what time of day the person was seen.

I am grateful for the interventions, but I had not even finished my thank yous. I want to thank all the organisations such as St Mungo's, which is represented in the Public Gallery, that have provided briefings.

**Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): I cannot be present for the whole debate, but I too wanted to thank St Mungo's, as well as Access Community Trust in Suffolk. Such organisations do great work. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that to meet this challenge and solve it, three things need to be done: an assessment of any correlation with the roll-out of universal credit, a move towards long-term funding for homelessness services, and a dramatic increase in the amount of affordable housing we provide in this country?

**Neil Coyle**: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I should probably finish my speech, because he has just said everything—[*Interruption.*] Steady on, I am not giving up that easily. He made three salient points, and I hope the Minister heard them being made from her Back Benches.

This issue is not, and should never be, a party political one. I am proud to co-chair the all-party parliamentary group on ending homelessness with the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince). Through him, we have met the Minister—if I had requested a meeting, I do not think she would have been as free with her time as she might be with the hon. Gentleman—and together we have had some successes. I look forward to that continuing. Work on this subject is happening across the parties and the solutions are there if we are prepared to invest in them.

Had I finished my thank yous? No. I was going to mention Crisis, Shelter and other organisations. Crisis provides facilitation for the all-party group.

The background to the debate is the statistics on rough sleeping, which were published a week ago. The wider background, which has been touched on by others,

[Neil Coyle]

is the rise in overall homelessness every year for the past eight years. On that wider issue, I hope that the Minister will indicate in her response whether she thinks the overall homelessness figure, which I think is to be published at the end of March, will rise or fall. What is her expectation?

I also pay tribute—as all MPs do—to the work of local organisations in my constituency. That includes St Mungo's, which does some brilliant work.

**Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab):** I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. If it were not for local organisations, such as the Slough homelessness forum in my constituency, which helps the council to operate two night shelters, we would be in a much worse situation. Does he not agree that it is a shocking indictment of our society that rough sleeping has more than doubled, increasing by more than 165% since 2010?

**Neil Coyle:** I have not been able to disagree with a single intervention yet—someone will have to challenge me. I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend.

There is a positive and a negative: the positive is that the public care about this issue. Volunteers help out, and even St Mungo's in my constituency relies on them to do the outreach. I went on a walkabout with them, to support homeless people and to try to get them into shelters during the very cold spell last year. The public appetite is there. People are willing to give their time and donations to address the issue. That, however, is in the face of eight years of annual increases in homelessness and of Government policies that directly contributed to that rise. That is the negative.

**Mary Glendon (North Tyneside) (Lab):** Organisations such as Depaul and the YMCA have projects that help thousands of young people who sleep rough, nationally and in North Tyneside. Does my hon. Friend agree that those organisations should have the Government's ear on policy issues? Depaul, for example, would like to see the shared accommodation rate put back to the 30th percentile of local rents, so young people can have somewhere affordable to stay at night.

**Neil Coyle:** Again, I agree. I was going to mention Depaul specifically because it has a base in Bermondsey. Its policy is for equal benefit levels for young people—their rent is not cheaper just because they are 20. That is a complete falsehood that leads to arbitrary levels of benefit that do not match people's needs. Depaul does some fantastic work in Bermondsey and beyond.

The church-run Robes Project, which is specific to Southwark and Lambeth, opens for five or six months in winter. Every year, it has had to provide more accommodation as a result of the outcome—whether intentional or not—of Government policies. That strikes at the same point. If the organisations working on homelessness, as well as those with experience of it, were listened to, some of that could have been avoided.

The hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) mentioned universal credit; I have had constituents, including one with a significant mental health condition and another self-employed and in work, who were made homeless as

a result of universal credit. That was avoidable. That direct link is unacceptable, but there is no brilliant data set for identifying those kinds of people.

**Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op):** I know homeless people who have not applied for universal credit because it is so complex. Does my hon. Friend agree that is another failing of the system?

**Neil Coyle:** It certainly is. The universal credit training centre is at the London Bridge jobcentre in my constituency. The jobcentre staff do what they can with limited resources and time, but people come to see me because they have been failed by that jobcentre. A few weeks ago, a man in his fifties who could not even spell his own address came to see me. He had not been told about advance payments; he was told he would have nothing for six weeks.

**Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab):** My hon. Friend is making a fantastic opening speech. He talks about some of the inherent problems with universal credit. Does he agree that the fact that it is digital by default ultimately prevents a number of people making applications, because they do not have access to online resources to make the initial application?

**Neil Coyle:** We are keeping up the trend, because I completely agree. People who have very little and who use certain mobile networks cannot call freephone numbers from their mobile phone, let alone use their phone to go online and fill in a form that they have to add extra information to multiple times, just to get it right.

Returning to Harry, who came to see me about his universal credit, he had no heating, electricity or food. He was told just to turn up at the council office. The council has not had a walk-in appointments system for years, yet the universal credit training centre in my constituency sent someone there, who they knew would not get help elsewhere.

There are massive failings. In my surgery sessions I have seen many people, and the number rises every year. Already this year, two homeless people—not just at risk of homelessness—have come to see me at my surgery. One lady, who is cleaner, was carrying all her belongings with her. She was still working and was sleeping on night buses. We are fortunate to have those—it is not the same in other parts of the country, where there is no opportunity to have somewhere warm and as safe as possible to sleep.

**Paula Sherriff:** I want to make the point about homeless women who may not have access to sanitary products, and how undignified it must be not to have access to those products and to a bathroom. I support the food banks and other agencies that provide menstrual products for those women.

**Neil Coyle:** My hon. Friend has done a huge amount of campaigning on that issue, including on the tampon tax. People may be unaware of the Red Box Project. In my office, we provide sanitary products—this is the situation that MPs are faced with, which was not there in 2010. In my office, I have a food bank box, a toiletries box and a red box for tampons. Not everyone knows where to go for those items, but I encourage those who are not already to get involved with Red Box. I chair the all-party parliamentary group on food banks. “Food

bank” is a misnomer—it is not just about food, although of course that is part of it, but about toiletries. What is shocking to many people who are unfamiliar with food banks is the number of families who come in for their babies. Food banks have to give out nappies, because those families would not otherwise be able to look after their children.

**Rachael Maskell:** And baby milk.

**Neil Coyle:** Yes, baby milk too. If anyone watching this debate wants to donate, do not just take food—it is not just about pasta and beans—but take all the other daily essentials.

A young woman who came to me was sleeping with someone different every night rather than go back to an abusive domestic environment or sleep on the streets. That is an appalling situation for people to be in. The two truisms from all the individuals I see is that no personal circumstances have been anything other than tragic, but all of them are avoidable—without exception—if we get the policies right.

The latest statistics are shameful: in the sixth wealthiest nation on the planet in the 21st century, an estimated 4,700 people are forced to sleep rough. That is completely unacceptable, whatever the politics. Genuine efforts to tackle rough sleeping are welcome. It is the most extreme form of homelessness, but in November last year, Shelter estimated that there were 320,000 homeless people in Britain. That fuller extent of homelessness needs adequate attention. It is not just about rough sleeping, because moving people from the streets into temporary accommodation still leaves them homeless.

Those statistics show that for every homeless person we see sleeping rough, there are about 63 other homeless people who are less visible: they are in temporary accommodation, sofa surfing or on night buses like my constituent. Some say that rough sleeping is the tip of the homeless iceberg, but if an iceberg is one-eighth out of the water, the analogy is not strong enough. Rough sleeping would not even be a quarter of what is visible above the water, if my maths is right—I make no claim to be a mathematician.

The latest statistics on rough sleeping show that the total number of people counted or estimated to be sleeping rough on a single night was 4,677, which is down 2% from the 2017 total of 4,751. That is a reduction of 74 people. It is important to flag that that data set is not strong enough. No one thinks that it is the most reliable way to assess the genuine number of people sleeping rough.

**Mr Dhesi:** To build on those statistics, research in 2014 found that 61% of women and 16% of men who were homeless had experienced violence or abuse from a partner. Does my hon. Friend agree that there is a serious link between homelessness and domestic abuse that the Government need to investigate further and deal with?

**Neil Coyle:** I completely agree, and I will come back to domestic violence later.

The data are based on numbers on the street, but areas such as Brent Council did an estimate rather than go out and count, so that is not a reliable figure. Keith, the *Big Issue* seller at London Bridge, sleeps in a bin

cupboard on the Purbrook Estate near Tower Bridge Road. Nobody went into that bin cupboard to count him. That estimate is not an adequate assessment of the problem. I hope that the Minister will tell us how she intends to ensure that data collection is more robust. That decrease of 74, based on a faulty test, is on the back of an increase of 2,909 since 2010, using the Government’s own measure. Under the last Labour Government, the number of rough sleepers was at an all-time low. The latest figures suggest that rough sleeping may have reached a two-year low.

**John Cryer** (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): The figures that my hon. Friend mentions are compelling, but even if we did not have them, we can see the problem anywhere—I know about it in my constituency, and that applies to most of us. In the centre of Leytonstone, by my office and by the library where I do my surgeries, the number of rough sleepers is massively greater than eight years ago when I was elected. On top of that, universal credit has just gone live. In the next few months, many of us—particularly me—are very apprehensive about the effects of UC when it really hits our area.

**Neil Coyle:** Sadly, my hon. Friend is right to be nervous. Of course, I gave way to the chair of the parliamentary Labour Party in the hope that he might call me in a debate at some point. Southwark was one of the earliest test areas for universal credit. My experience is that my hon. Friend will have more cases of rough sleeping as a result of the universal credit roll-out.

The 2% drop nationally comes with very significant variances. There was a massive 60% jump in rough sleeping in Birmingham. In Manchester, I believe it was about 31%, and 13% in London. There were not such high numbers overall, but there were statistically significant jumps in areas such as Doncaster, where rough sleeping is three and a half times what it was just a year ago. In Rugby, there is five times as much, and in Corby there is seven times as much, albeit from low bases. Those anomalies need addressing. The towns and cities with large rises need more significant attention. I hope that the Minister will address that.

I want to highlight areas that are doing better than others. Brighton has reduced rough sleeping by two thirds; Luton has almost cut it in half and Bedford has cut it by about a third. Some areas are doing better, and I hope that their perhaps better practice is extended. My own council has bucked the London rise of 13%. There were just three additional rough sleepers in Southwark last year, and it is leading work to train staff in other local authorities to implement the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017.

**Louise Haigh** (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. I have been out with the police in Lancashire and Kent and have seen their joint agency approach to tackling homelessness. Does he agree that a whole-system approach is necessary, and does he share my concern that some police forces still use the Vagrancy Act 1824 to criminalise rough sleepers without giving them the support they clearly need?

**Neil Coyle:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I know she does a huge amount on policing. The police should not be picking up the pieces of failing systems elsewhere. That is an avoidable drain on their resources.

**Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab):** My hon. Friend touches on something vital: we must deal not just with the phenomenon of homelessness and rough sleeping but with its causes. We need to make more effort on employment, the benefits system, young people coming out of care, people leaving the armed services without the necessary support and, yes, drug and alcohol problems. All those issues—including mental health problems, by the way—need to be addressed if we are really going to get on top of this problem.

**Neil Coyle:** My right hon. Friend is spot on. It is a sad truth that we know who these people are. We know which people are more likely to become homeless or sleep rough. They are an identifiable group. They are care leavers, women fleeing domestic violence, ex-forces people and people with mental health problems. We know who they are. We also know from experience—the scrapping of the Supporting People programme had direct consequences in this policy area—that there is no silver bullet. I do not think anyone suggests that there is, but we know who is more likely to become homeless, and we know how we can support them to avoid that.

**Ruth Cadbury:** My hon. Friend is being incredibly generous with interventions. We know what the causes are. We also have experience of the solutions. We had lots of rough sleeping in London in the mid-'90s. The Labour Government addressed the issue by identifying all the people who were vulnerable and putting in joined-up services. By 2010, there was virtually no rough sleeping in central London. Does he share my anger at Ministers who say that this is a complex problem and they do not know where to start?

**Neil Coyle:** My hon. Friend is right to be angry, and she is right to remember that this problem was being resolved. I remember cardboard city around Waterloo and Westminster in particular. The extent of the problem was reduced, and there was a good track record on it, but it is coming back.

The Government's target is to halve rough sleeping by 2022. If the statistics are accurate and there was a 74 person reduction last year, there are another 2,376 people to go. At the current rate, it would take 32 years—three decades—to meet the Government's target of halving the overall number. If anyone is struggling with the maths, that means it would take until 2051 to meet the Government's 2022 target. That is not good enough, and I hope the Minister can tell us what she intends to do to boost action to prevent the problem.

If only as much effort went into tackling the problem as went into creating it, we would be in a better place. It did not come out of nowhere. Warnings were given by organisations such as St Mungo's, but sadly they were not heeded. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth) pointed out, lots of issues contribute to the problem, but the warnings were there.

Destabilising the NHS with a wasteful top-down disorganisation that divided primary care trusts from social services, splurging millions in the process, prevented joined-up work to support people to manage conditions that are more prevalent among rough sleepers and the broader homeless population. When mental health services lose their staff and ability to intervene up front, more service users and survivors are forced towards the streets.

When drug and alcohol cessation services are decimated, no solutions to addiction are provided. The “fend for yourself” attitude, which was proven previously not to work, has failed again since 2010. When funding for affordable house building is undermined, and when councils have their resources attacked and their ability to manage local case loads undermined, the outcome can only be more gatekeeping to services and a reduced ability to support people with genuine needs.

The benefits system has already been touched on. Attacking people who rely on our threadbare social security system, calling people “scroungers” and making it harder to claim—we heard about digital access and processes that force people out of the system before they get any support—creates problems. This Government have extended sanctions to even those with significant mental health conditions and other impairments. That is unacceptable. Deliberate delays are built into benefits such as universal credit. People now face a minimum five-week wait to get universal credit—according to Department for Work and Pensions figures, that target will not be met for 300,000 people this year—but when it first began in Southwark, the average wait was 12 weeks. That is three months without a penny coming in. Sanctions are also imposed for longer and to a greater degree than ever before. I am a member of the Select Committee on Work and Pensions; I recommend our report on that subject, which calls for a dramatic change to the sanctioning system.

When the DWP, under the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), scrapped disability living allowance and brought in personal independence payments, its own impact assessment stated that 500,000 disabled people would not qualify for support. Making it that much harder for disabled people to obtain basic funding—the average DLA payment was £3,500 a year—of course pushes more people towards the street. I should plug the Trussell Trust's campaign to scrap the waiting time for universal credit. I encourage Members to sign up and support it.

Most organisations that work in this area have a long-term focus, and the Government should too. There has been only a 2% drop in rough sleeping so far, but will the Minister say how even that low level will be sustained if the pilots are temporary? I hope she will also tell us whether the funding for the schemes that exist—there are not enough—will be extended. We need an answer, because local authorities and organisations such as Shelter, which works with Southwark Council on this issue, need to know that they have longer-term funding. Their own sustainability is at stake. Without longer-term planning, I am uncertain whether we will halve rough sleeping even by 2051. I hope the Minister tells us how the Government intend to build on success in some of the pilot areas.

Lots of local authorities got in touch with me in advance of the debate. Last year, the number of households accepted as homeless was almost 60,000 in England, 34,000 in Scotland and 9,000 in Wales. Southwark is doing a lot of work on this issue, and it deserves credit for that. Southwark spends all its discretionary housing payment. It receives £1.3 million, and it all goes out—there is not a penny left—to try to support people to stay in their homes. It needs more. Southwark has trained all 326 councils on the Homelessness Reduction Act, and 271 councils have visited to shadow its service and learn

how to operate in the HRA environment. Southwark has established both a London training academy, which has trained 1,000 council officers, and a rough sleeping training academy, which has trained the 81 councils across England that have the highest levels of rough sleeping. I acknowledge that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government funded that.

The Local Government Association got in touch to say that homelessness

“is a tragedy for all those it affects,”

and that rough sleeping

“is one of the most visible signs of the nation’s housing crisis.”

It estimates that councils provide temporary housing for more than 82,000 households, including 123,000 children. “Temporary accommodation” does not begin to describe the circumstances of some of those households. Children will have woken up on Christmas day with a shared kitchen or even a shared bathroom. How can families celebrate Christmas day when they cannot even cook their own food? That is an appalling set of circumstances. The number of people living in temporary accommodation has increased by 65% since 2010. In Southwark alone, 2,400 families are supported in temporary accommodation. The Local Government Association estimates that the funding gap will be £110 million this year, and £421 million in 2024-25.

I will touch on dehumanisation. Last year a man died at Westminster tube station, right on the doorstep of this building. It got a lot of attention because of where it happened, but sadly it is estimated that 600 homeless people—600 people—died on the streets last year. We should be more shocked by this, not just because somebody died at Westminster and that case got more attention than usual, but because of the level of the problem and the age at which homeless men and women die, which is around 40 years old.

**Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op):** Does my hon. Friend agree that although we welcome the severe weather emergency provision money, which people in my area who run the shelter—largely the churches—get, the problem is that it is based on predictive weather planning? It is never easy for a volunteer to try to work out whether they are going to be needed on a particular night. Some of that money could be used more creatively for preventive work, to get people into accommodation before they need to go to the shelter.

**Neil Coyle:** Absolutely. The costs of getting this wrong are far greater than the costs of the up-front preventive measures.

The sector is unanimous, and it is a recommendation of the all-party parliamentary group on ending homelessness, that adult safeguarding reviews should become the norm for any adult rough sleeper who dies on the streets. We have them for children’s services, but there is not an automatic assumption that they will be done for adults, and there should be. A review should be done in a no-blame culture, so we can identify what interventions might have helped to prevent that death on the streets. I hope the Minister will commit to that today.

I have an example of a really difficult case. A woman whose sister had died in Ghana came to my surgery. The day she left to go to her sister’s funeral, she wrote to the police, the council, the South London and Maudsley

NHS Foundation Trust, the GP and others begging for help for her grandson. She had looked after her grandson as he grew up—his mum had died and his dad was never on the scene—for as long as she possibly could. However, his mental health had broken down and his behaviour became too much, so he was supported elsewhere, in sheltered accommodation.

What happened next was tragic. The grandson was not getting the mental health support that he needed. His behaviour became erratic in the shelter and problematic for other residents, and he was evicted. He was beaten to death in Walworth. He had stolen someone’s bike and pawned it, and the people he had stolen it from found him and beat him up, and he died. The morning his grandmother got back from Ghana, the police knocked on her door to tell her he was dead, despite the fact she had begged everyone to provide an extra, small intervention that could have prevented such an awful occurrence. Personally, I think the mental health services should have done more in that case, but we need to learn from incidents like that, to make sure that all avoidable deaths are actually made avoidable.

There is a question mark: are homeless people worth less, somehow? They have been made to feel that way. Being homeless is a dehumanising experience and the lack of human contact—even eye contact—is something that comes out in homeless group sessions, when we talk to homeless people directly.

There have been some bizarre policies. At Poole Borough Council the solution to rough sleeping was to introduce public space protection orders, which imposed fines on homeless people. Unsurprisingly, those fines were not paid when the council attempted to impose them, because homeless people do not have much money. It was a bizarre attempt at policy, but perhaps not as bad as the Cardiff Conservative councillor, Kathryn Kelloway, who was so outraged at the indecency and indignity of homelessness that she called for homeless people’s tents to be torn down—not because they had new homes, but just to take away their tents. That was shameful. She was suspended by the Welsh Conservatives, but less well publicised is the fact that she has already been readmitted, which speaks volumes.

Perhaps I have talked for too long, but I want to touch on some other issues. The private rental sector is the fastest growth area for people becoming homeless. Lots of organisations, some represented here today, are calling for no-fault evictions to be scrapped and section 21 reformed. There are lots of reasons why I want more rent controls and longer tenancy agreements to try to prevent some of this, as well as an increase in expenditure on help to rent, to try and get more people into the sector where possible.

Hon. Members have already referred to domestic violence, which I will touch on. The Government statistics, which I have taken from the House of Commons Library briefing, are astonishing. From April to June 2018, 4,500 households were owed a statutory homeless duty where the reason for losing their last settled home was “violent relationship breakdown with partner or associated persons.”

That is 8% of all households owed homeless duty. The Women’s Aid annual survey 2017 found that housing was the most frequent co-presenting issue for women experiencing domestic abuse, above health, justice, finance and children.

[Neil Coyle]

The crisis in refuge funding has been driven by the demise of the Supporting People programme. If there is one specific programme that should be rebuilt, it is that one. In 2015-16, one in 10 homeless acceptances were due to domestic violence. Half of St Mungo's female clients have experienced domestic violence and one third said domestic violence had contributed to their homelessness.

There is an issue around the implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. Fleeing from domestic violence does not automatically make women a priority need. They still have to meet the vulnerability threshold in the legislation to meet the criteria for assistance. That needs addressing, because councils are getting this wrong. The Women's Aid project No Woman Turned Away looked at the reasons given to women for not getting homelessness assistance—we should think about the circumstances in which councils are doing this—which included the woman needing proof of abuse. Some women were deemed to be intentionally homeless as a result of being beaten up by a partner. That is not an acceptable excuse to try and deny someone the support they need. Some were even told to return to the violent partner, rather than get help from their council. Those circumstances must change.

The “no recourse to public funds” policy is completely unacceptable on every level. Either we believe in human rights or we do not. NRPf denies people equality of opportunity and rights to family life. I will give some examples, but for those who do not know, let me first explain that it used to apply only to illegal immigrants to the UK—to those who had no lawful reason to be in this country. The coalition Government, to their shame, then extended it to families, including those with British-born children; there are now 50,000 British-born children, born to parents legally in this country, who are not entitled to any public support. The circumstances into which those families are driven are horrific, and in some cases they are the result of Home Office error.

On Monday, Mr Musari sent me a message. I am godfather to his son; when we first met in 2015, he was about to become homeless. He had been working, paying tax and paying private rent, but the Home Office told him to stop—apparently we did not want him working, contributing or paying tax—and he was made homeless while his wife was pregnant with their third child. They were put through the wringer so much that he nearly killed himself; he said that he thought his children would get more help if he were dead. Only on Monday, almost three years later, was the decision finally overturned, granting him access to public funds—it has taken that long to correct a Home Office error.

Let me give one more example from my constituency. A woman was told seven years ago, in court, that she had a criminal record and did not meet the “person of good character” criterion, so she would be denied access to public funds. She has just got her new biometric card, but it has taken until now to overturn the decision, because it was a case of mistaken identity. She has never committed a crime, in this country or anywhere else—not so much as nicking a pint of milk from a supermarket, which I am sure we have all done. She too has been through the wringer: she and her son, now 10, were made

homeless and were reliant on friends and family. That boy was three years old when this situation began as a result of a Home Office mistake.

The all-party parliamentary group has made recommendations, including reinstating access to legal aid so that people in those circumstances do not have to wait three and a half years, or seven years, to overturn awful erroneous decisions by the Home Office. It is unacceptable. The Zambrano restrictions, which deny people access, should be lifted for anyone with a dependant. No child should be put through this process as a result of where their parent may have come from.

It is completely unacceptable that Surrey Square Primary School in my constituency has 40 children in those circumstances. If my daughter Esme were old enough, those children could have been born in the bed next to hers in St Thomas's hospital, but they are denied access to the same support that Esme might qualify for. The children get this. They understand how unfair it is to victimise their classmates and friends. The Government are missing what this divisive and horrific policy is creating in our schools, especially in areas such as my constituency.

I will touch on the criminal justice system, which a couple of hon. Members have already mentioned, and the cost of getting this policy wrong, with specific reference to criminal justice. I hope the Minister sees her role as a cross-Government one, because there is not just one solution to this; it touches on many other areas. The cost to the taxpayer of getting this wrong is extortionate, through councils, the NHS and mental health services, which we have already talked about. Rough sleepers experience higher levels of certain health conditions that result in hospitalisation, and that is not free.

The response to a question I put to the Ministry of Justice revealed some figures that I think are shocking. The total number of people going into prison has fallen slightly since 2016, but the proportion of homeless people going to prison has risen from 23% to 27%.

**Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con):** I am finding the hon. Gentleman's speech of great interest, and he has obviously researched this subject very deeply, but I will tentatively point out that it has been going on for 42 minutes, and while I am enjoying it, it would perhaps be more appropriate, given that there are other people here, if he came to his peroration.

**Neil Coyle:** Finally, an intervention that I can say “Get lost!” to. Bad luck; perhaps the hon. Gentleman did not want me to take interventions. He will be pleased to hear that I am nearly finished, but his intervention was in poor taste, I think. Perhaps I will take a bit longer—I do not know.

As I was saying, the total number of people going into prison has fallen slightly, but the percentage of those people who are homeless has risen to 27%. Last year, that will have amounted to 27,000 people entering prison who are of no fixed abode—homeless, in other words. The average cost of keeping someone in a prison in England is £35,000; it is higher in Scotland and much higher in Northern Ireland, where it is more than £50,000. If we just use the England figure, 27,000 people at £35,000 a year means that the Government's failure fully to address homelessness is contributing to a prison population costing roughly £945 million a year.

What a waste—what an awful waste. That is nearly a billion quid. I know the Government did not get their money's worth out of the Democratic Unionist party, but this £1 billion would be much better invested up front in preventative services to stop the scandal of people being made homeless and forced into crime. We know who is among the prison population: people with mental health conditions, care leavers and people who are ex-forces, as has already been touched on. The Government should invest in those groups to support them and prevent them from becoming homeless.

I would like to think that this is linked to the rising and extortionate cost of getting this wrong, but, as touched on previously, the public will is there to tackle this problem. The public do not want people to be sleeping rough or to be made homeless. As an indication of that demonstrable public will, the intervention and support of the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, who has done some brilliant work on this, meant that last year StreetLink had more referrals and more donations from the public than ever before.

**Paula Sherriff:** Batley Homeless Project, Dewsbury Cares and Churches Together in Dewsbury do amazing voluntary work, but Sarah Watkinson of Winter Warmers of Mirfield is now taking the space-type blankets that people get at the end of a marathon to the railway station in the morning and asking people to give them out to homeless people they see on their commute. Does my hon. Friend agree it is a shame that people have to do that and that, while we are grateful for the work they do, if the Government got their act together, perhaps they would not have to do it?

**Neil Coyle:** We are, of course, grateful to the army of people out there who are propping up this failing system. They want to see action from the Government and they are not getting it. I will plug StreetLink again: people can phone to make a referral, and StreetLink will do the intervention. Anyone who wants to help directly should to that.

I will end, hon. Members will be pleased to know, with a quick point. The Minister made the commitment last year that if rough sleeping continued to rise, she would resign. Obviously there has been a 2% drop, so we are glad to see her still in post—I mean that genuinely; a drop is welcome—but will she commit to continuing that pledge for next year?

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Virendra Sharma (in the Chair):** Before I call the next speaker, I want to say that this is an important subject and the hon. Gentleman was doing his job, so I could not intervene in that. I am sure that everybody will show patience and take that on board when they contribute later; Members have seen the number of people standing to speak, and they can decide for themselves.

2.16 pm

**Will Quince** (Colchester) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma, and to follow my friend the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle), alongside whom I co-chair the all-party parliamentary group on ending homelessness. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing time for this very important debate.

It is difficult to conduct a debate about rough sleeping without viewing it in the wider context of homelessness. The hon. Gentleman gave a compelling and comprehensive speech; it will not surprise him that I do not agree with all of it, but much of it I do agree with. He referenced a lot of the all-party parliamentary group's work, and I will try not to repeat too many of the points that he made so eloquently. I also thank the Minister. I know it has not been a very easy 12 months for her, but she has worked very diligently on this issue and I thank her and the Secretary of State for the roles they have played.

Over the past 12 months we have seen a small decrease in rough sleeping, but it is important to point out that that is in the context of increases in London, Birmingham and Manchester in particular, and of figures still showing an increase of 165% since 2010. I welcome the Government's ambition to halve rough sleeping by 2022 and end it entirely by 2027, but that is too long. I put it to the Minister that we must be far more ambitious.

**Lyn Brown** (West Ham) (Lab): I know that the figures are disputed and that the CHAIN—combined homelessness and information network—statistics show differences year to year, but with a decrease of 2% a year it will take until 2052 to deal with rough sleeping in Britain, and that is frankly not good enough.

**Will Quince:** I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention; I picked up on that point, which the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark, my co-chair on the all-party parliamentary group, also made. I think it is a little misleading, if I dare say so, on the basis that the past year is the first year in which a number of interventions kicked in, the largest of which is the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, so it is not necessarily correct to say that we will see a 2% decrease; we should see a much sharper decrease this year, next year and the year after. Of course, the key is ensuring that we stay on top of those figures and, through further debates such as this one and through the all-party parliamentary group, we continue to hold the Minister and Secretary of State's feet to the fire to ensure that those ambitions are met.

However, I think we need to go much further. To tackle homelessness and rough sleeping, it is important that we truly understand it. The hon. Lady mentioned the statistics; the reality is that we do not entirely know, because in nearly all cases they are estimates. We have some reasonably good estimates for London, but for the rest of the country they are often based on a headcount on a single night, at one point of the year. As the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark rightly pointed out, numerous people will come into a town centre of an evening or during the day, because they can beg, and people will be kind and generous. However, because of the danger of violence in the evening, they will actually head out of town to parks and recreational spaces to sleep in tents, so may not be picked up in rough sleeping headcounts.

We know that the reasons for homelessness and rough sleeping are numerous, varied and complex. I wish it were as simple as saying that the answer is just more money, but money is only part of the answer. To some extent—I err on the side of caution when using this phrase—homelessness is a little like an illness. Successive Governments have thrown huge amounts of money at the problem, which, a bit like a painkiller, has worked in masking the pain but has not actually treated the underlying condition or, even better, actually cured it.

[Will Quince]

An old adage that works just as well for homelessness and rough sleeping as for anything else is that prevention is always better than cure. We need a two-pronged approach that covers both. In order to prevent homelessness and to help those currently homeless, we have to truly understand them, looking at those numerous, varied and complex reasons and then putting in place timely interventions to address each and every one of them, otherwise we risk regression.

The all-party parliamentary group goes to all parts of the country, and I have seen too many cases, particularly in London and my constituency of Colchester, of rough sleepers who have been through the council system. They have had support and been through temporary accommodation, and in many cases have been given social housing, but for so many reasons that has failed. That is one of the biggest problems, and if we do not address those underlying issues that cause homelessness at the outset, the likelihood of regression is sadly very high.

We need much better data—as I said, we have reasonable data for London but not for the rest of the country—in order to understand those root causes of homelessness and then address them. We know some of the causes. They include poverty, debt, eviction and section 21 notices to end assured shorthold tenancies, which are now the No. 1 cause of homelessness. They also include relationship or marital breakdown, domestic violence, landlords not letting to those in receipt of benefits, alcoholism, drug addiction, mental health issues, leaving prison or care, being LGBTQ—a particularly vulnerable cohort—hospital discharges and leaving our armed forces, which the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark mentioned.

We also have to consider the wider context. In 2017-18, we built 6,463 social homes, yet nearly 1.2 million people are on council housing waiting lists. Successive Governments have not built anywhere near enough social homes.

**Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith) (Lab): I do not disagree with the point the hon. Gentleman is making. Would he like to comment on the opinion of the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government that the Mayor of London should build fewer affordable homes and more luxury homes, as he said yesterday?

**Will Quince:** I had not seen that, so it would be ill-judged to comment on it. I can point the hon. Gentleman to a very fine article from only last week in, I believe, the *Colchester Gazette*, authored by the local MP, on why we need the most ambitious Government investment in social housing since the second world war. I will touch on that in a little bit.

Sadly, we have an estimated 4,677 people sleeping rough on our streets, and 277,000 homeless households. That is due in part to a lack of security in the private rented sector, which, as I mentioned, is now the biggest single cause of homelessness. We have areas where demand massively outstrips supply, including some of our major cities and large towns, with Colchester being a prime example, so landlords will not let to those in receipt of benefits.

The Government have done some great work, which is starting to make a difference and gives some reason for optimism, including the Homelessness Reduction

Act 2017. I was pleased to speak at all stages of its passage and to sit on its Bill Committee. There is also the £28 million Housing First pilot, the rough sleeping initiative and the Somewhere Safe to Stay pilot. There is funding for non-UK nationals sleeping rough. There are rough sleeping support teams and mental health support outreach workers. Improvements have been made to StreetLink and there are homelessness experts in jobcentres. Those are all part of that £100 million package to support the rough sleeping strategy announced last year.

My concern is that, worthy, important and valuable as those programmes are, they treat the symptoms, not the cause. What do we need to do? The first thing I should say to the Minister is that I do not have all the answers. However, I have some suggestions on ways in which we can start to prevent homelessness and address the issue. First, we need a full nationwide roll-out of Housing First as quickly as possible. The three pilots were important and a great start, but we know that it works; we have seen it work in other countries, particularly in Scandinavia, where rough sleeping has been entirely eradicated. Secondly, fewer than half of local authorities have a night shelter, so we need to fund and build more of those. Regional hubs are hugely important.

As the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark mentioned, we need to lift the freeze on the local housing allowance, which was introduced in 2016. We also need to embed and fully fund the Homelessness Reduction Act. It is a great piece of legislation, but we must monitor it to make sure that it is working and is fully funded and, equally importantly, that local authorities use it to its full and interpret it in the right way. That is hugely important, particularly in relation to the duties it places on them. As the hon. Gentleman also mentioned, we need a help-to-rent scheme. We need to look at people who have no recourse to public funds. In London and some of our big cities, between 30% and 40% of rough sleepers are non-British nationals and are not entitled to any support, so we need to find a solution for those individuals.

We need to start treating homelessness, and particularly rough sleeping, as a health issue. I mentioned alcoholism, drug addiction and mental health issues. We need mental health support workers to go out with every outreach team up and down the country. I am pleased to see that £30 million will be invested in that regard, which will make a huge difference. For the Minister to say at one of our all-party parliamentary group meetings that the Department very much sees rough sleeping and homelessness as a health issue was an important step change.

**Melanie Onn** (Great Grimsby) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman may feel positive about the Government accepting that homelessness should be seen as a health issue, but his Government have cut public health funding.

**Will Quince:** The hon. Lady makes a good point about health funding. I have raised my own concerns about that privately with Ministers. There is a huge amount more work to do in that area. I specifically refer to outreach workers going out in our towns and cities across this country and providing support. It is often those outreach workers who are trusted to provide that support. However, I very much take her point.

Minister, we need specialist, well-funded interventions for those high-risk groups that I mentioned—particularly prison leavers, care leavers, survivors of domestic violence and the LGBTQ community. We have to give more support to those amazing charities and voluntary organisations that work so hard to tackle homelessness up and down our country. Many of those charities have been in existence for decades, but the pressures on them now are huge.

**Ruth Cadbury:** I apologise that I will not be able to stay to hear the Minister's response. While I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's concern and care for what he thinks should be done, perhaps he could look at the record of the two years before and after the millennium. Those of us in local government then worked with and funded—or were supported by Government funding—via several different routes, the public sector and the third sector to provide the very services that he describes. Those services supported all sorts of vulnerable people before they became homeless. They were thought of not as homelessness services but as early intervention and prevention services, and they prevented a host of problems, not only rough sleeping.

**Will Quince:** As I mentioned, the last Labour Government made several helpful interventions, but I genuinely believe that throwing money at the issue, which the Labour Government did as much as any of their successors, is not wholly the answer. It worked like a painkiller, masking the pain, but did not address the underlying condition.

**Marsha De Cordova:** The hon. Gentleman is making an incredibly long speech. It is not about throwing money at homelessness. It is the policy of austerity that has led to the rise in homelessness. That is just a fact.

**Will Quince:** I thank the hon. Lady for the intervention. I mentioned that the issue is in part about money, but it is not wholly about money; it is also about getting the right interventions in place. The hon. Lady may not have been listening entirely. I would very much welcome her coming to some of our APPG meetings, because then she would know that it is not just about austerity. Austerity may be part of the issue, because of course if we cut back on services up and down the country, everything has a consequence, but the reasons for homelessness and, in particular, rough sleeping are complex, varied and numerous. It cannot be put down to just one thing.

We need to address the availability of high-strength cheap alcohol on our high streets. I appreciate that doing something about that is not within the Minister's gift, but I hope that she can take the issue away.

I know that this will be a controversial point, but we need to try to rechannel the generosity of the British public. Too many people are, understandably, giving money to people on the streets. My message to them is this. That generosity is incredible, but please direct the money to the amazing charities that work in our towns and cities up and down the country. By all means, support people with food, blankets and all sorts of other things, but not with money, because in too many cases, as we find if we speak to rough sleepers, it ends up going on drugs and alcohol, and sadly that is helping to perpetuate their rough sleeping. It is making the

problem worse, not better, so I encourage people to support charities that are working on the ground and not to give money to individuals.

I want to come back to what the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) said. Yes, we can throw money at an issue, but unless we address the underlying cause, we will not solve it, and the underlying cause of this issue is that successive Governments have failed to build anywhere near enough social housing. That is as true of the last Labour Government as it was of the Government before them and of the Government before them. That is why I genuinely believe that, finally and most importantly, we need the most ambitious and largest Government social house building programme since the second world war. I refer the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) back to that rather punchy article on this issue.

**Andy Slaughter:** Again, I cannot fault what the hon. Gentleman is saying about social housing. It is what all the homelessness charities are urging on us. I just hope that he can have some influence on the Government whom he supports. But perhaps he can explain, then, why rough sleeping fell by 75% in the last 10 years of the Labour Government and has gone up by 165% in less than 10 years of his own party's Government.

**Will Quince:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. There are many reasons for what he refers to. The Government could tomorrow invest tens of millions of pounds—well, it would be more than tens of millions—in more temporary accommodation, and that would get more people off the streets, but it would not address the underlying problem, which is that we need long-term, permanent, secure accommodation for people up and down our country.

I come back to the fundamental point about social housing. I want us to get back to building in the region of 100,000 social houses a year. The Office for Budget Responsibility has estimated that in 2018-19 the total housing benefit bill is likely to hit an incredible £23.4 billion—£23.4 billion—and it is only going in one direction; it is only increasing. That means that we are spending more than £20 billion a year to mitigate the effects of a housing shortage brought about by successive Governments, without finding a long-term solution to the problem. Arguably, what is worse is that, because of the lack of social housing, those who need homes are being housed in the private rented sector, so taxpayers' money is being transferred into the pockets of private landlords, which in turn only increases demand in the private rented sector and drives up rents for everyone else. I suggest that investing in social homes is a far more efficient use of public money. Once built, those social homes would be public assets that would appreciate in value.

**Mr Howarth:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his generosity in giving way. Does he agree with me on this point? The Government recently announced that they would make direct payments to private landlords to avoid escalating rent arrears. Would it not be sensible to make the same offer to social landlords?

**Will Quince:** I will have to look to the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark, because I believe that that is a recommendation that the all-party parliamentary group has made. It is one of those changes that would be a positive step.

[Will Quince]

The other reason why a large and ambitious programme of social housing would be a good thing is that it would provide—this is why there is a strong Conservative case for doing it—an immediate financial return through the reduced housing benefit bill. It would also alleviate hugely the pressure on the private rented sector and ultimately, I believe, lead to cheaper rents.

I will conclude because I am conscious that many hon. Members wish to speak in the debate. Although I hugely support the Government's aim and ambition, I want us to be far more ambitious, and, through the all-party parliamentary group, we will continue to push the Government to be more ambitious. I said earlier that homelessness is a little like an illness. I want us to invest fully and properly in the treatment and cure, and that does mean significant resource. So I say to the Minister: please set out an ambitious strategy to tackle the root causes, and the whole House—I believe that this would be cross-party—will support you in making the case to the Treasury. It would lead not only to a financial benefit but to a huge social benefit. One family homeless or one person sleeping rough on our streets is one too many. Let this be the Government who put in place the long-term strategy to end homelessness, and Minister, we will all be behind you.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

**Mr Virendra Sharma (in the Chair):** Order. Before I call the next speaker, I say to hon. Members that they may seek to make interventions, but I ask them to try to refrain from making comments while they are sitting down. I suggest that they seek to make interventions, rather than making comments from a sedentary position. I call Justin Madders.

2.36 pm

**Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. There were a lot of thanks in the opening remarks from my hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle), but I would like to thank him for securing the debate and for the excellent work that he does, alongside the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince), in chairing the APPG on ending homelessness. My hon. Friend gave a passionate and well informed introduction to the subject.

Sleeping out on the streets happens all year round, but it is at times such as this, when the temperature is very low and any night could be someone's last, that the issue comes into focus. I commend those organisations that have taken extra steps in recent weeks, when the weather has been particularly cold, but we must recognise—as I think hon. Members do—that, welcome as those interventions are, they deal only with the issue as it presents itself. We need to look at the underlying causes of what I consider to be a national scandal.

Rough sleeping is a national crisis. As we have heard, the figure has risen by 165% since 2010. No doubt we will hear—indeed, we have heard already—that there has been a 2% fall in the number of people sleeping rough across England as a whole in the last year, but what I see with my own eyes tells me that we have a crisis right here and now. I have been a Member of this

House for just under four years and I have noticed a significant increase in the number of people sleeping in doorways on the walk back to my flat. This morning, while walking in, I saw lots of sleeping bags and cardboard boxes—evidence of people sleeping rough. I notice, whenever I go out in a big city, that there are more and more people sleeping on the streets; there are more than there used to be. I have also noticed an increase in the number of people coming to my surgery who are sleeping rough or facing homelessness. Every night when I leave this place, I see the people sheltering in the subways under the Palace of Westminster and I feel ashamed—ashamed that right by the corridors of power, in one of the richest countries in the world, we have people sleeping rough. I am sure that I am not the only person who, looking at that, thinks: how can we let this happen?

As we have heard, there is a huge crisis. There were 4,677 people sleeping rough on any given night last year, compared with 1,768 in a similar survey in 2010. Nearly 5,000 people sleep rough every night. Saying the number does not really do the issue justice. Imagine filling a stand at a lower-league football ground and saying that every single person in it will be out on the streets that night. Think about exactly where those people will go, how they will feel and how that could be happening to a similar number of people not just that night, but every night throughout the year. That gives us a sense of the scale of the challenge that we face.

In the context of these surveys, those who are seen sleeping rough are, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark said, only the tip of the iceberg. Rough sleeping is the most visible form of homelessness, but of course many people are in temporary accommodation; there are people relying on friends and family for a place to live; and there are people sheltering in alcoves or other places away from the worst excesses of the weather.

It has not always been like this. As we know, in 2010, after 20 years of concerted Government effort across the parties, rough sleeping appeared to be almost at an end. Because homelessness is not inevitable, it can be prevented. It is clear that the Government accept that it can be prevented, because they aim to eradicate it by 2027. That seems an awful long time away for such a national scandal. We need to act more firmly now.

We have heard about the connections between health and rough sleeping. The British Medical Association tells us that being homeless can have a devastating effect on people's mental and physical health. That is borne out by the Office for National Statistics figures, which show that a staggering 597 people died while sleeping rough or in emergency accommodation in 2017. That means that every night, at least one homeless person died. The average age of the people dying is 44 for men and 42 for women. Those deaths are premature and entirely preventable. It is a stain on this country that we did not prevent those deaths.

The interventions and funding in the Government's new rough sleeping strategy are welcome, but they are only a first step. If the Government are to reach their own targets of halving rough sleeping by 2022 and ending it by 2027, they must address the key drivers, which we have heard a bit about in the debate: spiralling housing costs, lack of social housing, insecurity for

private renters and cuts to homelessness services. Only by addressing those issues can we have long-lasting change.

Since the Government came to power, rents have become increasingly unaffordable. Between 2011 and 2017, rents grew 60% faster than wages. In those circumstances, it is no wonder that people struggle to keep a roof over their heads. At the same time, welfare reforms have made private sector landlords increasingly reluctant to rent to tenants who rely on housing benefit. As we have heard, many landlords now refuse to accept tenants in receipt of benefit at all.

A quarter of private renters, equating to over 1 million households, rely on housing benefit or a housing element of universal credit to keep a roof over their head. Because of the decline in social housing stock, with nearly 1.2 million people trapped waiting for social housing, many of those families face greater and further instability with rising rents in the private rented sector. Housing benefit, as we have heard, is only paid up to the rate determined by the local housing allowance. The decision to freeze that in 2016 is causing real problems now. There is no requirement for landlords to let their properties at that level. It is a perfect recipe for people to fall further and further into debt.

If the Government were serious about tackling these issues and meeting the goals they have set, they would tackle the causes of homelessness. We need to make more homes available to people with a history of rough sleeping, and to continue to improve security for private renters. Three-year tenancies should be a minimum. We need to look at rent controls. We need to build thousands more homes for affordable rent.

Those are some of the causes, but I also question whether the system does enough to help those who become homeless. The new duties on local housing authorities to assess, prevent and relieve homelessness under the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 are welcome. However, I have seen that amount to little more than handing out a list of private landlords for people to contact. Shelter tells us that the leading cause of homelessness is the loss of a private rented home, so I find it incredible that some local authorities see their duty to prevent homelessness as being fulfilled by nothing more than pointing people back in the direction of the sector that was responsible for their situation in the first place.

We know that, once evicted, many more people now struggle to find a new property due to the cost of securing a new tenancy, with deposits and other fees coming on top of the unaffordable rents that I have already referred to. I also have concerns that people who are given notice to quit by their private landlord are not really helped by the local authority. They are given no special priority until they are very close to the eviction date, which causes unnecessary stress and anxiety, and encourages—if not forces—landlords to go to court to get the eviction order they need. Who picks up the tab for those legal costs? Of course, it is the tenant. That approach does not help anyone.

Telling people who go into the council with a notice to quit that it might not be a lawful notice and they should seek legal advice is not actually helping people to get rehoused. The landlord will get them out eventually. It might take them a bit longer or cost them a bit more, but the council is not discharging its duties.

In response to the draft homelessness code of guidance, Shelter also identified a problem with the system for local connection referrals. Even when referrals are made in the proper way, people are often left in a period of limbo, during which they may not get any help with the relief of homelessness. This is even more of a problem when the referral is actually disputed. People in that situation are at risk of becoming citizens of nowhere, so it is hardly surprising that we see the consequences of that every night.

I am conscious that many hon. Members want to speak, so I will conclude. I believe that rough sleeping is a damning indictment of our society. The lack of priority and support we give to those who have fallen on hard times should shame us all. We have to do much better than we currently do.

**Mr Virendra Sharma (in the Chair):** I will not impose a time limit on speeches at this stage, but I urge hon. Members to keep to seven or eight minutes. I would appreciate that. Otherwise, I might set a time limit later.

2.45 pm

**Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con):** Thank you very much, Mr Sharma.

If hon. Members have not already been, I recommend that they walk a few hundred yards down Millbank to see the exhibition of Don McCullin's photographs at Tate Britain. He is famous for his haunting photographs of war over the past few decades. However, I had not previously seen the pictures he took in 1970 of homeless people in Spitalfields in the east end. One of those photographs is one of his most famous. They are at least as haunting as the images of the ravages of war that he produced. It is shaming that decades on we are still grappling with this problem, which should not exist in a successful, modern economy. His photographs are a reminder that these problems have been with us for some time.

Other hon. Members have spoken about the importance of measures to prevent homelessness in the first place. It makes sense, of course, to try to direct the focus of Government policy in so many areas of social concern towards prevention, rather than picking up the problem after it has happened. However, that is easier said than done. Generally, Finance Ministers are resistant to generalised bids to increase money in preventive measures, for fear that they will end up picking up the costs twice. That is one reason why it has been so hard to shift policy towards preventive measures in areas of public health, for instance. However, it is essential that we do so in relation to homelessness, because it is preventable.

The importance of mental health services has been mentioned. My hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) was right to focus on housing supply. I have spent 14 years in my affluent constituency of Arundel and South Downs dealing with requests from local communities to prevent the building of new housing. In truth, much of that housing is for other relatively affluent people and only part of it goes to social housing. The concern about the impact of new housing—a genuine concern about the impact on the countryside, local services and so on—obscures the wider point, which is that there has been a systematic failure to ensure that housing supply meets demand.

[Nick Herbert]

This is not only a question of social housing provision, to which Opposition Members have rightly drawn attention. The failure to provide sufficient private housing also has a knock-on effect on rent levels: rents become higher because housing supply is too low. In turn, the state directs large amounts of money towards housing benefit in order to help people meet those rents, and we enter a vicious circle. It is important that we have determined measures to increase housing supply and that we try to deal with some of the problems and the objections that people have. That includes a mix of private sector and social housing.

[Ms KAREN BUCK *in the Chair*]

Hon. Members have rightly drawn attention to concerns about welfare policy. The five-week wait for universal credit has been mentioned. I know that the Government have taken some steps on that, but they need to go further, because it has clearly been a factor in homelessness.

Housing benefit is also an issue, particularly the shared accommodation rate, which has been frozen since 2016. The charity Depaul, which I will come to shortly, has pointed out that in one night, official figures indicated that 225 young people aged 18 to 25 were sleeping rough, but only 57 rooms could be found that would be available to them at rents within the shared accommodation rate. The support that is available to people has not and cannot keep pace with the level of rents, because it has been frozen, and the local housing allowance does not cover rents for 90% of areas in England. That welfare issue has to be addressed.

A related budgetary issue has affected Stonepillow, a local homelessness charity in West Sussex. West Sussex County Council has found itself at the receiving end of sharp reductions in local government funding, so it in turn has decided to nearly halve the housing-related support allowance. Effectively, that passes the burden on to district councils, with the knock-on effect that support for Stonepillow will be reduced by £300,000. If we are serious about tackling these problems, we should not penalise the important charities that do so much good work on the ground in providing help to people who become homeless and in helping to prevent homelessness.

As well as preventing homelessness and rough sleeping, we need to make sure that measures are available to help people who have become victims of it. I draw hon. Members' attention to the charity Depaul, which I mentioned earlier, and its Nightstop service. On 10 October, World Homeless Day, I and several other hon. Members, including my hon. Friends the Members for Colchester, for Gravesham (Adam Holloway) and for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) and the hon. Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin), and Baroness Suttie and Baroness Greender, slept out at the Oval cricket ground at an event organised by Depaul. Some 100 volunteers raised money for Depaul that evening. I declare an interest, which is that my partner is a fundraiser for Depaul, so it is not so much a financial interest for me as a matter of domestic harmony that I take an interest in such issues.

The experience of sleeping out on the concrete ground for just a few hours was a tiny insight into the experience that people have when they are sleeping rough. The

truth is that we were all looked after before we pitched our cardboard boxes for the evening and, a few hours later, we were able to return to the warmth of our homes, a hot bath or shower, a meal and a job. Most of us were seized by the realisation of how debilitating it would be if we had to pick up our cardboard box and move on without any of those things to go to. I hope that when Depaul organises its sleep-out event in central London next year, many more hon. Members will take part to help the fundraising effort, draw attention to the issue and share in that experience on World Homeless Day.

Depaul runs a good service, Nightstop, which I mentioned. It has been going for a few years and it is interesting because it is a good example of the shared economy. Private individuals open up their homes and provide a bed at night for a homeless young person. Of course, they have to be approved and thoroughly vetted. The introduction to that service is a reminder of the various forms of homelessness, but those young people are often vulnerable and need a bed, security and a meal for the night.

In 2017, the Nightstop service provided more than 11,000 bed nights to nearly 1,500 young people. There is a tremendous opportunity to expand that volunteer-run service, but that would require additional funding. Less than half the local authority areas in the UK are covered by the Nightstop service, but Depaul is keen to expand it.

Depaul would like the Government to invest just £2.2 million over three years in five new sub-regional Nightstop services. After four years, it will pick up the funding for those services itself; it merely needs the seedcorn funding—the Government do not often get that kind of offer. That self-sufficient service would provide up to 7,500 more nights of emergency accommodation a year for young people. I encourage my hon. Friend the Minister, who takes a strong interest in these issues and who has done so much in the last year, to meet Depaul, perhaps visit a Nightstop service, and consider that incredibly cost-efficient and worthwhile proposal.

The numbers of people sleeping rough have levelled off, but they are still too high. Underneath the global figures, there are some big regional disparities that we need to understand, such as the disparity between the numbers of homeless people outside London and in London. In London, half the people sleeping rough are foreign nationals—almost all EU nationals—and the welfare issues around them are much more complex.

We should also realise that although the numbers appear to have reduced only slightly in the last year and are still too high, there was a much bigger reduction—23%—in the 73 areas that were targeted by additional money as part of the Government's rough sleepers initiative introduced at the beginning of last year. That suggests that targeted funding, which is carefully directed at measures that are integrated and can help to deal with the problem, will succeed and is worth pursuing. This is a problem that can be dealt with.

This issue should embarrass and shame us as an advanced economy. I welcome the Government's ambition to halve the number of people sleeping rough by 2022 and end rough sleeping by 2027, but I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester, the chairman of the all-party group, of which I am also an officer,

that we need to do better than that. The Government should make the issue their highest priority, because no Government should want it to happen on their watch.

2.57 pm

**Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Buck. I know you would be speaking on the issue if you were not chairing, and I congratulate you again on the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act 2018, which received Royal Assent recently.

I will not take up too much time; I will deal with just two issues. Rough sleeping is the tip of the iceberg. I agree with the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince) that it is a complex issue, so I will say a bit about that. It is also a solvable issue, however, which was not entirely solved, but was largely reduced, by the application of skill and resources, so I will also say something about that and where we go with it.

Many hon. Members have mentioned the fact that some short-term solutions and immediate measures could be adopted to relieve the pressure of rough sleeping, as is often done at this time of year. I pay tribute to the Mayor of London for his initiatives and the specific action that he has recently taken in the cold weather to make sure that, on compassionate grounds alone, people who are forced to sleep outside on very cold nights have somewhere to go. That is good.

Equally, I pay tribute to the fact that the Mayor of London has made the expansion of affordable social housing a priority in London for the first time in many years, because London is severely affected. As has been said, even as the high numbers of rough sleepers flatlined nationally last year, they went up by 13% in London. Since 2010, rough sleeping has, I think, tripled in London, while it has gone up by about 165% overall. Yes, there are a lot of emergency and temporary measures that can be taken, but in reality we will not resolve this problem unless we address the underlying causes. I think everyone agrees on that, and it is good that there is consensus across the Chamber.

Some of those underlying causes are to do with the individual—I will come on to that in a moment—but a lot of them are to do with the housing system in this country, the instability of housing and the associated risk. I was struck by a figure from Crisis, which says that

“there were more than 170,000 families and individuals experiencing the worst forms of homelessness...This includes people sleeping on our streets, sofa-surfing with strangers, living in hostels, and stuck in other dangerous situations.”

That is an intolerable situation, but the trend in housing policy means that it has simply got worse over the years, because there has been huge growth in the use of temporary accommodation.

The ability of local authorities to discharge their housing responsibility into the private sector permanently under the Localism Act 2011 is one factor in that growth. As I have suggested, it is also about housing conditions—the very poor quality of housing and the attitude of landlords. Landlords may be willing to evict tenants who complain about the conditions they are in, or those conditions may simply become too bad and the properties unfit for habitation.

The problem is also related to restrictions on benefits. The cap on local housing allowance—one of the two key issues that Shelter identified in its briefing for this debate—makes it very difficult for anybody on who is on benefits to find housing in significant parts of the country, particularly in areas such as mine in inner London where housing costs are so high.

Universal credit is causing extraordinary problems. I met representatives of the Shepherds Bush Housing Group, which is one of the big housing associations in my area. They said that about 4% of their tenants are in some form of arrears, but the figure is three or four times that for those who are on universal credit. People are being evicted simply because the universal credit system is letting them down.

There is this fetish of relying on the private rented sector to solve problems that it simply is not designed to solve. The massive growth in the private rented sector and the decline in both owner-occupation and social housing, as a deliberate arm of Conservative Government policy, are at the root of these problems.

The other key point that Shelter makes—Members on both sides of the Chamber have also made it—is that we must have a significant commitment to social house building, including in expensive areas of the country. Social house building is very difficult because of land prices, and that is not just the case in London anymore; in other major cities and significant parts of the south of England, it is extremely difficult to achieve social house building.

How on earth did we get ourselves in a situation where £24 billion can go, with no long-term benefits in housing terms, into landlords' pockets? I am sure that there are good landlords who use some of that money to invest, and landlords with property portfolios who are prepared to take on difficult tenants or tenants who are reliant on benefits. Neither of those scenarios reflect the picture that I find in my constituency, nor is that how the system is designed to work.

My second main point is that although the situation may be complicated, it is not a difficult one to resolve. We know what the solutions are, because we have a very sophisticated group of organisations—the big ones include St Mungo's, Crisis and Shelter—which have huge reservoirs of knowledge about how to tackle the difficulties involved in homelessness. Homeless people are often very vulnerable people or people with complex problems, often related to addiction or mental health.

I know that there is a move now towards the Housing First model and I do not disagree with that, because putting a roof over somebody's head is—I think this is fairly self-evident—key to ending homelessness. That model did not find favour previously because those tenancies would often break down, because people who were not used to managing their own lives in that way were unable to sustain tenancies.

The Housing First model obviously has to go hand in hand with a lot of support, but that support is generally there. We are dealing with people who are used to dealing—in an extraordinarily compassionate way but also in a professional way—with people with complex problems every day.

Two weeks ago, I was at one of the St Mungo's hostels in my constituency. I go to those hostels often and we have hour-long sessions with their residents, and

[*Andy Slaughter*]

I get asked all sorts of questions. They are sophisticated, educated and intelligent people who happen to have fallen through the cracks and on hard times. I made my excuses and left when I started being asked why Gordon Brown sold the gold reserves and why Labour adopted private finance initiatives, which gives people an idea of where the debate was going. At that stage, I decided that I had another appointment and needed to move on.

Nevertheless, there is a willingness among residents of such hostels and among people who are sleeping rough, as well as among the organisations that look after them, to resolve these problems. The resources to do that have to be available, however, and I am just not finding that to be the case at the moment. Immediate investment is what is lacking.

I know that the Minister will talk about the Government's rough sleeping initiative, which has the aim of reducing rough sleeping by half by 2022 and reducing it fully by 2027. Of course we will support the Government in that aim, but it means that in about five years' time we will be in the position that we were 10 years ago. I find that a bit depressing, to be perfectly honest.

I will try to be positive. We all know the large organisations that we work with on this issue. As other Members have already mentioned, there are also a lot of small organisations in our own constituencies. I will mention one—I am a patron of it, so I am obviously biased towards it—called The Upper Room, which is in my constituency. It started in 1990 as a group of local people who were concerned about rough sleeping, both by British citizens and by a lot of European citizens, at that stage. The problem has not got any better, particularly with the increase in “no recourse to public funds”.

Simply out of sheer compassion, those local people got together and raised funds; they are now raising about £350,000 a year from individual donations and charitable giving. Every day they provide a hot meal for about 1,500 people, but they have also gone on to provide an employment service and—particularly for ex-offenders—a service that teaches people to drive. That is a very good skill to help people to get into employment.

Nobody asked those people to do that. It is not a state enterprise; this is people simply seeing a problem and trying to resolve it. The good will is there and the expertise is there. However, with all due respect to the Minister, I do not feel as though there is yet sufficient will to challenge the immediate problems of rough sleeping or to address the issue of housing policy.

It is gratifying that I am now hearing Conservative MPs talk about that issue, and I try not to intervene every time a Conservative MP tries to teach me about the benefits of social housing. It is good if there is going to be a cross-party consensus on that, but there needs to be a sea change in Government policy, not tweaking at the edges. It requires investment of billions of pounds, year on year, to turn things around. We are starting from a very low base, with a very low level of house building. It is not just about identifying the land, reforming the planning system or bringing developers to heel regarding what they want to build.

Frankly, the comment that was made to ITV—I think it was made yesterday—by the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government,

who I normally have a lot of time for, was a disgrace. To say to the Mayor, “You should concentrate more on building market housing and less on building social and affordable housing in London”—I mean, come and look at the problems in London of trying to get anybody housed, given the sort of conditions that people are living in and the length of time that people are waiting for a permanent home; it can be 10 or 15 years. Only by putting ideology to one side and saying that social housing is an absolutely key part of the housing market in this country will we ensure that these problems are not temporarily dealt with in a sticking-plaster way, but resolved for good.

3.9 pm

**Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) not only on securing this debate but on managing to stay on his feet for so long after losing a pint of blood, at least, and probably not having time for the tea and biscuits, given his rush to get here.

Unusually, I want to talk about the subject of the debate—rough sleeping. We have heard a lot about homelessness and housing generally. The issue is important, even though it affects only 4,677 people officially. I am sure it is much more than that. It is a totemic issue that affects many people in our constituencies who see it day in, day out, as of course do we. There is a temptation to conflate rough sleeping with homelessness and the number of families in temporary accommodation. Those are symptoms of the shortage of housing, or of housing in the right place, the shortage of affordable housing, affordable rents and housing that is affordable to buy or part-buy, as well as the lack of choice in the private sector and for those on housing benefit, as has been mentioned.

The Government have introduced some measures, we can say belatedly in some cases. It is slightly unfair to judge them on the basis of the reduction last year and then predicate the next few years on that. The manifesto commitments on the homelessness reduction strategy and the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, which I was proud to support, are important components going forward and they absolutely cement the Government's serious commitment in what is a cross-party consensus on a national emergency that we need to do something about.

The problem of rough sleeping, as hon. Members have already mentioned, is not simply about the availability of resources and bricks-and-mortar accommodation. Some rough sleepers simply will not come inside, for a host of reasons, many connected with mental health problems, as has been mentioned. What has changed over the past few years is the worryingly high incidence of ex-military who find themselves rough sleeping. They find it hard to make the transition from the discipline of the armed forces and to adapt to life outside. There has also been, we must admit, a big increase in the number of rough sleepers who are foreign nationals. Those are all new factors that we need to adapt to and deal with. However, I want to deal with a solution—specifically, what we have done in Worthing where there has been some real thinking outside the box. One project that I want to refer to is run by what was called the Worthing Homeless Churches Projects and has now been renamed Turning Tides.

Coastal towns such as Worthing have traditionally had a problem with rough sleepers. Worthing was not excluded from that, but we wanted to find practical solutions. Turning Tides and the council got together to quantify the extent of the problem to see what initiatives they could come up with. They wanted to engage with local rough sleepers to make sure that the services offered were suitable and matched the individual needs of local rough sleepers. In November 2017 they calculated the highest number of rough sleepers, with a count estimate of 34 and an actual count of 19. We know the problem of the actual numbers and the hidden numbers, but it was a more accurate picture than we had had for some time. The biggest challenge, not surprisingly, was sourcing sufficient emergency accommodation to offer them some refuge. The supported housing schemes run by Worthing Homeless Churches Projects were constantly full, despite good throughput and move-on rates. I pay tribute to the innovative and practical schemes that it ran for those with alcohol, drug and other problems. However, many rough sleepers were waiting too long to gain access.

In 2017, the council and Worthing Homes, the local social landlord after a large-scale voluntary transfer from Worthing Council, held an event on housing matters, in which I participated, to try to find a consensus in the town about what we could do about the issue. Worthing Homes has been very proactive in trying to make available step-up accommodation for rough sleepers once they get back to some stability and are able to take on some independent living themselves. I pay tribute to it.

At the event was a local developer, Roffey Homes, which has done some very worthwhile and commendable projects in the town. Inspired by that event, the owner of Roffey Homes saw an opportunity to provide emergency accommodation. He had just bought the local nurses' home, which was surplus to requirements, next to the local hospital and intended to develop it. He was not going to develop it for several years, so he offered Turning Tides a five-year lease on a peppercorn rent. The council chipped in, planning permission was obtained and the council helped fund the work to enable it to be used as a 37-bed high-support short-stay accommodation project. Housing benefit funded the majority of the 24/7 staffing and the project opened in May 2018. I have visited it and seen the benefits.

The last count of rough sleepers in November last year showed the number had virtually halved in Worthing as a direct consequence of the project, although we have not solved the problem. There are still rough sleepers. Some of them will not instantly go into accommodation even when it is available because they have more complicated problems, as I have said. The Lyndhurst Road project, as it was called, was modelled to be accessible to clients who had not managed the requirements of the Worthing Churches Homeless Projects' more structured supported housing schemes. The project offered wrap-around support from the multi-disciplinary team using the best practice of MEAM: Making Every Adult Matter. It is not just a matter of providing accommodation. There are mental health support workers on site to help. People come regularly from the local benefits office to help with jobs, benefit applications and support. A computer suite offers skills and access to enable people to apply for benefits, job opportunities and other things.

Yesterday I was told the story of one individual by the head of Turning Tides, John Holmstrom, who has really nailed his colours to the mast of the project, and I pay tribute to him for the work that he has done. He told me:

"Today in court J told the Judge that Lyndhurst is the first place he has felt he can call home since his adoptive placement broke down when he was 13. J said he really likes Lyndhurst and trusts the staff and has never had that before...since J has been at Lyndhurst he has not been arrested or in trouble with the police".

He was in court because of an historical issue before he became a tenant. His story applies to other people who have found not only accommodation but stability and a way of getting their lives back on track that will hopefully lead to some degree of independent living. It is not rocket science. The local council showed willing and used some Government money, and a local developer showed a bit of corporate social responsibility and some imagination. They and a well-run and well-supported homelessness charity that is very well regarded in our town came together, using the whole-systems approach that hon. Members have mentioned, to come up with a solution, rather than just constantly highlight the problems of homelessness and rough sleeping.

The project has not been without problems. My right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) mentioned the cuts in homelessness support that are affecting West Sussex charities. They will certainly impact on the project. It would be a great shame to see such good work go into reverse. The charity said:

"The government's decision to maintain supported housing within the Housing Benefit scheme has been a critical factor to stabilise our supported housing. This was very welcome."

However, it said:

"We would urge the support element funding that was devolved to Local Authorities under Supporting People is ring fenced so supported housing can be stabilised for the long term"—

so that projects can continue to benefit.

As I said, the project was not without problems. It has taken some brave characters, including two local councillors, to deal with it. I certainly pay tribute to Councillors Alex Harman and Keith Bickers who represent the area. There has been some antisocial behaviour, as often happens with such projects, usually not by people using the project themselves. It attracts drug dealing and antisocial behaviour to the vicinity, for which the project then gets blamed. It has taken brave local councillors and others to continue to support the project, despite residents' complaints. They have gone out and organised public meetings and liaised with the police to get better police enforcement where there is antisocial behaviour and criminal activity in the area.

What I am outlining is the way forward. We can talk about the problems of homelessness and rough sleeping—the historical problems going back years—until we are blue in the face. We need such imaginative projects, and imaginative and forward-thinking people working in partnership to come up with solutions. Those solutions exist. We have not solved the problem in Worthing, but we have greatly alleviated it. It is noticeable that there has been a great reduction in the number of rough sleepers, who were causing problems in the town; that was being commented on. They have not just been hidden or disguised. People have been helped and supported, so that they will—I hope sustainably—avoid rough sleeping

[Tim Loughton]

again in the future, when the accommodation comes to an end. That is the sort of practical solution to look at, and I am proud that it has been done in Worthing.

3.20 pm

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck, not least because of your interest and tireless work in the field we are considering. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) on his opening speech and on his work with the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince). There need not be an issue of rough sleeping, which is why we are having this debate.

I want to challenge the Minister, as have many hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber, about ambition. I believe that she is committed to the agenda, but that she lacks ambition in talking about 2027 as the date for the end of rough sleeping. That is far too late, because of the many statistics we have heard, and because of the lives involved—lives of people we have personal contact with. People urgently need redress. If the metro Mayor of Manchester can shorten the timescale, and in the light of the progress that has been made in Worthing, there is no reason why the Minister, with the resources in her hands and the power of office, cannot make a significant difference and change the landscape. I therefore urge her to reflect on the debate and to shorten the timescale, so that in 2022 street homelessness in our communities will have been obliterated.

We have today heard many reasons for the level of homelessness and rough sleeping, and we recognise how the country's housing market has completely failed. In York, luxury apartment after luxury apartment is built while there is a housing crisis and people cannot access the market. There are 1,500 people waiting for a house, and people sleep rough every night. However, what shook our city was hearing at the end of last year that 11 homeless people had died in York. I went to the council to investigate and find out more about those individuals' lives. A quarter of the deaths of homeless people in Yorkshire were in my city—a city that everyone tells me is lovely, which it is. Why, then, are these things happening? There is affluence as well as huge poverty in the city. There is huge inequality.

The council told me that it was not a question of homelessness; drug dependency and alcohol were the factors. In fact, one person did not count, because they had come down from Scotland. Who do those people belong to? Who has responsibility for those lives? The reality is that often local authorities hand out train tickets so people can return where they came from. We must say that we are all responsible. If people reside on our doorstep, we must take responsibility for their lives and give them every opportunity. That includes people with no recourse to public funds—perhaps people who are here without legal documentation. They are human beings. We cannot and must not turn away from that, and it is a matter of shame that so many people have, for such a long time.

Before I go on to focus on deaths related to homelessness, I want to raise with the Minister the fact that local authorities still fail people and put them on to the

streets. It was bitterly cold last week, and in York it was due to go down to minus 6 °C at night. My office had a phone call from a young woman. She had not complied with all the rules put upon her in the context of the support and services she was given. She was therefore turned away from accommodation, on to the streets. My office intervened and found a bed, but we cannot have such things happening on the council's watch. It is a disgrace. I have talked to the Minister many times about what is happening about homelessness in the city. In the summer, a homeless person came to see me after not being allowed access to their tent, and being evicted from it by the local authority. If that is happening, something has gone seriously wrong.

We have heard the statistics, including the figure that 597 people are reported to have died while rough sleeping in the past year. That is a serious crisis and a stain on our systems. It means that people have died unnecessarily. I have reflected on the fact that in many such deaths there are related problems and issues of comorbidity, with 32% being related to drug poisoning, compared with a figure of 0.7% for the rest of the population. Ten per cent. of deaths in that group are alcohol-related, compared with 1.2% in the rest of the population; and mental health is involved in 13%, compared with 0.9% in the rest of the population. That shows the complexity of homelessness, which the Minister understands, but it also demonstrates the need for a public health approach to address the whole issue.

Professor Nicholas Pleace of the University of York has provided evidence for the importance of putting housing first. The evidence is there. We do not need pilots anymore. The work has been done, as we have seen in global examples from Canada, New Zealand and Scandinavia. Let us get the programme rolled out across the country. It will make a significant difference.

I understand that Nottingham has a nurse working with people on the streets; let us put such approaches in place. What a difference that will make. It will affect physical health: many communicable diseases including tuberculosis and hepatitis can affect rough sleepers. It will also make it possible to address serious concerns about substance misuse and alcohol dependency, among other factors. Foot care and podiatry and general practice services can also be provided in that way. A rough sleeper in my constituency had serious respiratory problems but was denied anywhere to stay and had to sleep out in the damp and cold. The relevant services need to be in place to provide holistic care for individuals.

We also need to get upstream, however. Many people are on the streets because they have experienced trauma, including ex-members of the armed forces, people who have had broken relationships or those who have lost their job. I had a conversation with a gentleman in my constituency. Life turned against him when he lost his job, and he could not afford to live in a city where housing is so expensive. Many rough sleepers are lonely, and many are broken individuals. During the day they may not have anywhere to go. I ask the Minister whether we can ensure that there can be a safe place for people to go 24/7, day and night, where they can get food at meal times. Can we ensure that homeless people get the basic amenity of 24-hour access to public toilets? Those simple things can make such a difference to people who sleep on the street. We must put such systems in place.

I want to mention the question of ownership again. When it comes to the deaths of homeless people, who has responsibility? Currently no one does. Where is that data held? What is the definition of a homeless death, and can we learn from carrying out proper investigations how to improve things?

I ask the Minister to make a commitment today that for every person who is homeless and who dies, a safeguarding audit review will be carried out, so that we can learn the right strategies that we need to prevent deaths—to have no more deaths—this year and moving forward. Without ownership, we are not only saying to those individuals that their life has not counted; we are saying that they did not exist. Somebody who has had their identity suppressed by the circumstances around them throughout their life does not have dignity in death either, so will the Minister at least make that commitment today in order to move this debate forward?

3.30 pm

**Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck.

**Neil Coyle**: Too long!

**Kevin Foster**: Given that heckle, I will be considerate as there are Labour Members who want to speak, even though I am not under a formal time limit.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) on having secured this debate, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince). Rough sleeping is clearly an issue in Torbay, as it is in many other coastal communities. We have the contrast between those people with a £1-million boat in the harbour and a coastal apartment, and the people sleeping on the streets nearby.

The last count showed that 24 people were sleeping on the streets of Torbay. However, the Minister will know that from my time in local government, I have some suspicions about how the rough sleeper count is carried out: it is literally an exercise in going out and spotting homeless people. I suspect it is hard to work out another way of doing it, but if somebody is walking around, even though they visibly could have been sleeping on the street, they do not count towards the statistics. There is even some suggestion that if somebody is stood up with bedding around them, they may not be counted as a rough sleeper, even though most of us would look at them and see exactly what is going on.

The rough sleeper count is a measure that originates from Victorian times, and I am much happier with the way in which the Torbay End Street Homelessness campaign has set about doing a proper survey of those who are sleeping rough on the streets of the bay. Over the course of a week, people have been going out and engaging with those they find; not just spotting someone and saying, “There is someone who is sleeping rough,” but interviewing them about the reasons why they are sleeping rough, what their background is and what types of support services they have engaged with. It is clear that no one gets up in the morning and thinks, “It would be a great idea to go and sleep rough.” Some may feel it is their only choice in life, but we need to engage with those people and get genuine information that allows us to understand what has driven them to that position.

Another charity that works closely with those who find themselves on the streets of Torbay is People Assisting Torbay’s Homeless, a wonderful volunteer organisation that, sadly, is now trying to find a new home. It was removed from one of its previous properties because of a development going ahead, and now finds itself facing possession action by the local council. I certainly hope that the council will not implement a possession order until an alternative base has been found. I accept that the place offered up was temporary, but for PATH to be evicted and literally become homeless would be a rather cruel irony.

There is, of course, Shekinah in Torbay, which has provided a long-standing facility at Factory Row—the Leonard Stocks Centre, to which I used to be one of the closest residents. I recognise some of the comments that other Members have made about the issues that can occur, particularly when residents of such places are targeted, for no other reason than the evil intentions of those who are targeting them.

That leads us on, however, to a wonderful initiative that is happening in Torbay: the town’s night shelter, for which local churches come together and open their buildings to provide an option for those who are sleeping rough over winter. It is not just about having somewhere to keep warm and something to eat; it is about people finding a system of support and friendship, with a family or home atmosphere, to try to get them off the streets for good. Ultimately, it is not spending one night in a church hall that will make a difference to someone; it is having a system of support. I know that the churches in the bay are keen that their buildings should not just be magnificent Victorian structures that people visit on a Sunday morning, but places that really live out the gospel. That is a massive resource, and I know that some others are looking at how they can take it further.

I would certainly like Housing First to be extended into our bay, as we think it would make a great difference. The work of the Mayors of Merseyside, Greater Manchester and the West Midlands in driving that project forward is very welcome, and I do not see why it would not make a difference in Torbay. It has been slightly misconstrued as closing the hostel, but it is not: it is about making sure that people are supported from day one in terms of housing, rather than having to earn a right to housing via being in a hostel for a longer period of time. There will always be a need for emergency accommodation. Other Members have touched on the issue of housing supply, which clearly needs to be dealt with if we are to move forward.

I will conclude with some remarks about the Vagrancy Act 1824, which is a hopelessly out-of-date piece of legislation. I hope that in any review of that Act, we can take a mature cross-party approach, as happened with the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 and “to your credit, Ms Buck” your campaign for the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Bill the following year. That Bill became an Act, and it made a difference to people.

The 1824 Act is hideously out of date: it is both morally and practically wrong to think that homelessness can be dealt with by hauling people down to the magistrates court. I was only too happy to stand up against the idea of using a public spaces protection order against rough sleeping in Torbay—I did not see that as a practical

[Kevin Foster]

thing to do at all—and I was pleased that councillors from both the Conservative and Liberal Democrat groups made it clear to the independent administration that it was not something they would tolerate or accept. PSPOs should be used against antisocial behaviour. The act of sleeping rough—a person putting their head down and going to sleep—should not lead to them being arrested by the police; it should lead to them being supported by agencies.

This has been a welcome debate, and one that could probably go on for a lot longer. I hope that we will be able to take some comfort from the Minister's response.

**Ms Karen Buck (in the Chair):** Before I call the next speaker, it is obvious to Members that we have three speakers to go, and we will be moving to the Front Bench representatives just before 4 pm. I ask Members to time their contributions accordingly.

3.36 pm

**Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck. I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) and the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince) on securing today's debate.

Members of the public are rightly horrified by the idea that anyone should be sleeping rough. Only yesterday, people throughout the country watched a 19-year-old lad on Sky News struggling to maintain his sanity in a situation in which he had no money, no address, no home, no ability to wash or change his clothes, no way to apply for jobs, no prospect of achieving an interview—let alone being employed—and no access to any benefits or support because he was unable to provide written evidence that he was looking for work. If we are to eradicate rough sleeping, the first thing we have to do is to remove such ridiculous Catch-22 situations, which are imposed by the Department for Work and Pensions and by the way in which housing need is assessed. Whether people are addicted to drugs or alcohol, are long-term rough sleepers or young people who have recently fallen through the cracks, are ex-offenders or armed forces veterans, suffer from mental health problems, have learning difficulties or exhibit challenging behaviours, they will be unable to put their lives back together if they are rough sleeping. They will continue to cost our society more, unless and until they are housed.

Secondly, we have to provide a range of housing for people with a range of needs. I slightly take issue with some of the people who have spoken in this debate: the rough sleeping problem is not simply down to a lack of affordable homes. Not everyone is capable of successfully holding down a standard tenancy. Charities and voluntary sector organisations such as the Salvation Army and the YMCA provide housing with a significant level of support, but that costs money. Far from increasing the funding for supported housing, this Government are making it more difficult for the voluntary sector to provide it, with the exception of certain schemes such as the one mentioned by the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton). Some people are far more difficult to house than others, but funding and regulations do not adequately allow for that. However difficult someone might be, it is less expensive to provide

them with the most suitable housing than it is to house them in prison or hospital, yet that is precisely where a disproportionate number of those people end up.

Thirdly, we must do far more to deal with the causes of rough sleeping, particularly addiction, through prevention and rehabilitation. Any money invested in that repays society many times over in financial terms and, more importantly, in terms of lives transformed. The current level of investment in addiction, rehabilitation and prevention is pathetic. Ipswich Borough Council is combating homelessness by building council houses. Another 17 are ready to be completed in the next few weeks and 60 are about to start, but that will not, in itself, help rough sleepers. To help rough sleepers, we have to put in place operations such as the second homeless families unit that Ipswich is building. It will open in spring to provide homeless households with safe and supported temporary housing until they are able to move on to a permanent home.

Ipswich has a strong public campaign, which is supported by public bodies, charities and the business sector, to encourage people to make donations to the groups that are helping to get people off the streets, and to encourage people not to give their money to those who are begging. Not all rough sleepers beg, and certainly not all beggars are actually rough sleeping, although many present as rough sleepers to obtain the sympathy of the donor. Even when the beggar is a rough sleeper and they are not spending the money they receive on drugs or alcohol, they need somewhere warm and dry to stay, something to eat and, above all, help and advice to enable them once more to build liveable lives for themselves. Cash made from begging will not provide any of that.

We need society to be committed and to commit the resources it takes to eradicate rough sleeping. If we can do that, I believe we will also go a long way to reducing chronic addiction and begging.

3.41 pm

**Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck. On a personal level, it is good to see the Housing Minister back in her role. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) not only for securing the debate, but for the great work he has been doing with the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince) on the all-party parliamentary group. I have been pleased to attend one or two of its meetings.

Austerity has many faces, but none is more damning than the number of people who are having to live rough on our streets. Across not just our cities, but our towns, the scenes of people sitting on street corners or lying on sleeping bags and mattresses and in bivouacs are probably the most shameful visible manifestation of a Government who that just do not care. One does not have to go far to be made aware of the crisis. As we know, just 2 metres from the entrance to Parliament, we see people trying to survive against the odds. Here we are in Parliament, the supposedly powerful legislative body, and yet we are unable to persuade the Government that halving rough sleeping in five years or solving the issue by 2027 is an acceptable aim. The public believe that the situation is wrong, and the Opposition certainly agree. In fact, I

think most of us in this room believe that the Government are showing neither urgency nor ambition in tackling the problem. Perhaps we can persuade them today.

In the past year, two people from the rough sleeping community within the Westminster tube station area have died. On each occasion when such things happen, outrage follows. The Secretary of State claims that it is one death too many, and that collectively we cannot allow it to happen again. However, the fact that people can die so close to this place suggests that there is too much easy rhetoric from Government and not enough real action dedicated to tackling this humanitarian disaster. To restate the oft-quoted fact, we are the sixth richest nation in the world. Let us be clear and honest: rough sleeping did not start with the coalition Government, but the crisis did. The two Governments since have done little to arrest the exponential increase in the numbers of people rough sleeping. Back in 2010, 1,768 people were recorded as rough sleeping. According to the 2018 count, which was published recently, the figure today stands at just under 4,700. That is a rise of 3,000, or 165%, since 2010.

Perhaps surprisingly, my constituency of Warwick and Leamington has had the highest number of rough sleepers per head of population across the west midlands. At present, 12 rough sleepers are officially recorded by the district council, although that figure is disputed by charity and voluntary workers. It would also be disputed by the public, who see so many more people on our streets every day. In 2017, the figure was 21.

One of the primary reasons why we find ourselves in this situation is simply the basic lack of social housing, as we have heard. I elevated that issue here through the parliamentary campaign for council housing, which has cross-party support. Since 1980, successive Governments have failed to deliver enough affordable housing, particularly social housing. To put that into focus, in the financial year 2017-18, the Government delivered just 6,463 social homes, while nearly 1.2 million people are on waiting lists. By way of example, in my constituency, the council has accepted housing developments that have under-delivered social and affordable housing. In the period from 2010 to 2017, only 28% of new homes built in major housing schemes in the area—against a policy of 40%—have been either social or affordable. The lack of housing stock results in the council having to take a harsher line because it is essentially rationing housing, leaving a lot of people in unsustainable situations.

However, the crisis is not just down to a lack of housing, although it is central to the problem, and I will return to that point shortly. Under the Government's welfare policies, rates for local housing allowances have been frozen for five years from April 2016. The LHA now does not cover rents in more than 90% of areas in England. Then there is the added challenge of having to wait five weeks for universal credit, which has pushed so many people into arrears. Indeed, universal credit has caused a significant rise in homelessness and rough sleeping.

For many who find themselves living on the streets, the lack of direct and immediate support to address their complex health and welfare needs perpetuates the crisis. In 2017-18, mental health needs were most often cited as the greatest need among people sleeping rough, with 50% of those assessed during the period having a need in that area. Alcohol-related support was the second

most prevalent need, at 43%, while 40% of rough sleepers were assessed as having a support need relating to drug dependency. Those needs are compounded by the insecurity of the private rented sector. A significant number of the new rough sleepers—38% of them—recorded their last settled accommodation as private rented housing. Specifically, no-fault evictions are one of the leading causes of homelessness.

We all know of cases from our constituencies, and I hope Members will forgive me if I give just one illustration. A young man in my constituency approached me not so long ago. He has been homeless since October. He resides in a car and has previously had problems with drugs and alcohol, although in prison he received support for them. Since leaving prison, he has been reluctant to go into shared hostel accommodation, because he does not want to be exposed to similar behaviours again. The local council, however, will not allow him a single room in a hostel, because that is not in line with the policy, which is a progression from shared hostel room to single hostel room, to supported housing and then to independent residence. As a result, he continues to sleep rough, because he is adamant that he cannot go into a shared hostel.

A year ago, I called for a summit and brought together all the local agencies and authorities to pose the question of how we could address the issue. The ambition we set was to try to resolve and eliminate rough sleeping within a year. I am pleased to say that the council and other organisations seized on that ambition. Just a few months ago, the local council and its housing team opened William Wallsgrove House, a direct access hostel in Leamington. It provides around-the-clock accommodation, onsite support and referrals for 22 people, all year round.

Although that is positive, over recent years the Labour group on the council has been pressing for a change in the severe weather emergency protocol. Before, someone had to endure three consecutive nights of temperatures of 0 °C before they would be provided with accommodation. Now—many years later, after much pressing and on the insistence of that Labour group—that has been reduced to one night.

What are the solutions? I stress that more social housing is critical. As other Members have mentioned, the evidence from Scandinavia—particularly in Finland, where there is an absence of rough sleepers—shows that the issue can be addressed by a housing-first approach. It is therefore critical that we end the benefits freeze, re-establish the link between housing benefit and local rents, and reform universal credit.

I will end by saying this: as we have heard, a further 600 people died from homelessness in 2017—up 24% since 2013. That is almost two people every day. At the current rates, many thousands of people will die before this Government are defeated. That cannot be acceptable.

3.49 pm

**Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): It is a pleasure, as always, to see you in the Chair, Ms Buck. I know how personally committed you are to dealing with housing issues.

There is no more depressing image of the cumulative impact of the austerity policies of the Conservative Government and, before that, the coalition Government

[Kerry McCarthy]

than the image of people sleeping rough on the streets everywhere we go. If anything, the last Labour Government failed to boast about their achievements on that. We can be incredibly proud of the fact that we virtually eradicated rough sleeping on our streets.

It has been a cumulative impact—a toxic cocktail of benefits cuts and sanctions, and a lack of support for people with mental health problems and addictions. All those things go together, of course. Often people present with a multitude of problems that result in their ending up on the streets. The failure to build housing or to provide affordable housing is part of that in particular.

The annual official account of rough sleepers that we carried out in December 2018 found that 82 people were sleeping rough in Bristol. That was down four from the previous year, but we know that that is just the tip of the iceberg; many more people over the course of the year will sleep rough. Bristol City Council is one of the few councils to keep any semblance of a record of homeless people who die in the city. Over the past five years in Bristol, at least 50 homeless people have died.

I pay tribute to Michael Yong, who was an excellent journalist at *The Bristol Post*. Sadly, he has just moved on, but he had been working with the Bureau of Investigative Journalism to tell the stories of all the people who had died, and to add a touch of humanity to them. Often their cause of death was unknown, their stories and even their dates of birth were not recorded, and in some cases it was an awfully long time before their families even realised that they had died.

We are trying to tackle the problem in Bristol. We have increased the provision for homeless people. There is a city-wide initiative for organisations to open their doors when the weather is particularly cold. Church groups, for example, and local hostels are involved. The city's first 24-hour homeless shelter—St Anne's House, in my constituency—was opened by the Secretary of State. I join others in paying tribute to St Mungo's, which leads the rough sleeping partnership in the city.

Looking back at the history of Bristol, in Hillfields, in my constituency, some of the very first council houses were built 100 years ago under the Addison Act. In 1949, 70 years ago, Nye Bevan came to the city to lay one of the stones for the 10,000th house built since the second world war. That was when he was Minister for Housing. Everyone remembers him being Minister for Health, but he was Minister for Housing as well. It was crucial that those two things went together, because the population cannot be healthy unless they live in decent homes. It is so sad, as we celebrate the 100 years and the 70 years since those house-building programmes, that we are in the situation that we are in now.

Bristol is trying to build new homes. It has a target of building 2,000 homes a year, of which 800 will be affordable, by 2020. We are also setting up a new council-owned housing company that will give the council the ability to build even more new affordable homes. However, permitted development rights are a real problem. The fact that it is not necessary to apply for planning permission to convert office blocks to residential accommodation means that we do not have any power over the affordability element. In a place such as Bristol, that has a real impact.

I will briefly mention Jasper Thompson of Help Bristol's Homeless, who is converting shipping containers into amazing homes for the homeless. The idea is that people will live in them for six months or so. They are really well furnished and well kitted-out. That also offers the opportunity for people who are moved off the streets into those homes to get extra support.

The Minister knows that I am concerned about supported housing provision—I have actually met with officials in her Department on that matter. The level of local housing allowance in Bristol is low. For a family living in a two-bedroom house, there is a monthly shortfall of around £217 between the LHA rate and a typical rent charge in the city. That is encouraging many providers to move into the supported housing sector, because they can make a lot more money. Some of them are not at all interested in providing support, and because the sector is not regulated, a business model is emerging that I think puts people at risk.

There is a particular property in my constituency where several people have died in recent years. Homeless people have actually said to me that they would not go there. They do not want to go there. They would be scared to go to Wick House, which is the name of the property in question. I have met with Lorna, the sister of Paul Way, who died in Wick House in 2017. It was meant to be supported accommodation, but it took support staff three days to knock on the door of his room and find his dead body. I also met with Catherine, the mother of George Mahoney, who died in 2016.

There have been some changes. Local authorities are piloting multi-disciplinary teams looking at all the different agencies that could perhaps help to regulate the sector more: the housing benefit people, the environment agencies, and people who deal with antisocial behaviour. I hope that Bristol can be part of that, and that there will be more unannounced inspections. We also need legislative changes to help to resolve the situation. We need to upgrade the definition of support; currently, it just has to be "more than minimal". The definition of supported housing has not changed since 1977.

Ideally, everyone would have a home that they can call their own, and they would not be in halfway houses and temporary provision. However, if we are to get people off the streets, as a first measure we have to ensure that supported housing is fit for purpose. As I have said, it is costing local councils an awful lot of money, because providers can charge much higher rates for housing benefit properties than for ordinary accommodation. Organisations such as St Mungo's are doing a great job providing such places, but others are exploiting the system, and I know that the Minister agrees.

3.56 pm

**Douglas Chapman** (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck. I, too, thank the hon. Members for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) and for Colchester (Will Quince) for securing today's debate.

There is no sadder sight for a Member of Parliament than to leave these buildings at night, or indeed at any time during the day, and see people sleeping rough on the streets next to our mother of Parliaments. Whether they are under cardboard or just look like a bundle of

blankets, every single one is a real human tragedy. For me, it is a national embarrassment that some people are asked to sleep in those conditions, and to live their lives like that every day of the week.

Some of the most progressive and robust homelessness laws have been introduced in the Scottish Parliament in recent years. As a result of a major amendment to the Homelessness etc. (Scotland) Act 2003 that took effect from December 2012, local authorities in Scotland now have a duty to find permanent accommodation for all applicants who are unintentionally homeless. That led Shelter to describe Scotland as providing

“the best homelessness laws in Europe”.

Crisis, another charity focused on ending homelessness, said:

“This gives people in Scotland some of the strongest homelessness rights in the world.”

Nevertheless, a robust legal framework does not, in itself, solve all the problems; we still have people sleeping rough on our streets. That is why the Scottish Government set up a £50 million fund to tackle rough sleeping in 2017. We are also working with organisations such as Social Bite on its Housing First scheme, which will increase investment by £6.5 million over the programme period. The programme started with 8,000 people joining the world’s largest sleep-out in Princes Street Gardens in Edinburgh in December 2017, and a call to end homelessness in Scotland for good. The Sleep in the Park campaign was extended in December, with the number of people taking part increasing to 12,000. That gave those people an idea what it is like to be homeless for just one night, but imagine the impact on someone’s health and wellbeing when it becomes a relentless experience, night after night and week after week.

In November, the Scottish Government published an action plan to end homelessness and rough sleeping, which takes forward 70 recommendations from their homelessness and rough sleeping action group and focuses on providing a person-centred approach. At the heart of that approach is prevention, which many hon. Members have mentioned. The action plan will also prioritise the provision of settled and mainstream housing to ensure quick and effective responses and join up the planning process with as many resources as we can possibly bring together to solve the problem.

Aside from legislation, there are other factors that do not make it easy for people whose life is on the street. The underlying causes of homelessness must be addressed to get to the root of the problem. We cannot afford to ignore the impact of the UK Government’s austerity agenda, particularly on social security, from the four-year benefit freeze to—it has to be said, Minister—the shambolic roll-out of universal credit. Fransham and Dorling, two experts from the University of Oxford, argue that austerity policies lie at the heart of soaring homelessness and related health issues:

“What is needed is a comprehensive strategy that improves services for vulnerable people, an increased supply of affordable housing, more security of tenancies”.

The National Audit Office states that homelessness is “likely to have been driven by welfare reforms”,

while the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has noted with concern the impact of social security reforms on the right to adequate housing.

Several academic studies have also shown strong links between homelessness and Government reductions in welfare spending in England. It has been estimated that the number of homeless people in England has tripled since the Conservative Government’s tough austerity programme began.

The evidence is irrefutable. No matter how the Government cut it, no matter how they dress it up, there is a direct link between austerity policies and homelessness in the UK. The bedroom tax has forced some people out of their homes; in Scotland, we continue to fully mitigate that unfair policy with a view to abolishing it as soon as possible, but we cannot afford to mitigate every single daft policy that comes out of this place.

The impact of benefit sanctions is also widely known. Many claimants in my constituency are turning to food banks after being sanctioned by the Department for Work and Pensions. My hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) introduced a private Member’s Bill to ensure that a person’s mental health, caring responsibilities and risk of homelessness were accounted for before a sanction could be applied. Disgracefully, that Bill—the Benefit Claimants Sanctions (Required Assessment) Bill—was shot down when the then Minister used parliamentary tactics to dismiss it. I ask the present Minister to reconsider my hon. Friend’s Bill and look at whether there is anything we can all learn from it to create a much fairer society.

Finally, I should mention the economic case for reducing homelessness, which in these troubled times should itself be an incentive for the UK Government to end homelessness and rough sleeping. In 2017, the NAO estimated that homelessness costs the public sector more than £1 billion a year, even before factoring in how the homeless are less likely to make a huge contribution to the economic wellbeing of the nation. A University of New Mexico study that examined the economic impact of homelessness has shown that it actually costs less to house someone who is chronically homeless than to leave them on the street: providing homeless people with housing led to a 15% saving of public money.

People who are appropriately housed are also more likely to gain employment, thereby paying back into the economy. In a world in which disrespect appears to be the order of the day, it is time we pushed for a much more respectful society. We cannot do that better than by giving people a roof over their head and a way of protecting their family. A 2018 report by Crisis suggests that for every £1 invested in the solutions recommended to move people directly out of homelessness, £2.80 will be generated in benefits, including cashable savings and a value for wellbeing. The report also points out that people who are moved out of homelessness are expected to use public services such as the NHS and the criminal justice system with much lower frequency.

We are in the midst of a housing and homelessness crisis, which I am sure will be exacerbated by Brexit as jobs become less secure. I ask the Minister to act now, before the crisis becomes a disaster for so many individuals and families across the country. Her actions must go beyond her own Department; we need a cross-Government approach. If we cannot create homes for heroes, maybe we can create homes fit for people.

4.5 pm

**Melanie Onn** (Great Grimsby) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) on securing this debate. I also congratulate him and the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince) on all their hard work as co-chairs of the all-party parliamentary group on ending homelessness, not just in the winter months but all year round. They have championed the issue since they came to this place in 2015, and they have been very successful at drawing together organisations, individuals and Members from across the political spectrum to highlight the incredibly difficult circumstances and the plight of the most vulnerable in our society today.

I also thank the organisations that have circulated excellent briefings to Members: the Local Government Association; Mind, whose parliamentary reception I attended last night and will discuss briefly later; Depaul UK, which has been mentioned extensively; St Mungo's, a steadfast charity that does incredible outreach and support work for people who are homeless; Agenda; Shelter; and Women's Aid. Those are the organisations whose briefings I have with me, but there may well be others—so many organisations are pleased that we are having this debate.

The number of hon. Members who have participated today shows how important an issue homelessness is and how rapidly it is rising in the public consciousness as a demonstration of what our society is like today. I think a moment of reckoning is coming, because the number of people who are rough sleeping is increasing all the time. The Minister may well challenge me on the point, but in every city and every town around the country, people are experiencing homelessness. Our community's perception of just how damaging that is for individuals and how it reflects on us all needs to be tackled far sooner than 2027, which is the date that she has given.

It would be very welcome if we discussed the issue all year round, not just in the cold winter months when it is plainly obvious that it must be deeply unsettling for anybody to sleep rough, wrapped up in blankets on the pavement or on cardboard. We cannot just have a sudden moment of conscience when it is cold and raining; it is a year-round issue that we should make every effort to tackle.

Sleeping rough is something that nobody should have to experience. Its impact is dire. Those who sleep rough are more likely to develop drug and alcohol dependency or experience increased problems with mental and physical health, and they are nine times more likely to commit suicide than the general population. Six hundred people, with an average age of just 44, paid the ultimate cost while sleeping rough last year. They included 43-year-old Gyula Remes, a father of two, who died just outside this Palace while waiting for his first pay cheque.

It is shameful that an estimated 4,700 people slept on the street on a single night last year, with many more sleeping in cars, sofa surfing or out of sight of the authorities. I stress that that is an estimated figure—several colleagues have raised the problems with having estimated rather than concrete figures. Unless we know the real scale of the problem, we have no hope of tackling it. I hope the Minister will take that message away.

Rough sleeping has more than doubled since 2010, so we have to acknowledge that specific policies put into place by this Government, and by the previous Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition, have led to more people suffering on our streets. We cannot ignore the impact of a housing system that is not fit for purpose, a stripped-down drug and alcohol support system, cuts to hostel and supported accommodation provision, and ill-thought-through changes to the benefits system that are leaving people homeless and driving them on to the streets. My hon. Friends the Members for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) and for Ipswich (Sandy Martin) both mentioned the importance of supported housing, which is critical in ending the cyclical nature of homelessness and making sure that people have support—that they are not just given a roof over their heads and left to their own devices. It is also critical that supported housing is properly monitored to make sure it is fit for purpose and people are not put in dangerous situations.

Last week, I visited Rugby and met Labour's candidate, Debbie Bannigan, who took me to see the work of Hope4. That organisation has seen a huge rise in the number of people using its services. It relies on donations and lottery funding to provide clothing, meals and somewhere to stay for just a few short hours throughout the day, as well as shower and laundry facilities—the only services in the whole town available for people who are rough sleeping.

The reality is that the root cause of rough sleeping is the failure to provide adequate housing for all. Booming house prices and a failure to build anywhere near enough social housing that is truly affordable—a point that we should really start to hammer home is that it needs to be truly affordable, because “affordable” has become an artificial description—mean that far too many in this country are living in housing insecurity. That is precisely the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) is drawing to our attention with his campaign for more social homes, and for council housing in particular. Social housing was once available to many who had a housing need, but a number of social rented homes equivalent to a city the size of Coventry have been lost through a combination of a move into so-called affordable housing, and schemes such as right to buy. The failure to provide adequate replacements means that in places such as Southwark, applicants for social housing may wait an average of three and a half years for a two-bedroom council property.

Many people are now in the private rented sector, and my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) raised the need for more security in that sector. At the moment, tenants may face unfair and punitive bans on properties across the sector, landlords may impose punitive rent rises if they want a tenant to leave and renters may be evicted through no fault of their own with just two months' notice. I know my hon. Friend is deeply concerned about those points.

Last night, I attended the launch of Mind's “Brick by brick” report, which tells us just how devastating housing insecurity can be for tenants with mental health problems. One in four such tenants have serious rent arrears, and they are four times more likely to report that poor housing is making their health worse. GPs spontaneously identify housing issues as a common contributing factor to their patients' poor mental health. When the last

barrier to homelessness is a rental market that is simply unsuitable for many people with complex or specific needs, it is unsurprising that many end up falling out of it and into homelessness and rough sleeping.

If the Government are serious about eradicating rough sleeping, they must eliminate the housing insecurity that fuels it. That requires more social housing and a private rental sector that places security of tenure at its heart.

My hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) was particularly clear—2027 is far too long. Why does the Minister not raise her ambitions and bring that date forward? What is stopping her from doing that? I am sure that by now she knows what the causes of homelessness are. It is not just Opposition Members who are saying this; it is her own Back Benchers, too. My hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) said that in five years' time, we will have the glory of being back to where we were in 2009. That is not an achievement.

Will the Government look to address the shortage in social housing by placing a moratorium on right to buy and pledging to build 1 million genuinely affordable homes over 10 years, to make sure that we get back the council stock we need to get people off the streets? Will the Minister also address the insecurity that many in the private rented sector face by scrapping section 21 and reaffirming the rights of tenants on social security to rent without discrimination? That is something that I have raised with the likes of Zoopla. Will she tell us when we should expect a response to the Government's consultation on longer tenancies? It closed five months ago and we are yet to hear anything. I also ask her to support the calls of the leader of the Labour party—as, surprisingly, the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) has done today—and recognise the absolute pointlessness of the Vagrancy Act 1824.

Even if tenants find themselves homeless, it should not mean that they end up on the streets. After almost a decade of austerity, however, councils simply do not have the resources to provide the type of homelessness service that is needed to end rough sleeping.

4.15 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, Ms Buck, and that of Mr Sharma before you. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) on securing this debate and thank him and my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) for their tireless work as co-chairs of the all-party parliamentary group for ending homelessness.

This is a debate about rough sleeping, so I am thankful for the experiences and expertise shared today, whether that comes from a constituency or a wider perspective. I am grateful to hon. Members for their speeches and questions; I hope to answer them as I work through my speech, but given the time limit, I may not answer them all.

Ensuring that everyone has a decent, affordable, secure home is a core priority for this Government. That is why we have made a commitment to halve rough sleeping, as everybody has said—I am glad that everybody knows it—by 2022, and to end it by 2027. It is an ambitious

target, but it is essential that we achieve it. Underpinning that bold commitment is a concerted cross-Government effort to address homelessness in all its forms.

As hon. Members will know, last year we launched the rough sleeping initiative, working with the areas with the highest levels of rough sleeping, and with the support of charities and experts from across the sector, many of which we have heard about today. We announced the rough sleeping strategy, backed by £100 million, and introduced the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, the most ambitious homelessness legislation in decades, with prevention at its heart. In total, we have committed £1.2 billion to 2020—a not insignificant amount of money—to ensure that the most vulnerable in society have the support they need.

I, for one, am encouraged by the figures published last week which show that our approach is working. This is a significant moment. For the first time in eight years, the number of people sleeping on our streets has fallen. That follows year-on-year increases, with an average annual increase of nearly 16%, so we are moving in the right direction. To be clear, our rough sleeping initiative has been up and running for five months in those 83 areas, and those areas have seen a 23% reduction in the count. That is just the beginning; we are bringing in further funding and embedding services. I look forward to seeing progress at the next count—which will deal once and for all with any question of my resigning.

I know we still have a way to go and, as many of you have remarked, it is simply unacceptable that people have to sleep on the streets in 2019. That does not reflect our country, which we want to be the best, which is why I am determined to put a stop to it. The cross-Government rough sleeping strategy, announced last August, is the blueprint for sustained action, looking across the spectrum from prevention to intervention to recovery. In the six months since our strategy was published, we have focused our energies on delivering key commitments that will help those in need and prevent people from sleeping rough in the first place.

We have announced the early adopters of our rapid rehousing pathway, an approach that a number of hon. Members have called for today, which includes 11 areas with Somewhere Safe to Stay hubs. A hub has already started delivering in Nottingham, helping people to secure routes off the streets, with the specialist support that the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) was so keen to secure. We have also secured up to £30 million in the NHS long-term plan for specialist mental health services for people sleeping rough, which will be informed by the findings of a health provision audit to be carried out this year. We have provisionally allocated £34 million for 2019-20 to the 83 areas with the highest levels of rough sleeping to continue their excellent work supporting those currently on the streets, and opened up bidding for a further £11 million to all other local authorities to support them in helping people off the streets now.

There are particularly encouraging results in the 83 areas supported by our rough sleeping initiative, which is backed by £30 million of Government investment this year. In those areas, numbers have fallen by almost a quarter. Indeed, almost three quarters of RSI areas have reported decreases from the previous year. I thank councils across the country for working tirelessly to

[Mrs Heather Wheeler]

support people off the streets and into recovery. Those figures are proof of what can be achieved when we all pull together in the same direction.

In just seven months since the funding was announced, councils have used the investment to create an additional 1,700 beds and employ 500 dedicated staff, such as outreach workers, mental health specialists, nurses and substance misuse workers. This means that there are more people in warm beds tonight as a direct result of Government funding and the wrap-around support that goes with it. An excellent example of this is the local authority in the constituency of the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark, who secured this debate. It is receiving £615,000 this year, which provides funding for a worker from Solace Women's Aid to support offenders who have experienced domestic abuse, and a further 72 new beds to tackle rough sleeping.

Some 33 Members have spoken in this debate, including both interventions and speeches. The right hon. Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth) made a fascinating intervention—at the last count, there were no rough sleepers in Knowsley.

**Melanie Onn:** But there is no proper counting system—

**Mrs Wheeler:** With respect, that is not good enough—

**Ms Karen Buck (in the Chair):** Order. I advise Members not to conduct conversations bilaterally.

**Mrs Wheeler:** In the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester, the number of rough sleepers is down to 13. In Liverpool it has reduced from 33 to 15, in Torbay from 24 to 19, and in the Worthing and Shoreham area from 35 to 11.

**Neil Coyle:** One of the specific questions I asked was whether the Minister would improve the data collection to ensure that these figures were robust. There is a question mark over them.

**Mrs Wheeler:** People have asked these questions. Some councils choose to do an estimate, and some choose to do a count. Personally, I prefer a count.

The number of people rough sleeping in York has reduced from 29 to nine, and I congratulate the hon. Member for York Central on all her hard work in that area. In Ipswich the number has gone down from 21 to 11. In the Warwick area it has gone down from 24 to 12—the area received £370,000-worth of Government funding to help with this. I work very well with the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) on these particular issues. Her area has received £583,000 of Government money and there has been a slight reduction in rough sleeping, but there is much more to do. We very much recognise the importance of the certainty of funding for services. The Chancellor has said there will be a spending review this year, and Ministers have made it clear that rough sleeping and homelessness are key priorities for this Government.

I shall crack on and then allow the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark to wrap up. We note the release of the first ever ONS death statistics—hon. Members have mentioned this—which will help us to

ensure that we are targeting our action to prevent deaths. We know that the risk to life increases during periods of cold weather, which is why we launched an additional £5 million cold weather fund in October. The fund has already enabled us to increase outreach work further, extend winter shelter provision and—I am sure that Members will be pleased to hear—provide over 800 additional bed spaces. We are also ensuring that when a homeless person dies or is seriously injured, safeguarding adult reviews take place, where appropriate, so that local services can learn lessons from the tragic events and prevent them from happening in the future.

**Rachael Maskell:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mrs Wheeler:** If I could just finish my sentence—it might help the hon. Lady.

We expect all local areas to conduct SARs according to guidance. We will also work with the LGA to ensure that lessons learnt from these reviews are shared with other safeguarding adult boards.

The hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark raised the issue of female rough sleepers who have suffered domestic abuse. Domestic abuse is a devastating crime that nobody should have to suffer. Supporting victims of domestic abuse and violence is an absolute priority for the Government, and we need to do more to ensure that they are appropriately supported. We all agree that survivors of domestic abuse should have access to a safe home. Councils have a legal duty to provide accommodation to families and others who are vulnerable as a result of fleeing domestic abuse. The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 requires councils to take reasonable steps to help eligible homeless families to secure accommodation.

**Nick Herbert:** They are exactly the kinds of vulnerable people who the Depaul Nightstop service is helping in half of local authorities. Would the Minister agree to meet Depaul, and perhaps visit a Nightstop service, to see how important and cost-effective it is and to see the potential for the roll-out that I mentioned earlier?

**Mrs Wheeler:** Absolutely. My apologies—when I mentioned the fantastic reduction of rough sleepers in his area from 35 to 11, I meant to say that I would be delighted to meet Depaul.

**Will Quince:** At the moment, survivors of domestic abuse are subject to a vulnerability test. Could the Minister look at removing that, so that it is an automatic priority need?

**Mrs Wheeler:** We will keep all such matters under review.

I hope that my remarks have demonstrated the Government's commitment to halving and ending rough sleeping and to reducing homelessness. I thank hon. Members for their speeches and questions, and I thank all the charities mentioned today. I look forward to working with the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark and other hon. Members of different parties in the coming months and years. I also thank my brilliant team for all their hard work.

4.25 pm

**Neil Coyle:** I thank both Chairs and everyone who contributed to the debate.

I asked several questions in my speech. The Minister referred to her team, and I hope they are busy drafting their reply to the inevitable letter in which I put those questions again, because not all of them were answered. Will the funding for the pilot be continued? Will the data be improved? Is the Minister still committed to resigning if rough sleeping rises again? Will there be changes to legal aid and the Zambrano restrictions? How can we ensure that safeguarding adult reviews are more routine? Councils are simply not carrying them out. Even in the example I gave, that did not occur.

There were several running themes in the debate. The first is shame. My hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) and the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) both touched on that powerfully. People are ashamed that the system in our country has compelled so many people to sleep rough. It simply should not be happening. There is a public appetite for change, but sadly not in the Government.

The second theme that came out strongly is ambition, which the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince) and my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) touched on. The Government's target is simply not ambitious enough. They are not on target to meet their weak, unambitious target to halve rough sleeping by 2022. Their figures show that they will not

meet it. The risk is that this problem will continue for far longer than necessary. There was some complacency in the Minister's response. She did not listen to the debate.

**Andy Slaughter:** My hon. Friend, who opened the debate brilliantly, is summing it up brilliantly. I am afraid that I heard the Minister read out a prepared speech that just seemed to say that everything is going terribly well. It is complacency. We have heard very good speeches from hon. Members on both sides of the House advocating an immediate solution to the problem.

**Neil Coyle:** Absolutely. There were some warm words, but they will be cold comfort to those who are living in these extreme conditions. The Minister said that three quarters of councils in the pilot areas have done better than average at reducing rough sleeping. That means that, even in the pilot areas, a quarter of councils have seen rough sleeping increase. That is simply not good enough. There may be pilots, but there does not seem to be a cockpit or even a plane. The Government must properly address this problem. I will end on that and start drafting my letter to the officials.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered rough sleeping.

4.29 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*



# Written Statements

Thursday 7 February 2019

## CABINET OFFICE

### European Union (Withdrawal) Act and Common Frameworks

**The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington):** I have today laid before Parliament a report, “The European Union (Withdrawal) Act and Common Frameworks, 26 September 2018 to 25 December 2018” as required by paragraph 4 of schedule 3 to the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018.

The report is available on gov.uk and details the progress made in discussions between the UK Government and devolved Administrations regarding common frameworks in the second reporting period covered under the legislation, and sets out that no “freezing” regulations have been brought forward under section 12 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act.

A copy of the “The European Union (Withdrawal) Act and Common Frameworks, 26 September 2018 to 25 December 2018” report has been placed in the Library of both Houses. The publication of the report reflects the Government’s continued commitment to transparency.

[HCWS1310]

## DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

### Sporting Future Annual Report 2019

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies):** The Government’s Sporting Future strategy, published in December 2015, set out a radical new vision for our approach to sport and physical activity, including how we value and measure their immense contribution to the nation’s health and wellbeing. It placed five key outcomes at the heart of everything we support and invest in—physical wellbeing, mental wellbeing, individual development, social and community development and economic development. It identified tackling inactivity and getting people from underrepresented groups more engaged as key priorities. It was a bold new strategy for an active nation and marked the biggest shift in Government policy on sport for more than a decade.

#### *Participation and physical activity*

In the third full year of the strategy we have continued to deliver significant achievements. We have seen good progress against the 2020 physical activity targets set by Sport England and will continue to build on our understanding of active lives adult survey data to define robust successor targets for 2025.

A key focus has been developing our understanding of children’s engagement with, and attitude towards, physical activity. The December 2018 publication of the first year’s results of Sport England’s new active lives children survey was a significant milestone in terms of our understanding of how children engage with and

think about sport and physical activity. The data on children’s inactivity levels was a wake-up call both for Government and the sector, and has prompted a substantial new focus across Government on improving sport and physical activity for young people. This will be manifested through the cross-government school sport and physical activity action plan which will be published in spring 2019.

#### *Culture and integrity of sport*

We have also continued to focus on the culture and integrity of sport. What matters is not just what we do to win medals and enjoy sporting success, but how we go about it. We have continued to work with UK Anti-Doping (UKAD) to implement the findings of the tailored review of UKAD and will be launching a consultation on revising the UK’s national anti-doping policy. We have launched a mental health and elite sport action plan, and UK Sport has reported on the first set of findings from its culture health check, which monitors how athletes and staff in the elite sport system feel they are treated.

Ensuring people feel safe when participating in sport is a significant part of improving and strengthening the culture and integrity in sport. Over the course of the year we have worked across Government and with the sports sector to look at existing processes and strengthen them where possible, integrating sport into the Department for Education’s working together and keeping children safe in education guidance. The governance of sport remains a critical issue and Sport England and UK Sport continue to embed the code for sports governance and work with the sector to improve on issues such as diversity in leadership.

#### *International sport and Global Britain*

We have continued our work to ensure that the UK remains one of the big hitters in elite and international sport. UK Sport launched its consultation on its future funding strategy beyond the Tokyo 2020 Olympics and Paralympics, the results of which will be available in February 2019. UK Sport also successfully launched its aspiration fund which will provide invaluable financial support to those sports that do not have immediate medal potential, but which we want to support to improve and develop. We have also revised the gold framework, which provides guidance to partners and agencies seeking to bid for and deliver major sporting events in the UK. The revised framework strengthens the UK’s ability to put on world-class sporting events that will help to further cement its reputation as a world leader on the sporting stage.

#### *Priorities for the future*

Looking to the future, cross-government working will be a key priority. Sport and physical activity has an immense role to play in a range of important agendas across Government, be that supporting the NHS to become more prevention focused, joint working with the Department for Education to make sure that a robust sport and physical activity offer to children is available both in and out of school, supporting and informing investment in transport infrastructure so that we are encouraging more people to walk and get on their bikes, or investing in sport and physical activity interventions to help reduce social isolation and strengthen community cohesion.

Supporting underrepresented groups including women and girls, people from BAME backgrounds, disabled people and people from lower socioeconomic groups to get active will continue to be a central focus. These are the groups in society who will benefit the most from getting more active and we remain committed to focusing on these groups as a priority. Equality in sport also applies to what we are able to watch. We can look forward to a number of sporting events on free-to-air TV this year, including the women's netball world championships and the women's football world championships. We want sports and broadcasters to continue to work together to ensure sports can continue to grow their appeal and find new audiences.

Preserving and strengthening the integrity of sport will continue to be at the forefront of our work. People having faith in the sports they know and love and athletes having the belief that they are competing on a level playing field are vital pillars of Sporting Future. To this end our focus on ensuring we have robust anti-doping and governance regimes will continue.

One of my highest priorities going forward will be for Government and the whole sport and physical activity sector to work together to ensure that we create the conditions for anyone to get involved and to enjoy the transformative power of both physical activity and witnessing live sport. It is vital that we direct our efforts not only at providing people with sufficient opportunities to get, and stay, active, but that the atmosphere and environment in which that activity takes place—be it grassroots or at the elite level—is safe, supportive and free of discrimination. In recent times, we have seen some worrying instances of discriminatory behaviour across the sporting landscape, notably in football, and I will be bringing together the footballing authorities and other organisations with an interest, to agree what action must be taken to stamp out all forms of discrimination at sports events. I am clear that we must not, and will not, tolerate any form of discrimination in sport and sport administrators, clubs and fans must continue to embrace diversity and tackle racism whenever they encounter it.

As we leave the European Union, we will also continue to work closely with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and the Department for International Trade, to maximise the great contribution sport can make to our international profile and our vision for Global Britain. Our hosting of the cricket World cup, with an expected global audience of over a billion people, will be a wonderful opportunity to showcase our country in 2019.

We want to make sure absolutely everyone can benefit from the power of sport and physical activity. It can deliver tangible benefits for people's physical and mental health, support the delivery of other vital agendas such as improving employment and educational outcomes, and it can act as a powerful tool for bringing communities closer together. I am grateful to all those across Government and the sport and physical activity sector who are working to make the ambition of Sporting Future a reality.

There is much more to do to ensure that the UK becomes, and reaps the benefits of, a truly active nation. I will be laying the formal report of the third annual report to Parliament in spring. This will allow us to incorporate the findings of the third full year of Sport England's active lives adult survey data results due for publication in April 2019.

[HCWS1311]

## ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

### January Agriculture and Fisheries Council

**The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice):** The Agriculture and Fisheries Council took place in Brussels on 28 January. The UK was represented by Lord Gardiner of Kimble, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Rural Affairs and Biosecurity, and Lords Minister.

The lead issue on the agriculture-focused agenda was the common agricultural policy (CAP) reform post-2020, divided into two table rounds. The first round focused on strategic plans and horizontal regulations, detailing the changes to streamline the new delivery model, as well as the agricultural reserve. Member states broadly supported the call for the pillar two budget to be maintained, including a proposal which will allow a 35% deviation from annual milestones, among other things.

In the second debate, the Commission's proposal to lift the ban on vitis labrusca and six forbidden grape varieties was debated. The majority of wine producing member states rejected the proposal on quality and reputational grounds. Commissioner Hogan then gave a presentation on green architecture which focused on member states' objectives to achieve high-level climate ambitions.

Commissioner Hogan also introduced the non-legislative debate on supporting the growth of plant protein in the EU, setting out a wide range of proposed measures from the Commission's plan. A declaration, calling for measures to be brought together in an EU-wide action plan was supported by a number of member states.

A number of other items were discussed under "any other business":

Commissioner Andriukaitis provided an update from the ministerial conference on African swine fever (ASF) held in December 2018.

Slovakia presented their request for an update on the dual quality food issue.

Denmark informed Council about their new international centre for antimicrobial resistance solutions (ICARS). The UK expressed its support, highlighting the new five-year national AMR action plan and the chief medical officer's recent visit to Copenhagen.

[HCWS1308]

## HOME DEPARTMENT

### Automatic Immigration Bail Referral Pilot

**The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes):** On 24 July 2018, the Home Secretary laid before Parliament the second independent review by Stephen Shaw CBE, into immigration detention. In responding to that review, the Home Secretary committed to going further and faster with the reforms to immigration detention in four priority areas: encouraging and supporting voluntary returns; improving the support available to vulnerable detainees; increasing transparency around immigration detention; and a new drive on dignity in detention.

As a part of this commitment, the Home Secretary, in agreement with the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice, announced plans to pilot an additional automatic bail referral to the First-tier Tribunal of the Immigration and Asylum Chamber at the two-month point, halving the time in detention before a first bail referral.

I am pleased to announce that this pilot will commence on 10 February. It will run for six months and will be evaluated fully.

This is an important additional safeguard for those who are detained, giving them certainty that their detention is subject to further independent judicial oversight. It builds on the current automatic bail referral regime at the four-month point which was introduced last year. I have written to the Chairs of the Home Affairs Select Committee and the Joint Committee on Human Rights with more detail on the pilot and I will place copies of those letters in the Libraries of both Houses.

Together with the Ministry of Justice, we will consider the key outcomes of the pilot, as part of our continued efforts to ensure we have a detention system that is fair to those who may be detained, upholds our immigration policies and acts as a deterrent to those who might seek to frustrate immigration control.

[HCWS1309]

## TRANSPORT

### Smart Ticketing on the Rail Network

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones):** In November 2017 in our strategic vision for rail, the Department for Transport set out ambitious plans for the roll out of smart ticketing across the network, with the aim of making it more convenient for passengers to buy and receive their train tickets. Over a year later, we have made real progress. Every franchise offers smart cards and/or barcodes and smart tickets are available across almost all of the network.

We now want to go further. Our ambition is to ensure that across regional and urban commuter areas smart ticketing can deliver the kind of pay-as-you-go (PAYG) structure that is used in London, to make journeys easier and smoother for passengers.

In the north of England, the Government have allocated £150 million to the multi-modal PAYG programme already being progressed by Transport for the North and, in London, Oyster ticketing already offers seamless PAYG travel. However, there is demand for PAYG to be deployed more widely, so today we begin consulting on the feasibility of delivering PAYG to an expanded area across the south-east of England. This is just a first step, and we will continue to work with other areas to assess opportunities to roll out PAYG.

The consultation offers the travelling public, business, local authorities and others the opportunity to have their say on how the system could operate and where it could extend to. We are aware that there are views on the appropriate ticketing systems and the way the fares structure could be organised to complement pay as you go travel; these issues are also being considered in the consultation.

[HCWS1307]

## Tyres and Vehicle Safety

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman):** Colleagues across the House have expressed concern about the potential dangers posed by ageing tyres. This is also a matter of great concern to the Government, and following my statement to the House of 23 November 2018, I want to update the House further on the measures we are taking to address it.

Colleagues will recall that in 2013 the Government issued guidance advising bus operators against fitting tyres over 10 years old to the front axles of their vehicles. This has proven extremely effective. Since June 2017, 136,263 vehicles have been checked by DVSA at annual test and 82 have been found to be non-compliant, a rate of 0.06%.

However, we have been determined to go further. In November 2018 the Government updated the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency guidance on maintaining roadworthiness, to the effect that tyres of 10 years of age or older should not be used on the front or steering axles of heavy goods vehicles as well as buses and coaches.

All DVSA encounters with GB heavy vehicles, including buses and coaches, identified as using older tyres will be followed up. Between 23 November and 25 January, DVSA carried out 7,500 enforcement checks and found 14 vehicles using older tyres. This reinforces the picture already built up of very low levels of infringement. The changes to maintenance best practice now provide a clear basis for referring cases to traffic commissioners when guidance has been disregarded.

The DFT and its agencies continue to work together to ensure vehicle operators understand how to maintain the safety and roadworthiness of their vehicles, including their tyres, and to enforce any non-compliance.

This strengthening of the roadworthiness guidance followed amendments to the MOT and annual test requirement in 2018 to tighten the control of the use of any tyres exhibiting deep cuts to the tread area. These changes, which apply to all road vehicles subject to MOT tests, were developed in response to new evidence obtained from a DFT-funded collision investigation. This indicated that structural damage to tyres was possible due to corrosion caused by water ingress. As a result, from 20 May 2018 any vehicle found with tyres that have deep cuts will fail their MOT test. This is another example of how the DFT continue to make improvements to vehicle maintenance requirements based on available evidence, so as to improve roadworthiness and safety of vehicles on UK roads.

In addition to these measures, the Government have also commissioned pioneering new research to strengthen our understanding of the effect of age on the integrity of road vehicle tyres. No other country in the world has done work of this nature—we are pushing the boundaries of technical research in order to inform policy and ensure the safety of all road users.

The present work has been commissioned by the Department for Transport and is led by the UK's transport research laboratory. The project has enlisted expertise from a leading laboratory in the United States, Smithers Rapra, to undertake testing and analysis to find out more about the structural qualities of those tyres. A total of 31 used tyres of different ages, taken from the UK market, have been sent to this laboratory. The

sample tyres are all from a single manufacturer and have been assembled so that accurate comparisons can be made. This analysis will be used to address the question of how ageing affects tyres' integrity. I understand that it will be the first of its kind to be published using this methodology.

The Government are committed to evidence-based policy making, in order to ensure the safety of all road users. Stakeholders and the public expect the Government

to act on complete and appropriate evidence, and decisions would otherwise risk legal challenge by affected parties. As I informed the House on November 23, we expect the outcome of this research to be reported in the spring. It will be used alongside existing evidence to inform Government policy.

[HCWS1306]

# Petition

Thursday 7 February 2019

## OBSERVATIONS

### HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

#### Ryarsh Quarry Kent

*The petition of Residents of Tonbridge and Malling.*

Declares that land in Ryarsh, west of Roughetts Road is an unsuitable location for a quarry and Kent County Council should not allocate site M8 for sand extraction in their Minerals and Waste Local Plan.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges Kent County Council to reconsider the allocation of a site for quarrying in Ryarsh, West Malling.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Tom Tugendhat, *Official Report*, 21 November 2018; Vol. 649, c. 976 .]

[P002296]

*Observations from The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse):*

While I am unable to comment on emerging minerals plans and the merits or otherwise of specific sites proposed for inclusion in those plans, I can set out the Government's policy on allocating sites for minerals development.

The national planning policy framework states that it is essential that there is a sufficient supply of minerals to provide the infrastructure, buildings, energy and goods that the country needs. Since minerals are a finite natural resource, and can only be worked where they are found, best use needs to be made of them to secure their long-term conservation.

Mineral planning authorities should plan for the steady and adequate supply of minerals by designating specific sites, preferred areas or areas of search. Sites may be designated where viable resources are known to exist, landowners are supportive of minerals development and the proposal is likely to be acceptable in planning terms. Designating specific sites in minerals plans provides the necessary certainty on when and where development may take place.



# Ministerial Correction

*Thursday 7 February 2019*

## WORK AND PENSIONS

### State Pension Age: Women

*The following is an extract from an Adjournment debate on Thursday 31 January 2019.*

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman):** I want to address briefly the point about the national insurance fund that the hon. Lady raised. It is simply not true that the

national insurance fund is used purely to reduce national debt. It is financed on a pay-as-you-earn basis with receipts collected in one year used to pay for certain benefit payments, including the state pension paid out in the same year.

*[Official Report, 31 January 2019, Vol. 653, c. 1073.]*

*Letter of correction from Guy Opperman:*

An error has been identified in my response to the debate.

The correct response should have been:

**Guy Opperman:** I want to address briefly the point about the national insurance fund that the hon. Lady raised. It is simply not true that the national insurance fund is used purely to reduce national debt. It is financed on a **pay-as-you-go** basis with receipts collected in one year used to pay for certain benefit payments, including the state pension paid out in the same year.



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**not later than  
Thursday 14 February 2019**

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**Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]**

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