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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Monday 13 May 2019

HER MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

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OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SEVENTH PARLIAMENT OF THE
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 13 JUNE 2017]

SIXTY-EIGHTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 660

THIRTY-FIFTH VOLUME OF SESSION 2017-2019

House of Commons

Monday 13 May 2019

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

WORK AND PENSIONS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Disability Living Allowance: Appeals Process

1. **Mr David Davis** (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con):
What progress her Department has made in improving
the appeals process for disability living allowance.
[910831]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Amber Rudd): I thank my right hon. Friend for the opportunity to meet him recently and reassure him that I am committed to looking into this area. I want to do and want my Department to do more to make sure we gather more information earlier so there is less need to go to tribunals and, where there is a need to go tribunals, the amount of time people have to wait is reduced.

Mr Davis: I have a constituent, Susan Hatton, with an eight-year-old daughter, Jessica. Jessica suffers from achondroplasia; she cannot wash herself, dress herself or brush her own hair; she frequently falls over, is regularly on concussion watch and wakes up several

times every night. Her mother needs help. In August, Jessica's DLA was withdrawn despite her condition worsening. While an appeal was ongoing, the Department recommended she put in a second claim to hope for a better outcome. Eight months after that, they went to court and the judge said that because the second proposal was in play, he could not answer on the first one. So not only did my constituent have to wait an unduly long time for her appeal to be heard, but she now finds herself facing the entire process over again. Every month's delay in fixing this problem is another month of deprivation, distress and uncertainty in very young lives. I know the Secretary of State is committed to correcting this problem, but I urge her to spend whatever it takes to do this as quickly as possible.

Amber Rudd: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising such an important case, and I am very sorry to hear of the circumstances he has set out today. I have set up a new process for listening to MPs about particular cases; I now have a surgery open to all MPs about a week after having oral questions, and if he wants to come along and discuss that case, or of course have a separate meeting about it, I will certainly do that.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind): The Secretary of State will have heard of Stephen Smith, because I wrote to her about him a couple of weeks ago. Stephen Smith was found fit for work, and by the time he went through the appeals system, he was obviously dying. He died shortly after the Secretary of State's Department's decision was overturned. What lessons does she draw from the tragic circumstances of this Merseysider, and when is she going to reply to my letter asking for an inquiry?

Amber Rudd: That is another very sad case. I have got the right hon. Gentleman's letter and will be replying to it, and we will be looking very carefully at what can be learned from that example.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): I have a constituent who has now waited a year for a DLA appeal, having previously waited a year for a successful appeal. She is a

chronically disabled teenage girl and faces endless errors in the Department and constant demands for more information and more signatures, and she has come to the conclusion that the Department has engaged in deliberate foot-dragging, not merely incompetence. What assurance will she have that thousands of cases like this, including the ones we have just heard, will be dealt with more expeditiously in the future?

Amber Rudd: I can reassure the right hon. Gentleman that we are spending more money and investing more effort to make sure we get the decision right first time. I am working very closely with the Ministry of Justice, which is recruiting additional people to make sure there is less of a wait for the tribunal. I know how distressing that wait can be, and I am determined to reduce that time.

In-work Poverty

2. **Bridget Phillipson** (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): What recent assessment her Department has made of trends in the level of in-work poverty. [910833]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Amber Rudd): There is clear evidence that work offers people the best opportunity to get out of poverty, and we now see record numbers of people in work. But it is not enough just to have a job; we want people to have good jobs and to progress in their work. And last month, this Conservative Government increased the national living wage, work allowances on universal credit and the personal tax allowance, providing the biggest pay rise to the lowest earners in 20 years.

Bridget Phillipson: I did listen to the Secretary of State's answer, but she will know that around two thirds of children growing up in poverty have at least one parent in paid work. Work is simply not a straightforward route out of poverty for far too many families. Will she look again at the current levels of the work allowance and the taper rate for universal credit as an important first step in addressing this rising tide of in-work poverty?

Amber Rudd: There are many different levers that we can assist with to ensure that we reduce poverty overall and child poverty in particular. I have been focusing particularly on ensuring that more childcare is available and accessible to parents who want to get back into work, sometimes full time, so that the whole family income can be increased. That is a really positive way to try to assist people such as the hon. Lady's constituents.

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): Some people working in Truro and Falmouth tell me that the faster technology changes, the more frightened they feel of being left behind. I therefore very much welcome the Secretary of State's recent announcement enabling work coaches to support people in work to upskill and transition to better-paid employment, including in the new tech sectors. When will my constituents be able to benefit from this new service?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that some people are very concerned about this; they see the changing face of the workplace, and they are concerned about their own job security and skills.

I am determined to ensure that we give people the skills they need and that we work with work coaches on projects to ensure that people get the right support. I would be delighted to work with my hon. Friend, particularly as she did such fantastic work in my Department, to ensure that her constituents are early beneficiaries.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): We know that, from April, 15% of claimants are not receiving their first payment within five weeks. Will the Secretary of State tell us what action the Department is taking to ensure that claimants are paid in a timely fashion?

Amber Rudd: I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that we are seeing constant improvements in the rate at which pay is received by claimants as early as possible. We have ensured that advance payments are available, and I am vigilant about ensuring that the figure of 85% for those receiving the actual application on time is constantly improving.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend tell the House what safeguards are in place to help universal credit claimants with regard to the repayments of any debts they might have accrued?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend asks a very good question. Many universal credit applicants have already accrued debts, and sometimes they wish to take out an advance on their claim, which they would then need to repay over a period. We have been able to reduce the amount that they need to repay, from 40% to 30%, to ensure that they can keep more of their funds. I am constantly alert to the fact that people may have debts, and we need to be careful about the rate at which they need to repay, to protect vulnerable clients.

People with Disabilities: Employment

3. **Huw Merriman** (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to help people with disabilities into work. [910834]

8. **Alex Chalk** (Cheltenham) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to help people with disabilities into work. [910840]

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Justin Tomlinson): We support disabled people to enter employment through initiatives such as the Work and Health programme, which is expected to support 220,000 disabled people over five years, the personal support package, and the new intensive personal employment support programme. Access to Work approved support for nearly 34,000 disabled workers last year, and we engage with employers through Disability Confident.

Huw Merriman: Employment prospects for young people with hidden disabilities or who are on an education, health and care plan are much lower than the mainstream average. Supported internships offer a way through, but the take-up from employers is painfully low. Given that the Department for Work and Pensions is responsible for overall targets, may I ask the Minister to work across

the Government to ensure that we can use the apprenticeship levy to fund employers to enable them to take up more of these excellent opportunities?

Justin Tomlinson: My hon. Friend has been a real champion in pushing forward the opportunities created through supported internships and traineeships, and through our efforts to open up apprenticeships to those with learning disabilities. I will continue to work with the Department for Education and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to increase awareness among employers, and I very much welcome the fact that last year Access to Work saw a 28% increase in take-up for those aged between 16 and 24, in part because of the expansion of the supported internships.

Alex Chalk: Specsavers in Cheltenham has teamed up with the GEM project to recruit people with disabilities into the world of work, and the impact has been transformational, resulting in improvements in staff morale and in productivity. What more can the Government do to ensure that the message gets out that recruiting people with disabilities is good for the individuals themselves and good for society?

Justin Tomlinson: My hon. Friend has worked really hard to promote opportunities for employers in his constituency to employ people with disabilities. I welcome the fact that, over the past five years, this Government have seen an extra 930,000 more disabled people in work and that, for the first time ever, there are now more disabled people in work than not in work. The key is to give businesses the confidence to realise that they can benefit, and that this is a win-win for the disabled person and for the business.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): My concern relates to the number of people who are dying after being found fit for work. Further to my letter to the Secretary of State, will she commit to publish the Department's internal reviews of the cases of those who have died? Will she also commit to an independent inquiry? Will she ensure that if any evidence of wrongdoing by someone in public office is found, that information will be forwarded to the police?

Justin Tomlinson: This Government are committed to working with stakeholders and those with frontline experience to continue to make improvements. There have been two independent reviews of the work capability assessment, and we have accepted and implemented over 100 improvements. We will continue to do all that we can to improve the process for claimants.

17. [910850] **Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): According to the Office for National Statistics for 2018, 20% of disabled people have never used the internet, so what steps will the Department take to assist disabled people who are not computer literate to ensure that their claims are processed quickly and efficiently and that they are able to enter the job market where they can?

Justin Tomlinson: All claimants should be advised at the beginning of the process that there are alternative methods of communication. I welcome the introduction of the Citizens Advice provision across the jobcentre

network, which is an additional layer of independent support, particularly for vulnerable claimants who may find it difficult to access services.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): May I welcome the Minister to his post? As the National Audit Office recently pointed out, the number of disabled people out of work has stagnated at 3.7 million during the past five years, because increases in the number of disabled people employed have not been matched by a decrease in the number of disabled people who are out of work. Under the Government's flagship Disability Confident scheme, it is possible to be a Disability Confident employer without actually employing a single disabled person. Will the Minister now commit to independent evaluation of the effectiveness of that flagship scheme?

Justin Tomlinson: The Government have actually delivered an additional 930,000 job opportunities for disabled people over the past five years, and for the first time more disabled people are in work than out of work. The NAO also welcomed our joint work with the Department of Health and Social Care, particularly in the area of mental health. As for the Disability Confident scheme, I welcome the fact that 49% of the businesses that have signed up have said that it helped them to recruit at least one additional member of staff with either a disability or a long-term health condition.

Young Vulnerable Adults: Universal Credit

4. **Paul Masterton** (East Renfrewshire) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to support young vulnerable adults in receipt of universal credit who live in supported accommodation. [910835]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Will Quince): As announced in August last year, housing costs for all claimants in supported housing, including universal credit claimants, will continue to be met through housing benefit. Maintaining housing benefit for all supported housing reflects the particular needs of these vulnerable groups.

Paul Masterton: I welcome the Minister to his new role. However, is he aware of an issue with the Universal Credit Regulations 2013, which refer only to English county councils as relevant bodies? Supported accommodation provided by Scottish local authorities is not covered, even though those living in identical circumstances in accommodation in England will be covered and so will still be subject to housing benefit. Will he meet me to discuss the matter?

Will Quince: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He is a passionate campaigner, and I recognise that that is a specific constituency issue. There is no difference in how English lower-tier local authorities and Scottish local authorities are treated within the regulations. Amendments to the regulations were introduced in 2014 to extend the protection to other supported housing, which was not previously included and was most likely to be affected by the welfare reforms. However, I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss this complex issue further.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Contrary to what the Minister just said, I have had a small group of constituency cases in which the Department for

Work and Pensions does not seem able to decide whether people in supported accommodation should continue on housing benefit or whether their housing costs should be paid through universal credit. Will he repeat his clarification to make the situation absolutely certain, because the DWP does not seem able to decide in its own cases?

Will Quince: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I am happy to look at those individual cases. He can write to me, or I would be happy to meet him.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Mr Speaker, I could probably ask this question on the back of any question on the Order Paper. Broadband connectivity is very poor in parts of my constituency, which surely flies in the face of the Government's best efforts to ensure that people who deserve benefits get them and that people who want to get back to work have that opportunity. What do the Government intend to do about the problem to help my constituents?

Will Quince: The question is a good one, and we will always look at alternative forms of communication.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Too many young people who are sofa-surfing or, worse, sleeping rough are doing so because of problems due to universal credit delays and sanctions. When will the Government do an assessment of the impact of these delays and sanctions on vulnerable young people?

Will Quince: That is why, in recent Budgets, we have put an additional £1.7 billion into the universal credit system.

Care Leavers: Employment

5. **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): What steps she is taking to increase employment opportunities for care leavers. [910836]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Will Quince): This Government have introduced a £1,000 bursary for those starting an apprenticeship, the care leaver covenant and extended paid internship opportunities across the Government. I will build on the good work of my predecessor and meet employers to see how we can further improve job opportunities for care leavers.

Sir Desmond Swayne: Of what does the Minister's work with Barnardo's consist?

Will Quince: I thank my right hon. Friend for that question. He is a passionate campaigner and supporter of Barnardo's. The Department and Barnardo's are developing a small work experience pilot for care leavers in a number of Barnardo's high street shops. More broadly, the Government aim to use the care leaver covenant to secure 1,000 employment opportunities by September 2021.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Why is the youth obligation failing our young people so badly? More people on the youth obligation are falling out of benefits altogether. They are unable to maintain stability and are unable to go on to seek work.

Will Quince: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, but I gently point out that youth unemployment has halved under this Government.

Vulnerable Claimants: UC and the Legacy System

6. **Giles Watling** (Clacton) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to increase financial support for vulnerable universal credit claimants compared with the legacy system. [910837]

9. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to increase financial support for vulnerable universal credit claimants compared with the legacy system. [910841]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Amber Rudd): Universal credit makes sure that payments reach those who need them most. Around 1 million disabled households will receive, on average, £100 more per month on universal credit than on the system it replaces. As a single system that integrates six legacy benefits, universal credit will enable 700,000 households to access approximately £2.4 billion of welfare that was previously unclaimed.

Giles Watling: I recently wrote to the Secretary of State about one of my constituents in Clacton and the severe disability premium. I set out in the letter that my constituent was moved on to universal credit in October but now says that she is £185 a month worse off. I know the draft Universal Credit (Managed Migration Pilot and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2019 will rectify her situation and provide a lump sum to cover the missed payments since she moved. This is welcome, but when does the Secretary of State expect the regulations to be voted on so they can become law, especially given the real need of some claimants now?

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important matter on behalf of his constituent. As he will be aware, there has recently been a court judgment on the Universal Credit (Transitional Provisions) (SDP Gateway) Amendment Regulations 2019, and we will have to wait to consider it before I will be able to give him an update. I will come back to him on the earliest possible occasion, because I understand the concern his constituent must have on this matter.

Bob Blackman: Without a roof over one's head, it is very difficult to get a job or to claim benefits. Without a job, it is almost impossible to afford rent, so what is my right hon. Friend going to do to ensure that universal credit claimants are helped and assisted not only to get a roof over their heads but to get back into work?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend asks a question about which he has done so much, and I start by paying tribute to his incredible work to help homeless people in the previous Parliament.

We recognise the concerns about homelessness, and I am determined to make sure we help homeless people to rebuild their lives. I recognise the link he so eloquently describes between jobs and homes. As part of the rough sleeping strategy, we will establish a single point of contact for homelessness at every jobcentre. I recently announced that we are increasing awareness of direct

payments to private landlords under universal credit to protect vulnerable claimants' rent. Many private landlords have told us that that will help to ensure that vulnerable people are able to stay in their homes.

21. [910854] **Anna Turley** (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): Since the roll-out of universal credit in Redcar and Cleveland last November, I have seen an increasing flow of people coming to my office in crisis and desperation, such as the new mother who was receiving income support with tax credits but who, on transition to universal credit, has lost nearly £400 a month, including milk tokens. Universal credit is not working and it is hitting the poorest people hardest. When will the right hon. Lady do the right thing and fix this mess before more people are pushed into poverty?

Amber Rudd: I would ask the hon. Lady to work with us on UC and with her local jobcentre. The National Audit Office recently commented that the right thing is to continue with UC. I understand that it is often difficult for individuals who are concerned about moving from the six legacy benefits to one benefit, but my experience from talking to people is that even though they were concerned, once they are on UC they almost exclusively say that it is a better system than the previous one.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Shelter Cymru, a Welsh housing association, has growing concerns that tenants threatened with eviction who are dependent on UC payments are not able to meet the deadlines to settle arrears claims. Will the Minister consider allowing fast-track payments, especially for those facing eviction?

Amber Rudd: I would hope that the possibility of evictions will be reduced by our new plans to allow many more people to have their rent paid directly to housing associations and, increasingly, to private landlords. The hon. Lady raises an interesting point, and she needs to give me an opportunity to look at it; perhaps she would like to come to my surgery in the House of Commons next week or write to me about it.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): Under UC, claimants will be treated as terminally ill only if they are not expected to live for any longer than six months. Owing to medical advances and the nature of some diseases, some people may live much longer than that, so what steps is the Department taking to ensure that those who are terminally ill but with a life expectancy of more than six months will be able to receive support through UC?

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for raising such an important issue. It is so important that when people receive such a devastating diagnosis they are treated with care. So where a claimant has been diagnosed with a terminal illness but has a life expectancy of longer than six months, and they have satisfied the conditions of being treated as having either limited capability for work and work-related activity or limited capability for work, they will be submitted for an immediate work capability assessment referral. I hope that that answer satisfies my hon. Friend.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): One of the clear vulnerabilities for people accessing UC is indebtedness; the Department's figures show that 60% of all new

UC applicants receive an advance payment. We know that people are in such desperate need at that application stage, so will the Government consider making the advance payment assessment the first assessment and any advance payment the first payment of that person's UC claim?

Amber Rudd: I understand where the hon. Gentleman is coming from and his desire to ensure that these people, who are often on very low incomes and in difficult circumstances, are looked after when they first make their application. We believe we have made the right changes to be able to address that, not only with the advance payment, but with the housing benefit run-on that comes after two weeks, which should give them additional funds in order to be able to support themselves. Of course we will also be introducing further run-ons of other benefits from next year. We are improving the ability of people to access money all the time.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): The Government's plans for payments to severe disability premium recipients who lost about £180 a month when they were forced to transfer to UC were found to be discriminatory by the High Court on 3 May. Severely ill and disabled people should not have to fight through the courts for the support they should be entitled to, so will the Government now ensure that people receive payments, as soon as possible, that fully reflect the loss they have suffered?

Amber Rudd: As the hon. Lady will be aware, my hon. Friend the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work took an urgent question on this last week and fully answered the questions that many people in the House had about it. The issue is the access that we put in place through a gateway and whether it is the right amount—the amount that was paid previously or the amount that is paid subsequently. We have decided that we will consider this before replying in full to the Court.

Margaret Greenwood: New research from the Children's Commissioner found that the introduction of UC, the two-child limit and the benefit cap combined will mean that the number of children in families struggling to make ends meet will almost double in some areas. The Trussell Trust distributed nearly 600,000 emergency food parcels to children last year. When will the Government wake up and make tackling child poverty the priority it should be once again?

Amber Rudd: Tackling child poverty and poverty in general is absolutely a priority of this Government, which is why we are so focused on ensuring that UC supports people into work as well as providing the necessary safety net. Last week, I made a speech about ensuring that there is additional support for people when they are on low income and finding new ways of getting better access to different skilled work.

Pensioners on Fixed Incomes

7. **Stephen McPartland** (Stevenage) (Con): How many pensioners on fixed incomes have had their benefits reduced in the last nine years. [910839]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): We spend more than £120 billion on benefits for pensioners, including the state pension, which is now worth £1,600 more than in 2010. Means-tested benefits are adjusted according to changes in circumstances, and it is not possible to say how many pensioners have had an increase or reduction, but it is the case that this Government spend more on pensioners than any Government have ever done before.

Stephen McPartland: More than 750,000 pensioners are in receipt of disability living allowance, and those who turned 65 after April 2013 are being kicked off DLA and are forced to apply for personal independence payments. Many of them are not applying, and of those who do, some are not receiving PIP. Why are we not transferring these pensioners across automatically?

Guy Opperman: It is right to say that 75% of all reassessed claimants receive a PIP award, and nearly 67,000 more people aged 65 or over are on either DLA or PIP than when PIP was first introduced in 2013. I take my hon. Friend's point, though, and the Minister for Disabled People will be happy to meet my hon. Friend. I am sure he would make the point that the Government spend more than £20 billion on DLA and PIP, which is up from £15 billion in 2012.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The inquest for my constituent Joy Worrall took place last Thursday. Joy was 82 years old. It was confirmed that she had committed suicide after the DWP wrongly stopped her benefits and her winter fuel allowance for a period of 15 months before her death. At the time of her death, Joy had £5 in her account. Will the Minister and his right hon. Friend the Secretary of State undertake, for the family, who have asked me to do this for them, an urgent inquiry into why Joy was not paid her pension or her winter fuel allowance for that period? Will he ensure that nobody will ever again commit suicide due to poverty?

Guy Opperman: The right hon. Gentleman rightly raises his constituent's case; I have already spoken to him on two occasions. Our thoughts are with Mrs Worrall's family and friends. The Government apologise unreservedly for the clerical error—it was a clerical error—that led to Mrs Worrall's pensions payment being stopped. We have urgently reviewed our processes and acted so that benefits are no longer linked on our systems, to try to ensure that this does not happen again. There is an internal process review; I undertake to write to the right hon. Gentleman in the short term with what we know and with more detail when the urgent process review has taken place. I am including Mr Worrall in that process.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): It would be helpful if every member of DWP staff were able to get to a Minister if something absurd was happening, rather than getting stuck in bureaucracy.

May I take the Minister back to his £1,600 extra? Will he review House of Commons briefing paper 01457, on the history of frozen overseas pensions for half our overseas pensioners? It is absurd that an agreement with New Zealand in 1948 and a written parliamentary answer in July 1955 should determine that people who leave this country to retire abroad do not get pension

increases in half the countries around the world but do so in the other half. It is time that we had a proper debate and a proper decision, and got past the legalistic approach taken by this Government and previous ones.

Guy Opperman: My hon. Friend raises several points, but unquestionably the situation in relation to overseas pensions has been consistently enforced by every Government of every persuasion since the second world war, and there is no anticipation of changing that. Of course, we will ensure that individual members of DWP staff up and down the country are able to go to their line managers and then to Members of Parliament or individual members of the Government on an ongoing basis.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Pensioner poverty halved under the most recent Labour Government; it has increased by 400,000 under this Government, with one in six pensioners living in poverty. Having broken one manifesto pledge on TV licences, Ministers are now breaking a second one, as mixed-aged couples are no longer being paid pension credit if one of them is under retirement age. How can the Government begin to justify the breaking of a solemn promise, particularly in circumstances where it will cost the couple concerned a staggering £7,320 a year?

Guy Opperman: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the overall trend in the percentage of pensioners in poverty is a dramatic fall over several decades. The rates of material deprivation for pensioners are at a record low at this stage.

On the hon. Gentleman's second point, couples who currently receive pension credit or housing benefit will not be affected by the change, as long as they remain entitled to either benefit. Claimants who would be eligible for pension credit or housing benefit for pensioners under the current rules but have not claimed before 15 May have until 13 August to make a backdated claim.

Jack Dromey: From Carillion to BHS, workers' pensions are being put at risk by bad bosses, sloppy practices and poor enforcement. We have campaigned against that injustice. The defined benefit White Paper has proposed stronger powers and penalties. Ministers have promised to introduce such legislation, which we would support. Will the Government keep at least this promise so that we can send out a joint message that says, "Never again a Philip Green"?

Guy Opperman: We are agreed across the House that there must be action on defined benefits so that we stop what took place with Philip Green, and to address that the Secretary of State has brought forward proposals in the defined benefit White Paper. We propose to bring forward a Bill, when parliamentary time allows, to address the DB White Paper, collective defined contributions, Dashboard and a number of other matters, and I look forward to working with the hon. Gentleman on a cross-party basis to make that happen.

Universal Credit

10. **Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con):** What steps she has taken to tailor universal credit to claimants' needs.

[910842]

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): Under universal credit, our work coaches provide vital one-to-one support to all claimants. Work coaches receive appropriate training to ensure that they can offer support to claimant groups with a variety of characteristics.

Tom Pursglove: As I understand it, the test and learn approach has been crucial to improving the system and getting it right for individual claimants. What key lessons have been learned and what steps have been taken to address them?

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: the test and learn approach has allowed us to adapt the delivery of universal credit to support claimants more fully. Examples include: abolishing the seven-day waiting period; the introduction of 100% advances; the landlord portal; and the flexible support fund being used to cover initial childcare costs.

19. [910852] **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): It is no coincidence that, as universal credit has hit Ealing in the past year, food bank use has doubled. Ealing Churches winter night shelter and Ealing soup kitchen report unprecedented demand, and six deaths have been reported among users of the soup kitchen in the past year. Are the Government not ashamed that Christian charities are having to mop up thanks to the gaps in their policy, and when will they put in place the National Audit Office's recommendation to look into hardship as well as spouting statistics at us?

Alok Sharma: Of course there is a range of reasons why people make use of food banks, but what is important is that the DWP makes sure that we get funds to claimants in a timely manner. The Secretary of State has already talked about the 100% advances and the two-week housing benefit run-on, and, of course, there will be additional run-ons coming on in 2020.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I have constituents in Stirling who would like to take up work or to extend their hours of work but cannot afford to pay the upfront costs of childcare. Can the Minister tell the House what is being done to help parents with upfront costs of childcare?

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend raises a very important point. Under universal credit, up to 85% of childcare costs can be covered and, as the Secretary of State announced earlier this year, we are making the flexible support fund available so that funding can be provided up front to take care of childcare costs, which will help people get into work.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): It is welcome that the Secretary of State has finally responded to pressure and abolished three-year sanctions, but failure to scrap this punishing regime entirely means, as we have heard across the House today, that many people including children will still suffer. Six months is a long time to go without money, so will she go the extra mile and abolish punitive sanctions altogether?

Alok Sharma: I welcome the fact that the hon. Gentleman has, in turn, welcomed what the Secretary of State has announced—it has absolutely been the right thing to do.

Sanctions are not put forward indiscriminately; a very clear procedure takes place, and right now less than 3% of those who are on universal credit and under conditionality are getting a sanction. The average sanction rate is 31 days.

People with Disabilities: Employment

11. **Dr Rosena Allin-Khan** (Tooting) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to support people with disabilities in employment. [910843]

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Justin Tomlinson): We support disabled people in employment through initiatives such as Access to Work, which last year approved support for nearly 34,000 disabled people; Disability Confident, to which almost 12,000 employers are now signed up; and the £55 billion we will spend on benefits this year to support disabled people, including those who are in employment.

Dr Allin-Khan: Sarah Jeffers in Tooting requires a specialist wheelchair owing to her cerebral palsy. The Department for Work and Pensions has told her that she is required to pay £17,000 to fund the replacement of her broken wheelchair. Sarah's job each day is to get disabled people back into work. However, without her wheelchair, she herself cannot work. The DWP has also stated that it cannot provide further funds for her wheelchair because she already receives support for her car from the Motability scheme. Will the Minister meet Sarah and I to discuss this complicated case?

Justin Tomlinson: The hon. Lady has been working brilliantly to support her constituent, who we all want to remain in employment. From the details given to me already, it sounds as if Access to Work would have the potential to help with the funding towards her constituent's wheelchair. I am happy to look into the details of the case as quickly as possible.

Dr Allin-Khan: Will he meet us?

Justin Tomlinson: And I would be very happy to meet the hon. Lady and her constituent.

Dr Allin-Khan: Thank you!

Women in Employment

13. **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): How many women have entered employment in (a) Northamptonshire and (b) England since 2010. [910845]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Amber Rudd): The UK female employment rate has never been higher. The latest figures show that there are over 12 million women in employment in England, which is almost 1.4 million more than in 2010. My hon. Friend asks about his constituency. I can give him the figures for the east midlands, where there are 109,000 more women in work since 2010. The number of women claiming unemployment-related benefits in Northamptonshire has dropped by 28% in the last five years.

Mr Hollobone: Against the background of records levels of employment in the Kettering constituency, will the Secretary of State confirm that, whether someone is male or female, young or old, able or disabled, employment prospects in Kettering have never been brighter?

Amber Rudd: I can confirm that employment prospects have never been brighter in Kettering, particularly with the strong advocacy of such an excellent Member of Parliament.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman can luxuriate in the lather of the praise conferred on him by the Secretary of State. Make sure it is bottled and keep it for a long time, man.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The question of women's employment is very important to me. Is the Secretary of State's Department doing long-term planning? Has she seen the recent research from Sheffield University and King's College London that says that the very areas that voted leave will be the hardest hit post-Brexit, with a 17% to 20% decrease in GDP? Is her Department getting ready for this terrible situation?

Amber Rudd: I would like to reassure the hon. Gentleman that we are ensuring that we are prepared for any situation, whether that is leaving the European Union or changes to the workplace in general. We are working closely with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to ensure that we are prepared for changes to employment structures, and I have been making some comments on that issue recently to ensure that the necessary training is provided in the workplace in the private sector as well as the assistance that we can give.

Poverty

14. **Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP):** What recent assessment she has made of trends in the level of poverty in the UK. [910846]

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Justin Tomlinson): The Government remain committed to tackling poverty so that we can make a lasting difference to long-term outcomes. This Government have lifted 400,000 people out of absolute poverty since 2010, and income inequality has fallen.

Patrick Grady: Very few people in Glasgow North moving on to universal credit feel as if they are moving out of hardship and poverty. As my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) said, 60% of claimants across the country automatically apply for the advance payment, which means that they automatically start receiving less universal credit as the repayments kick in, regardless of their means. How on earth is that helping to tackle hardship or people's ability to manage their money? Will the Department urgently review the advance payment system?

Justin Tomlinson: The hon. Gentleman highlights the importance of ensuring that claimants do not go without any money, which is why we welcomed the improvements to make advance payments more accessible. Let us remember that, under the complicated six legacy benefits,

more than £2.4 billion of benefits were left unclaimed every year, worth an average of £280 per month; that meant that 700,000 of some of the most vulnerable people were missing out on their entitlement.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): A constituent of mine who is a single mother with three children was persuaded to apply for a loan to replace her cooker. The loan company took her details and made an application for universal credit on her behalf, unbeknown to her, and claimed a large advance payment that they told her was the loan. When she reported this to the police and to the DWP and asked them to look into her case, they insisted that it was a valid claim for universal credit. She has had her advance payment, and she is left—pregnant, with three young children—with no access to any money until the end of the month. Please will the Minister or the Secretary of State look into this and make sure that vulnerable people cannot be treated in this way?

Justin Tomlinson: The circumstances just described sound horrendous. We will absolutely look into that as a matter of urgency and report back as quickly as possible.

Unemployment Trends

15. **David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con):** What assessment her Department has made of trends in the level of unemployment in the UK since 2010. [910847]

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): The unemployment rate is at its lowest since the 1970s. We have record employment with more people in work than ever before, and wages have been rising faster than inflation for 13 months in a row.

David T. C. Davies: The latest figures do indeed show that Britain's economy is booming, unlike those of the rest of the European Union. Do the Minister and his colleagues on the ministerial team agree that the prospect of Brexit, with or without a deal, is driving forward the British economy and confidence in it?

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend is of course right to point out that, despite any uncertainty around Brexit, the British economy is in good shape. We do have one of the highest employment rates in the EU, Britain is the No. 1 destination in Europe for foreign direct investment, and the IMF projects that our economy will grow faster than Germany's this year. Unlike the Opposition, Conservative Members believe in supporting businesses and employers.

Ex-offenders: Employment

16. **Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con):** What steps the Government are taking to support ex-offenders into employment. [910848]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Will Quince): The Government know that getting ex-offenders into work is a crucial part of rehabilitation. DWP prison work coaches and jobcentre work coaches provide tailored support to ex-offenders. The DWP works collaboratively with Ministry of Justice

on its education and employment strategy, creating a system where prisoners are on a path to employment as soon as they enter prison.

Mark Menzies: People from all walks of life have to undergo work capability assessments, but ex-offenders have complex needs and often institutionalised experiences. What measures is my hon. Friend taking to ensure that the assessors themselves are taking the appropriate measures?

Will Quince: My hon. Friend raises a good point. Healthcare professionals are subject to a rigorous recruitment process, followed by a comprehensive training programme in disability assessment for physical and mental health conditions, and have to be approved by the Department. They are then required to complete a programme of continuing professional development.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Reoffending rates among those who have served a sentence of less than 12 months are a staggering 64%. The Ministry of Justice has signalled a clear intent to move away from this model of sentencing. What discussions have Ministers had with the Ministry of Justice about ensuring that community-based sentences have substantive support around employment to ensure that reoffending is curbed and sentences deliver meaningful rehabilitation and workplace opportunities?

Will Quince: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. Being relatively new in post, I have not had those conversations as yet, but I do work very closely with my counterpart at the Ministry of Justice and will be having such conversations.

Mr Speaker: We look forward to an update in due course and we are grateful to the hon. Gentleman.

Working People's Income: Universal Credit

18. **Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con):** What steps her Department has taken to increase working people's income through universal credit in this financial year. [910851]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Amber Rudd): That is such a relevant question from my hon. Friend. The key difference between the legacy system and the universal credit system is that work coaches provide such a tailored, individual service, which will give his constituents the additional support they need to make sure they get the best financial reward from their work this year.

Steve Double: Cornwall has a higher than average number of self-employed people—about 60% higher than the English average. Being self-employed and claiming universal credit can present a number of challenges, particularly in the early years when starting out. What specific help are we giving to self-employed people who need to claim universal credit?

Amber Rudd: It is good to hear from my hon. Friend quite how enterprising his county is. I reassure him that work coaches provide additional support to allow those who want to become self-employed to do so via the new

enterprise allowance, which provides mentoring support and additional financial support. We announced in the last Budget a one-year grace period from the minimum income floor for claimants joining universal credit with an existing business. All these efforts try to make sure that his constituents, and other people throughout the country, are able to set up their businesses and work self-employed and get access to universal credit.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I am sure that the Secretary of State has seen the comments made by the Children's Commissioner based on research carried out by Policy in Practice, which found that the number of children in families running a monthly deficit is expected to double in some areas as a result of the introduction of universal credit. Does she accept that this is completely disgraceful, and what is she going to do about it?

Amber Rudd: I reassure the hon. Gentleman that we care enormously about ensuring that there are fewer children in poverty than before. There are fewer children in poverty and fewer families in poverty since 2010. As we know, the best way to help people out of poverty is to ensure that families have work. I am ambitious to ensure that people in low-paid work can get into higher-paid work, which is why I made the announcements last week, ensuring that work coaches can give additional support.

Topical Questions

T2. [910857] **Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab):** If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Amber Rudd): Employment is at a record high, with 32.72 million people in work. Overall, 3.6 million more people have entered work since 2010, which is on average 1,000 people each and every day, and the vast majority of them are in full-time, high-skilled jobs. I know that there are concerns about low-paid work, which I am determined to address. That is why I made announcements last week about new projects working with our excellent work coaches on job switching and with employers in the private sector, to see how we can help individuals across the country to access the better-paid jobs that will help them and their families.

Chris Bryant: If you were to look in the faces of the vast majority of people who have an acquired brain injury, you would not be able to spot anything wrong whatsoever, but inside is somebody who has a massive sense of fatigue. They might have major memory problems or have completely lost their executive function, unable to make proper decisions for themselves, but when the assessor from the DWP comes they will want to please them and will exaggerate the improvement in their condition. Will the Secretary of State guarantee that every single person who, on behalf of the DWP, goes to see somebody with a brain injury fully understands how brain injury can fluctuate?

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that, and I know how much he has done to support people with brain conditions. We are ensuring that we do that through the welfare system, so that those with

acquired brain injury and associated neurological complications receive the right support, but I recognise the issue he raises. We are doing more to ensure that our health assessors have all the necessary training, so that they are able to recognise different challenges, such as acquired brain injury.

T3. [910858] **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): Can the Secretary of State confirm that, since 2010, 650,000 fewer children are growing up in workless households, giving them the benefit of a higher family income and providing them with a role model in the world of work?

Amber Rudd: I can confirm that. We are ambitious to ensure that we continue to take children and families out of poverty, and we acknowledge that there is more to be done. I believe that the best way to do that is to focus on growing a strong economy, with better-paid jobs, and ensuring that those on lower incomes can access those jobs.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Last week, the Secretary of State kept her name in the Tory leadership fray by admitting that social security sanctions can “undermine” the aim to help people into work and reducing the longest sanctions from three years to six months, which we welcome, but will her review of sanctions include the possibility of scrapping them altogether? If not, can she really make a name for herself by explaining how anyone is expected to live on fresh air for six months?

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his cautious welcome of the announcement I made last week about ensuring that there will be no sanctions of more than six months, but, as my hon. Friend the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work has pointed out, sanctions are usually no more than 30 days. I have had many conversations with work coaches, who have personal relationships with individuals, and they reassure me that they use sanctions only as a last resort. The work coaches who provide this tailored support also tell me—I would be interested if the hon. Gentleman has had a different experience—that sanctions are an important part of the tools they have.

T6. [910861] **David T. C. Davies** (Monmouth) (Con): The hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) has fought a very good campaign to have a children’s funeral fund set up in England. She was told that it would happen within 12 months, and it has not. Does my right hon. Friend agree that all of us on the Government Benches have an obligation to fulfil promises that have been made, and that that is a very important one?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Will Quince): I thank my hon. Friend for his question, and I absolutely agree with him. He may know that I campaigned with the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) before taking up my post. I am personally committed to this, the Department is committed to this, the Prime Minister is committed to this and we will deliver it.

T5. [910860] **Wes Streeting** (Ilford North) (Lab): Access to Work is essential to enabling disabled people to get into employment, but does the Minister recognise that delays with processing applications are causing real difficulty for people, but particularly for those who are

self-employed or, indeed, holding elected office in local government. May I ask him to meet me and one of my local councillors, Rosa Gomez, to discuss these particular challenges?

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Justin Tomlinson): I thank the hon. Gentleman. I welcome the fact that record numbers benefited from Access to Work last year—an increase of 13%—but operational improvements still need to be delivered. I would welcome an opportunity to meet the hon. Gentleman to look at some areas of priority for us.

T9. [910864] **Mrs Pauline Latham** (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Will the Minister’s Department close the loophole that allows terminally ill employees to be dismissed by their employers once one reasonable adjustment has been made, which does not allow for any more changes to the employee’s health because it is not covered by the disability legislation?

Justin Tomlinson: I thank my hon. Friend, who has been a real champion in this really important area of work. The Government are fully committed to protecting people with disabilities in the workplace and elsewhere. We welcome the fact that over 1 million employees are now protected by the voluntary employers charter, and this is a real step forward. There is more work to be done, and I welcome the fact that MPs are working together cross-party on this vital issue.

T8. [910863] **Tonia Antoniazzi** (Gower) (Lab): Anne Puckridge, a brave 94-year-old world war two veteran who served in three armed forces, moved to Canada in 2001 and now receives £72.50 a week, instead of £125.95 a week, of the state pension she is owed. She is not alone: 510,000 British pensioners are in the same situation due to the policy that awards an increase only to some overseas pensioners. The pensions Minister has responded on this topic, but will he agree to meet me to discuss Anne’s case and those of the many others struggling as victims of frozen pensions?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): The hon. Lady knows that the policy pursued by this Government is the same policy that was pursued during the 13 years of the Labour Government and all other Governments since the second world war. It is a consistent approach that is absolutely endorsed by the present Government, and I am afraid there are no plans to change the policy at present.

T10. [910865] **Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): As has been mentioned, the proportion of self-employed people in South East Cornwall is higher than the national average, showing that my constituents have an entrepreneurial spirit. What is my right hon. Friend’s Department doing to support self-employed people in Cornwall and across the country to make their businesses an increasing success?

Amber Rudd: It is indeed interesting to hear of this success: the rate of self-employed people in Cornwall is 5.5 percentage points greater than the UK average. In Cornwall, jobcentres are working in partnership with the local authority and with Big Lottery funding to

provide self-employment workshops. In addition, across the UK work coaches are trained to provide additional support to self-employed people. This includes the new enterprise allowance, with which mentors can support claimants to develop their business further.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): Every week in my surgery I hear from people who have been wrongly assessed as being fit for work when they are so clearly disabled. I welcome the Secretary of State's offer to sit down with us individually in the Tea Room, but I fear for all those constituents who do not think of going to their MP and the countless numbers of people out there who do not know how to access help. Surely it is now time for the Secretary of State to admit that the whole process of work capability assessments is flawed and in need of an urgent review.

Amber Rudd: I am aware of this, and a number of Members of Parliament have raised issues with me. As a Member of Parliament myself, I know that we need to do better at making sure that people do not have to wait so long for a tribunal, so I am looking again at what we can do. I am focusing particularly on making sure that the first decision collects more information, and that the mandatory reassessment has more content put into it. We are already looking into this, and I am seeing some extraordinarily good progress being made in making sure that the mandatory reconsideration has more information.

I will come back to the hon. Lady and others with more information in due course. I recognise that we need to do more, and I am on it.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): What progress is being made to support more people in East Renfrewshire into an occupational pension scheme through auto-enrolment?

Guy Opperman: It was a great pleasure to visit Barrhead with my hon. Friend and meet his outstanding credit union, which is one of 1,290 employers providing 5,000 employees across his East Renfrewshire constituency with automatically enrolled pensions. It is a cross-party success story, with 10.4 million people now automatically enrolled.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): If it is true that work is the best route out of poverty, why did food banks in Barnsley give out more than 1.5 million food parcels last year, many to people in work? Why is it that in the Secretary of State's own constituency low income has overtaken benefit delays as the biggest reason people are referred to Hastings food bank?

Amber Rudd: I am aware of the challenges faced by people on low incomes, which is why I am focusing on making sure that there is better access to higher-paid jobs. I am working on a number of projects with jobcentres across the country to see what we can do to get better training for people, setting up projects relating to job switching, and working particularly with employers in the local area so that they can get more involved and recognise that there are opportunities for them to promote people and give better training to those on lower incomes to get them into higher-paid jobs.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): For clarity, can the Minister confirm that the Scottish Government have power under section 24 of the Scotland Act to top up reserve benefits, including for anyone affected by future changes to mixed-age couples' benefits?

Guy Opperman: I thank my hon. Friend for giving me the chance to clarify that sections 24 and 26 of the Scotland Act enable the Scottish Government to make top-up or discretionary payments to any person in Scotland who is in receipt of any reserved UK Government benefit. Put simply, the ball is in the Scottish Government's court.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): A constituent of mine is being passed from pillar to post by the DWP and the Scottish student loans group, both of which say she is entitled to support. She wants to start studying full time in September but, as a single parent, cannot do so without appropriate financial support. Will the Secretary of State or one of her Ministers meet me to see whether we can find a way out of this Catch-22 situation and ensure that my constituent and other single mothers like her, who want to improve their families' opportunities, have the support to do so?

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): Yes, I will of course meet the hon. Lady.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): According to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 1.9 million pensioners now live in poverty, which is a complete disgrace. Given that 46,000 pensioners died prematurely last year, why has the winter fuel allowance not been increased for more than a decade?

Guy Opperman: It is not specifically the case that pensioners are in poverty compared with previous records, which show that pensioner poverty is coming down. I will write to the hon. Lady in respect of her specific point about the winter fuel allowance.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): I listened carefully to the Minister's earlier answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey). It was simply not good enough because in just two days' time changes by this Government to mixed-age couples' benefits will make them ineligible for pension credit and force them both to apply for universal credit, which will result in many losing thousands of pounds. With one in six older people already living in poverty, is it not time that the Minister rethought the changes, or is he determined to increase those shameful levels of poverty?

Guy Opperman: Pension credit is intended to provide long-term support to economically inactive pensioner households. It is not intended to support working-age claimants. This change ensures that people cannot access pensioner benefits before they have reached state pension age, so taxpayer support is directed to where it is needed most.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Earlier this year I met representatives of those who carry out work capability assessments and representatives from the previous disability Minister's office. I was assured

that those carrying out capability assessments were well aware of unseen conditions such as ME, but since then I have been overwhelmed with correspondence saying that people with ME are being declared fit for work. What work is the Minister doing to ensure that the assessors are aware of conditions such as ME?

Justin Tomlinson: There is a real emphasis on ensuring that assessors are best placed to identify how fluctuating health conditions and hidden disabilities will impact on the assessment. I am disappointed to hear what the hon. Lady reports and I would be happy to meet her to discuss it further.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): My caseworkers recently updated me on the thousands and thousands of pounds of public money that they have helped to recover for constituents who are entitled to it, often after many months of delays. I am not satisfied with that; I am angry that this Government Department is keeping so many of my constituents and, I presume, others across the country in poverty for so long when they are owed this money. What is the Government doing about reviewing DWP's shameful record on paying people money to which they are entitled?

Alok Sharma: I would just point out to the hon. Lady that, under the legacy benefits system, there are £2.4 billion of unclaimed benefits. That is changing and being fixed under universal credit. If she has specific cases, she will know that this ministerial team is always happy to talk to Members of Parliament to try to resolve issues. If she wants to talk about specific cases, I would be happy to do so after this session.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): Visits to one of the food banks in my constituency have increased by 20% since the roll-out of universal credit. Trussell Trust referrals have risen by 52% since the roll-out of universal credit. Everything suggests that universal credit is not lifting people out of poverty, but pushing them further into it. Was that the Government's intention with the roll-out of universal credit, because that is what is happening?

Amber Rudd: Universal credit is a vast improvement on the legacy benefits. There were six different benefits and three different places; the system was incredibly difficult to navigate, and there were vast numbers of complaints and problems with it. This new system is easier for people to navigate. Overall, it will be more generous, when it is fully rolled out, than the last system. I believe it is absolutely the right approach in making sure that we support all our constituents.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): The Verify identification function for those claiming universal credit online does not work properly. When the Secretary of State is looking at that, will she also look at the problem that requires couples making a

joint claim to verify their identity in person at the same time, which causes those sharing childcare and working shift patterns difficulty in claiming?

Alok Sharma: I am happy to discuss any issues around Verify with the hon. Gentleman, but, as he will know, there is more than one way for someone to verify their identity. Of course, they can use gov.uk Verify, but they can also use documentary evidence or a biographical test. Those are known, recognised tests, and they are all available in the system.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): The Secretary of State just said that universal credit is better than the legacy system, yet evidence published this weekend shows that twice as many children will be pushed into poverty by universal credit, the two-child limit and the benefit cap. On top of that, universal credit is actually increasing infant mortality—the first time we have seen an increase in 100—

Amber Rudd *indicated dissent.*

Debbie Abrahams: I am sorry, but there is irrefutable evidence on this. Instead of the cursory responses that we have had from the Government, will the Secretary of State commit to review the up-to-date evidence and get back to this House with some detailed explanations of how she is going to stop these things?

Amber Rudd: I totally reject the hon. Lady's approach to this. Universal credit is a welfare benefit system that, overall, is more generous and much more straightforward than the previous system. I wonder whether she has talked to any Members of Parliament who had the experience of having to navigate the six legacy benefits, of three different places to go to, and of annual tax credits. The complications were totally out of proportion compared with the challenges that people sometimes encounter now. Above all, there was the difficulty people had with the 16-hour threshold, where they could not take up new work if they were on a certain amount of benefits. We have reformed the system so that it works for people—it works for families, and it works for people trying to better themselves and get better access to work.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Centrepoint's evidence to the DWP Committee showed that 96% of the young people it surveyed were not offered a traineeship or work placement if they were still on the youth obligation for six months. Does the Minister think it is worth having a closer look at what more could be done to improve the youth obligation?

Alok Sharma: I share the hon. Lady's desire to make sure the youth obligation support programme works properly. We are looking at extracting information from the system, and I hope shortly to come and report on the findings from that.

Tessa Jowell Brain Cancer Mission

3.38 pm

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): I would like to update the House on the progress we have made in tackling brain cancer, including on a new innovation that is now available across England.

For far too long, tackling brain cancer has been put in the “too difficult” box, and we are determined to change that. I want to pay tribute to the Petitions Committee, which did so much work on this; my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), who picked up the subject in Government as Life Sciences Minister; my hon. Friend the Member for Castle Point (Rebecca Harris), the former chair of the all-party parliamentary group on brain tumours, which brought parliamentarians together; my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas), the current chair of the APPG; and, of course, Baroness Tessa Jowell, who campaigned passionately and tirelessly while battling the illness herself, and who, sadly, passed away a year ago.

Brain cancer is the most common cause of cancer-related deaths in children and young people under 19. Baroness Jowell called for all patients to benefit from 5-aminolevulinic acid, or “pink drink” as it is otherwise known: a dye that makes cancerous cells glow under ultraviolet light, thereby making it easier for surgeons to target the right areas. Trials have shown that, when the dye is used, surgeons can successfully remove a whole tumour in 70% of cases, compared to 30% of those without.

I am pleased to inform the House that we have now rolled out this ground-breaking treatment aid across England, with the potential to save the lives of 2,000 patients every year. That is part of the £33.9 billion extra that we are putting into the NHS and the NHS long-term plan. This procedure will now be expanded to every neurological centre in England. That is a fitting testament to Tessa Jowell’s memory.

It is worth pausing for a moment to remember the courageous words that Tessa Jowell used to urge us to rise above our differences. She said that this

“is not about politics but about patients and the community of carers who love and support them. It is...about the NHS but it is not just about money. It is about the power of kindness”.—[*Official Report, House of Lords, 25 January 2018; Vol. 788, c. 1169.*]

That represents the very best of our democracy and of our Parliament. On behalf of all those who have died of brain cancer, all those—children and adults alike—who have campaigned, and all those seeking to do research, of which there is more to come in future, we are acting.

I want to mention three further areas in detail. The first is research. In the past, not enough research was done into the causes of and treatments for brain cancer. In the last year, the Government have made an unprecedented £40 million available to fund cutting-edge research of new treatments and drugs through the National Institute for Health Research. That will build on our outstanding reputation for neuroscience and oncology research, and increase the quality, quantity and diversity of brain cancer research. That funding was further enhanced by Cancer Research UK committing an

additional £25 million to support brain tumour research. The size of those pledges will cement the UK’s position as a leading global centre.

Secondly, on our NHS cancer workforce, the number of specialist cancer staff in the NHS is set to grow as we put the £33.9 billion into the NHS over the next five years. Health Education England’s cancer workforce plan, and our upcoming NHS people plan, will set out in detail the steps we are taking to recruit a world-class cancer workforce. We made available an additional £8.6 million in the cancer workforce last year, and we aim to have 300 more radiographers start training by 2021.

Finally, on empowering patients, we have worked closely with the Tessa Jowell Brain Cancer Mission, Jess Mills and others to ensure patients are at the heart of all these efforts. The mission brings together Government, the NHS, researchers, pharmaceutical companies and patients to ensure that data is shared and disseminated properly so that more patients in the UK and around the world can benefit from what is learnt. Due to the complexity of brain cancer, we must provide joined-up care that meets each patient’s unique needs. The NHS is focused on improving care for brain cancer patients to ensure they have access to dedicated out-patient clinics and consultations, wherever they live.

I hope the whole House will recognise the important progress made over the past year in rising to the challenge set by Baroness Jowell and the families of those who have lost loved ones to brain cancer. That progress has been possible only through the collective effort of patients, the NHS, charities and industry. That work is and will continue to be collaborative.

In her final speech in the other place last January, Tessa Jowell said:

“I am not afraid. I am fearful that this new and important approach may be put into the ‘too difficult’ box, but I also have such great hope.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords, 25 January 2018; Vol. 788, c. 1170.*]

That hope was an inspiration to us all. We will rise to the challenge that she left us. We must not waiver in that task. I commend this statement to the House.

3.39 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Secretary of State for an advance copy of his statement. We warmly welcome today’s announcement. His tribute to our much-missed friend and colleague was moving and powerful. It is an extraordinary testament to Tessa’s bravery that in the final harrowing months of her life, faced with a highly aggressive and very-difficult-to-treat cancer, and in full knowledge of the life expectancy associated with such a devastating cancer, Tessa led from the front to campaign for better brain cancer treatment for others. She spoke with extraordinary courage in the Lords, she brought the then Secretary of State and me together, and she convinced Ministers to shift policy, not by garnering sympathy, understandable though that approach would have been, but by persuasion based on facts and policy argument. It was typical Tessa.

Tessa would have been delighted by the Government’s announcement—some 2,000 brain cancer patients a year will now benefit from the “pink drink” solution—but she would be keen to go further still. Almost 11,000 people

[Jonathan Ashworth]

are diagnosed each year with a primary brain tumour, including 500 children and young people, which is 30 people every day, and more than 5,000 people lose their lives to a brain tumour each year. Brain tumours reduce life expectancy by around 20 years, which is the highest of any cancer, and are the largest cause of preventable blindness in children.

We live in hope of dramatic improvements, but further research is needed, given that less than 2% of the £500 million spent on cancer research is dedicated to brain tumours. I welcome the Secretary of State's commitments on research, but does he agree that we also desperately need more involvement in clinical trials? The number of brain cancer patients taking part in clinical trials is less than half the average across all cancers. How will the Government encourage more trials and data sharing?

Finally, we know that the NHS remains under considerable strain generally. The 93% target for a two-week wait from GP urgent referral to first consultant appointment was not met once last year. Neurosurgery is no exception. In March 2019, the 18-week completion target for referral to treatment pathways stood at 81.3% for neurosurgery—5% lower than the average for all specialties—which made neurosurgery the worst performing specialty. This is a question of both resourcing and staffing. I know the Secretary of State has his answer on revenue resourcing—we disagree, but we will leave our political arguments for another day—but on workforce there are vacancies for more than 400 specialist cancer nurses, chemotherapy nurses and palliative care nurses, and there are diagnostic workforce vacancies too.

Meanwhile, the staff who are there are reliant on outdated equipment, and we have among the lowest numbers of MRI and CT scanners in the world. Failing to diagnose early is worse for the patient and more costly for the NHS, so will the Secretary of State update us on when we can expect Dido Harding's workforce plan? Can he reassure us that the cancer workforce will be a key part of that plan? On equipment and MRI scanners, can he guarantee that the NHS will see increased capital investment budgets in the spending review so that it can upgrade existing equipment and increase the number of MRI and CT scanners?

Overall, however, we welcome today's announcement. It is a fitting tribute to our friend Tessa Jowell, and like Tessa herself will touch the lives of so many.

Matt Hancock: The cross-party tone of this discussion demonstrates what we can achieve when we work together. This is not just about Baroness Jowell, who did so much and was so brave in how she made her case—in the last few months in particular, but before that as well. It is about the many others who have worked together, including the many who were inspired by her words to work harder on brain cancer.

In truth, the amount of research money going into brain cancer—and therefore the number of clinical trials, which the hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) mentioned—was too low. There were so few clinical trials because research overall was too low. That is partly because brain cancer is a very difficult disease to treat. Just because it is difficult, however, does not mean we should not try, so we have increased the

amount of research money, and I am determined to see an increase in the number of clinical trials and to make sure that the data from them is properly used and openly disseminated.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the cancer workforce. As I mentioned, of course we will need more people to treat cancer. That is partly what the £33.9 billion extra is all about.

The hon. Gentleman is also right to say that we need more early diagnosis. The truth is that, while the NHS is very good at treating cancer once it has been spotted—indeed, it is one of the best in the world—our cancer survival rates in this country need to improve through early diagnosis. That means giving more support to community services, strengthening primary care and ensuring that we have the diagnostic tools that he mentioned. We have more MRI scanners and more Linux machines for treatment purposes, but of course there is always more that we can do.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): During my time as the cancer Minister, I had the pleasure of meeting Tessa. You will recall, Mr Speaker, a very special debate that we had in the Chamber last April, when Tessa was back in the House of Commons, sitting in the Under-Gallery with her lovely family and listening to the debate.

Obviously I welcome the roll-out of 5-aminolevulinic acid—5-ALA—which allows surgeons to tackle some of the most difficult cases while ensuring that the healthy cells remain untouched. Does the Secretary of State agree that the exciting new frontier in cancer treatment is not only allowing people to survive it—more people are doing that for longer than ever before—but enabling them to live really well after treatment? It is no good surviving cancer if it is a rubbish time afterwards. Is that not the real promise of this?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend is a former colleague and dependable Minister, and I regret not having mentioned the work that he did in my opening remarks. The hon. Member for Leicester South said that he and my predecessor as Secretary of State had worked together on this issue, but the person who did the hard yards was my hon. Friend, and I pay tribute to him.

My hon. Friend is completely right: it is not just about surviving cancer, but about living well both with and after it. We must make sure that we learn that lesson and put the needs of patients at the heart of the process—not only their medical needs, but their non-medical and social needs. One of the humorous and amusing things that Tessa would talk about was the importance of the shape of the wig and the colour of the headscarf to a person who is going through chemotherapy, and that should be at the heart of treatment.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I welcome the statement, and thank the Secretary of State for giving me advance sight of it. I join Members on both sides of the House in remembering Dame Tessa Jowell, her lifetime of public service and, of course, her brave campaigning during the final months of her life.

This research funding is very welcome, and it was good to see Edinburgh University's Dr Steven Pollard involved with the Tessa Jowell mission. Will the Secretary of State expand on what he said about research spending

being UK-wide, and on the implications of that? Will he also say something about how his Department has worked with the Scottish Government in this important area?

I am sure that the Secretary of State is aware of the statement made this morning by Medac, which manufactures the “pink drink”, and its concerns about medical supplies post Brexit. Will he update the House on the work that he is doing to ensure the smooth continuing supply of that very important medicine?

Matt Hancock: It shows the power of bringing people together that we can agree with the Scottish National party’s Front Bencher on the importance of this agenda. I am delighted that the research spans the whole UK. The National Institute for Health Care Reform is reserved, and health research takes place throughout the country, and indeed internationally—throughout Europe and the world as a whole. Much of the best research is global, and that must continue. I shall be happy to work with colleagues in the SNP Government to further this mission and this end. Innovations of this kind are of course available to the NHS in Scotland, but the decision on whether to roll them out there will be a matter for Scottish Ministers, as that element is devolved.

As for the question of Brexit, I have absolutely no doubt that whatever form Brexit takes, we will do everything we can to ensure the continued and unhindered flow of medicines. We did an enormous amount of work to ensure that was the case ahead of 29 March. I have seen the comments the hon. Gentleman mentions from the company that supplies this drug. I see absolutely no reason to think that Brexit should have any impact at all on the ability to use this cutting-edge drug to save people’s lives.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): First, may I thank everyone in Taunton Deane who was involved in raising money for the new MRI scanner? It was a huge local team effort. May I also welcome today’s announcement and the use of this dye, which will potentially save 2,000 patient lives and which is to be rolled out into all those neurological centres? That is wonderful news and demonstrates that where there is a will in this place there usually is a way.

I also want to highlight the following. Does the Secretary of State agree that when we are talking about this issue, we should also remember cancers that spread from other parts of the body to the brain—it is called metastasis? This is a very complex area and it needs more input in just the way that we have looked at this issue. Does the Secretary of State agree that we ought to look at that in more detail? Unfortunately, I speak about this from experience, with a close family member being involved.

Matt Hancock: I know about my hon. Friend’s, sadly, personal experience with this horrible disease and pay tribute to her for speaking up because it is not easy. She is right to raise another frontier that we must cross, and I am fully open to research bids in this area to work not just on brain cancer but on brain cancer that is a secondary cancer, because that is a very important area to get right, too.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I welcome the announcement today and the progress made over the past year since Tessa so sadly passed away.

I also welcome the announcement as someone who lost both my paternal grandparents to brain cancer. I want to pay tribute in particular to Tessa’s daughter, Jess Mills, who has worked with unswerving determination and energy to drive forward progress in Tessa’s name over the past year. May I say on behalf of my constituents in Dulwich and West Norwood, who Tessa represented for 23 years, how proud we are of her powerful legacy on brain cancer and the difference her work will make for thousands of people for generations to come? Throughout the whole of Tessa’s 23 years in Parliament, she was a tireless champion of King’s College hospital, which is currently in a very challenged financial position. May I encourage the Secretary of State in continuing his commitment to £33.9 billion of additional funding to look at how this national support may also be marshalled to secure Tessa’s legacy at local level?

Matt Hancock: Baroness Jowell’s successor in her parliamentary seat speaks very powerfully and the hon. Lady is right to highlight the role of King’s in this research. King’s has been developing this treatment for years, and as a result of its work, it can now be rolled out nationally. It is a hospital that, as the hon. Lady says, needs to address some of its local challenges, but we should not take away from some of the globally cutting-edge work that it does and the positive impact it has: potentially 2,000 people alive each year who would otherwise die. That is testament to the importance of this research.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): The first person I know who had a brain tumour and cancer and died was John Davies, who had been the MP for Knutsford shortly after I was first elected.

The NHS website is very good about the possible symptoms of brain tumours. May I strongly recommend that everyone who thinks they may have a worry consult their medical practitioners so that either they can be cleared or they can get early treatment, and is it not right that early diagnosis is the best way forward for those who may have the condition?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about that: early diagnosis is critical to improving the proportion of people who survive cancers, because of course it is easier to treat people if diagnosis is early. We are reviewing all cancer screening programmes because they are not working well enough; the National Audit Office set that out in some detail recently, and we accept those findings. We want to get early diagnosis and screening right, and it is a top priority for the new Public Health Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy), to make sure we do so that more people can survive.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): As the Secretary of State said, last weekend marked a year since the death of Tessa Jowell. We all heard the moving interview that Jess did at the weekend, which showed the commitment that she still has for taking on this issue and fighting for her mother’s legacy. On 19 April last year, we were in this place for a Back-Bench debate, with Tessa sitting in the Under-Gallery. I had sponsored the debate, alongside the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire), and I should also like to thank you, Mr Speaker, for helping us at that time. We heard many moving speeches, and we were all glad to be there to pay our tributes to Tessa.

[Sarah Jones]

I am privileged to sit on the board of the Tessa Jowell Brain Cancer Mission, and I want to thank the Department of Health and Social Care for its support and for the roll-out of the pink drink that we have all been talking about. That is one of the many important initiatives that the mission has prioritised. Will the Secretary of State give us his assurance that the Department will provide the same amount of support and commitment to the other initiatives that we have identified? He has talked about some of them. They include the national roll-out of the integrated multidisciplinary care model, support for the first adaptive trial for brain cancer and the Tessa Jowell fellowship programme for oncologists. The NHS is one of the few care systems in the developed world that does not train or employ experts in brain tumour treatment. Rather, brain tumour patients are typically cared for by colleges and radiologists who predominantly treat other cancers. This strategic programme is really important, as it will revolutionise the skills in the health service to tackle this difficult problem.

Finally, I worked for Tessa Jowell, and I also worked for Mo Mowlam. They were two of the most powerful, wonderful women in this House, and they both had brain tumours. We need to find a faster cure, to ensure that people with brain tumours live well for longer so that women like those two amazing parliamentarians can continue to contribute for much longer. I thank the Secretary of State for the work that he has done, and I ask him to carry on doing it.

Matt Hancock: The hon. Lady expresses the thoughts the whole House. She, too, has done an awful lot. I should of course have mentioned my right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire), who used his enforced sabbatical from the Cabinet due to cancer to push this agenda. I add his name to the tributes. It is absolutely true that campaigners on this subject who have had personal experience of brain cancer either themselves or in their loved ones and friends, as I have, feel very strongly about it, and this is absolutely not the end of the drive. I wanted to update the House on what we have done in a year, but there is still plenty more to do.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Melanoma is one of the cancers that can metastasise into the brain, because it can travel either through the blood or through the lymphatic system. We also know that, although it can kill, especially in the circumstances we are talking about, it is very preventable. I just wonder whether there is not considerably more that the Government could do to ensure that every child covers up in the sun and that more people use sunscreen, perhaps by taking VAT off sunscreen that is higher than SPF30 or SPF50. We must also ensure that we have enough dermatologists in this country to check moles and other growths that people might have on their bodies.

Matt Hancock: Yes, I agree with all that. Of course, protection from too much exposure to the sun is part of the prevention agenda in healthcare, as well as being an absolutely sensible thing to do.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Like others, I want to congratulate the Government and everyone involved in the Tessa Jowell Brain Cancer Mission on making what is a painful anniversary for Tessa's friends

and family a bit more bearable for knowing that her vigour and energy are still very much alive and kicking through the mission. This is also a painful time of year for my constituents, Scott and Yang Lau, who lost their young daughter Kaleigh to a diffuse intrinsic pontine glioma, a particularly pernicious brain tumour that largely affects children. They are working with Jess Mills on fighting that particular form of brain tumour. What more can the Department of Health do, generally and specifically through the Tessa Jowell Brain Cancer Mission, to focus on childhood brain tumours, particularly rare tumours such as DIPG, so that other families do not have to suffer what my constituents and others have had to go through?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that, and I send my condolences to his constituents. The truth is that brain cancer is one of the most, if not the most, predominant cancers among children. Although it is relatively rare among all cancers, that is not true among children. Thousands of people still die from brain cancer, which is why it was right that Parliament and Tessa Jowell came together to highlight the lack of research in the area—something that we are determined to put right.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): May I also thank the Government for today's statement? I was heartened by the answer given to the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), because early diagnosis is incredibly important. There are certain things that people can recognise, such as the effect on vision. Ironing a pinstripe shirt, for example, can lead to an odd effect, which is an early sign. Early screening in built-up areas and cities is quite easy, but it is harder in rural areas, so I make a plea for the Government to consider sparsely populated regions such as mine.

Matt Hancock: The hon. Gentleman is right that screening is vital. One of the reasons why we are looking at the whole screening programme is that the use of technology has not been nearly good enough. For many people, but not all, that can be valuable, especially in rural areas. Technology is not only used for the screening itself, but for notification and for ensuring that we get to everybody who needs to be reached. Professor Sir Mike Richards is undertaking the review of all screening, and I would be happy to put Sir Mike in contact with the hon. Gentleman to ensure that the review properly considers the impact of rurality on the need to get screening to everybody who needs it.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Secretary of State, the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth), and all colleagues for both the content and the spirit of the exchanges that have just taken place. Let us hope that Tessa's husband David and children Jess, who has rightly been referred to, and Matthew will derive some succour from knowledge of the continuing interest in Tessa's passionate crusade that exists in the House. We know in our heart of hearts that that continued interest will endure for as long as is necessary, both because of the supreme importance of the cause and because we are united across the House in this. We have huge respect for the courage, stoicism and unrelenting determination to make progress on this subject that Tessa Jowell, in extreme adversity, exhibited at all times.

Domestic Abuse

4.8 pm

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): Mr Speaker, I echo your words in relation to Tessa Jowell's contribution in this place and the debate that we were privileged to be part of just a year ago. It is good to see the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) in her place. We are in different places now, but the debate was a shared endeavour, and we were both privileged to be part of that special debate, when Tessa was here, and to champion the cause so well and so effectively.

With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on a new sustainable approach to delivering support for victims of domestic abuse and their children in accommodation-based services across England.

Domestic abuse is a devastating crime experienced by more than 2 million adults a year, with women twice as likely to be victims. That is completely unacceptable, and we have much more to do if we are to reach a point where no family lives with the threat of domestic abuse. Domestic abuse can take many forms and affects the young and old, male and female, but whoever the victim is, those fleeing abuse must have somewhere safe to go.

Just last year we announced £22 million to provide over 2,200 new beds in refuges and other safe accommodation, supporting more than 25,000 survivors with a safe space to rebuild their lives, but I know much more must be done to ensure a consistent approach across the country and to ensure that survivors have a safer future.

At the 2017 general election, the Prime Minister made a manifesto commitment to review funding for refuges. The violence against women and girls strategy for 2016 to 2020 set out our ambition to provide support for refuges and other accommodation-based services, helping local areas to ensure that no victim is turned away from the support they require at the time of need.

We also committed to reviewing the locally led approach to commissioning domestic abuse services. To meet that commitment, in January 2018 we began a full review of the funding and commissioning of domestic abuse services in England. We have worked closely with sector partners, drawing on their data, expertise and knowledge. This review complements wider Government work on tackling this devastating crime and supporting victims, including our new draft Domestic Abuse Bill.

Through the course of the review we have engaged with specialist domestic abuse service providers and their representative bodies, local authorities, police and crime commissioners and other organisations that support victims to understand fully both the challenges in commissioning and delivering these vital services and the positive features of the current system. We are grateful for their engagement and extensive input into our work.

We know there are dedicated professionals delivering support to victims and their children in accommodation-based services across England. This support helps victims move from danger and abuse to safety and independence, and their children to regain their childhoods. That includes the vital work of service managers and support staff, counsellors, outreach workers and play therapists, and I pay tribute to their work.

However, we also know that we need to do more to ensure that all victims and their children can access support at the right time, underpinned by a sustainable approach to provision. We understand that victims and their children will live in a variety of different forms of safe accommodation and will need support to stay safe and rebuild their lives in all of them. That includes outreach support to remain safe in properties with enhanced security measures, in emergency or temporary accommodation, in dispersed accommodation and in refuges.

Although refuges play a critical role in supporting victims at high risk of serious harm, we have deliberately kept our definition of accommodation-based services wide to include the full range of safe accommodation in which victims and their children may require support. That will help local areas to meet the support needs of diverse groups of victims and their children, and those at lower and medium risk, to prevent their needs from escalating.

Having reviewed the current system and listened to the views of expert stakeholders, today I am proposing new local authority-led arrangements for delivering support to victims of domestic abuse and their children in accommodation-based services in England. The proposals will place a new statutory duty on upper-tier local authorities—county councils, metropolitan and unitary authorities, and the Greater London Authority—to convene a local partnership board for domestic abuse accommodation support services.

The local partnership boards should include representation from police and crime commissioners, health bodies, children's services and housing providers, along with specialist domestic abuse service providers. The boards will be required to assess need for domestic abuse services; develop domestic abuse strategies; commission services to meet the support needs of victims and their children; and report progress to my Department.

In two-tier areas, lower-tier local authorities—city, district and borough councils and, in this instance, London boroughs—will have a significant role to play in contributing to needs assessments, strategy development, service commissioning and reporting on progress. Those areas will be subject to a statutory duty to co-operate with the local partnership board.

To support local authorities and local partnership boards to meet these new requirements, I am proposing that we should produce new statutory guidance, making our expectations clear. This new approach will be backed by funding from the Government to ensure that services are put on a sustainable, long-term footing; it will be determined through the forthcoming spending review and informed by the consultation.

I want to safeguard provision of support; to clarify expectations of governance and accountability; to ensure needs assessments are undertaken; and to enhance our understanding of service provision across England, through monitoring and reporting. I also want to ensure that the diverse needs of all victims and their children are met, including those with protected characteristics. This is part of a wider Government drive to tackle domestic abuse and end this pernicious crime for good. Our Domestic Abuse Bill, published in January, is the most comprehensive package ever to tackle domestic abuse. We have also brought in a new offence to capture coercive and controlling behaviour, and new domestic

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abuse protection orders will allow the police and courts to intervene earlier. It is our duty to ensure that victims and survivors can receive help by providing the support they need to transform their lives and move to safety and independence.

Through this consultation, I want to hear views on our proposals from victims and survivors, service providers, local authorities, housing providers and other public agencies, as well as professionals who support victims and children every day. I believe that this announcement today will provide much-needed help to ensure that more victims and their families better overcome their experiences, and move on to live full and independent lives. The consultation will run from today until 2 August. A copy of the consultation document will be placed in the House Library, and I commend this statement to the House.

4.16 pm

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. Today's announcement is, of course, welcome. It is a victory for the campaigners who have fought for 10 years for a legal duty to support survivors of domestic violence. It is a victory for charities such as Women's Aid; for campaigners such as the new Victims' Commissioner, Vera Baird; and for Members of this House such as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) and my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips). They deserve huge credit, as do many other Members in this House, on both sides, who have fought for this change. This is a victory for the hard work of current and former Front-Bench colleagues, particularly my hon. Friends the Members for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) and for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn). Most importantly, it is a victory for survivors of domestic abuse, who show such unimaginable strength.

There are, however, questions still to answer, which will determine whether this policy is going to work. First and most importantly, unless we provide the funding to make it work, we are setting local authorities up to fail. The Secretary of State has estimated today that the new legal duty could cost £90 million. Given that councils in England are facing an overall funding gap of £8 billion by 2025 and that Home Office figures estimate that domestic abuse costs the economy £66 billion in just one year, does the Secretary of State really think that that funding will be enough?

The Local Government Association has today raised concerns that the policy is focused exclusively on the crisis-point intervention, rather than early intervention; we need to ensure that the funding does not drain from these equally important areas to pay for this policy. Will the Secretary of State confirm that the funding will be ring-fenced? We do not know when the spending review will be; we may not know the outcome of the spending review until this time next year. Why is the Secretary of State risking this policy being kicked into the long grass by hooking it to the spending review? When will we know how much money there will be to spend?

We know that there are issues with support provided to victims only in their local area, despite two thirds of women fleeing to a refuge further afield. Can the Secretary

of State confirm that women will be supported wherever they are from? The same must apply in respect of women with no recourse to public funds and those with complex needs, as such women struggle to access beds and are overrepresented among women murdered. Specialised support services such as those for black, Asian and minority ethnic women and for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people are hugely important but have suffered significant cuts, with one expert recently saying that we have lost 50% of all specialist BAME refuge services. It is unclear how these proposals will impact specialist services, so can the Secretary of State provide some reassurance?

The background to this announcement is a crisis in support for victims of domestic abuse and deep cuts to investment in genuinely affordable homes. The Government are responding to a crisis that their own policies have partly created. A 60% cut in Government funding for local authorities between 2010 and 2020 has stretched our councils to the limit. Services have been cut back to the legal minimum and core services have deteriorated in quality. Women's Aid has found that many organisations are running an area of their services without dedicated funding from local authorities, and some receive no support from local authorities at all. That has led to a fifth of refuges closing since 2010, and more than 150 women a day are now being turned away from refuges.

The lack of genuinely affordable housing has left domestic violence victims facing homelessness and squalid housing. This is because last year the number of homes built for social rent fell to fewer than 6,500, compared with almost 40,000 in 2010. The Government's record on this issue is not good. Attempts to dismantle the funding stream for refuges through housing benefit were shelved last year only after tireless campaigning from women's organisations.

Although many men are victims of domestic abuse, the majority are women, and women are disproportionately affected by austerity, bearing the brunt of cuts in support services. Ten years of austerity have had a savage impact on BAME women and single mothers in particular. By 2020, the income of single mothers will have fallen by 18%, and black and Asian households will see average drops in living standards of 19.2% and 20% respectively, according to analysis by Amnesty International.

The Prime Minister said today:

"Whoever you are, wherever you live and whatever the abuse you face, you will have access to the services you need to be safe." That it is a commitment that cannot be made lightly. There is a now a clear moral duty on the Government to see this through—not just for the sake of keeping the promises that have been made, and not just for the sake of the campaigners and survivors who have pushed for this change for years, but for the sake of those people who are trapped right now in abusive relationships. If we promise them safety and do not deliver it, we will not deserve forgiveness. We welcome today's announcement, but we will hold the Government's feet to fire until this commitment becomes a reality.

James Brokenshire: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments and her support for today's announcement. I agree with her on that sense of moral duty—that sense of moral purpose—to those who are in abusive relationships that underlines all this work. She will know the figure that is used: some 2 million people each year suffer

some form of domestic abuse. That is unacceptable and intolerable, and it is right that we do much more, which is why the Prime Minister made her comments today. Indeed, she has an enduring commitment to making a difference in this important policy area.

I join the hon. Lady in paying tribute to all those who have campaigned on this issue, not only across the House but throughout the country. So many voluntary organisations—those very much at the frontline—have really made the difference and I pay tribute to their work, as well as to the quiet, dignified determination of so many survivors of domestic abuse, who have really underlined that sense of why we need to do more.

The hon. Lady highlighted the issue of funding for local government and the interrelationship with the spending review. We have indicated that there will be a spending review later this year because the current spending review period ends at the end of this financial year. It is therefore right that we look at the funding position in that context but, as I have underlined, it is a question of ensuring that local government receives the appropriate financial support, given that a new and additional requirement is being placed on local government as a consequence of this proposal. That is why I said what I did about the need to ensure that this issue is properly addressed through the spending review and that it is informed by the consultation itself.

In the media this morning, I gave some estimates of what we anticipate the broad annual cost may be—a round figure of around £90 million is our current estimate—but I want that to be informed by the consultation and, indeed, to be taken into the spending review, so that we can get the right level of support. That sense of co-operation between areas is also within the duty that we anticipate, by which I mean not looking at this in isolation. The hon. Lady makes a very good and important point about being able to support people from wherever they come. Indeed, that is, in part, what this variability of service, which we want to address, is all about, and what the statutory duty is very firmly intended to underpin.

As I said in my statement, we announced £22 million of additional support for the sector last November. I pay tribute to the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mrs Wheeler), who has had to leave her place on the Front Bench to attend a debate in Westminster Hall, for her incredible support and leadership in this regard. Obviously, local authorities are seeing a real-terms increase in spending power over this coming year.

I know that we need to do more. We need to ensure that specialist support reflects the protected characteristics—the needs of BAME, LGBT and other communities. There is a need to recognise some of the different types of outreach services that will be needed to give effect to that. The hon. Lady sets that challenge, and I respect and acknowledge her intent to ensure that this Government are properly scrutinised and challenged to see that we follow through. I know that that view is shared across Government. Colleagues with different responsibilities are determined to work together to make that difference.

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): I join Women's Aid and Safelives in welcoming today's announcement. I also pay tribute to the absolutely inspirational Maggie Parks from Women's Centre Cornwall and thank the refuges in Truro that provide such needed

refuge for both men and women. This very important announcement today builds on a landmark domestic violence Bill. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is just as important to commission high-quality services for victims and their children living in their own homes as it is for those living in refuges? Alongside that, we must make sure that there is access to specially trained and qualified mental health professionals.

James Brokenshire: I pay tribute to the work of my hon. Friend. I know that, in some of her previous ministerial work, she was very passionate in advocating for and supporting greater focus on this matter and ensuring that some of these issues in relation to the criminal justice system were followed through. I pay tribute to Maggie Parks and the Women's Centre Cornwall to which she refers. Yes, of course, the domestic abuse Bill will be really important. The commissioning of services is absolutely critical. She makes the right point, which others have made too, that it is important that we get the support right in refuges, but it goes much wider than that, which is why we have framed the consultation in the way that we have.

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab): I commend the statement of the Secretary of State. In particular, I commend the Minister for Women—I do not take anything away from the Secretary of State for making this statement today—for tirelessly pushing for this. I thank her for that.

Ever since the first women's refuge—Chiswick Women's Aid—was created in 1971 by Erin Pizzey, women's refuges have been precarious financially. They have existed hand to mouth from year to year, never knowing what their financial situation will be. The reason why this is a very important statement and an important moment today is that it marks the point at which it is recognised that this is not just an optional issue, dependent on locality, but actually a national public policy imperative. We should recognise the really serious step forward that has been made.

I join other colleagues, including my hon. Friend the shadow Minister, in paying tribute to all those people around the country—including in the refuge movement but more widely in the women's movement—who have pushed for this moment, and also to women across the House who have provided the support that has led to this statement. Will the Secretary of State explain to the Chancellor that we are very supportive of this statement, and that we will expect the Government to put their money where their mouth is?

As my hon. Friend the shadow Minister said, 150 women a day have been turned away from refuges because of the lack of available resources. We do not want the Government to rob Peter to pay Paula; we want the money to be there. The Secretary of State has said that he is going consult, and that is absolutely right, but he does not need to consult me any further because I can tell him what my view is: this is a thoroughly good thing. Will he get on with it and ensure that it is fully funded?

James Brokenshire: I thank the right hon. and learned Lady for her comments and for her leadership as one of the key Members across the House who have championed the issue for so many years. I recognise her contribution in getting to the place at which we have arrived today. She is right to say that this is a national public policy

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issue, and that we need to deal with variability to ensure a national standard that we seek to reach through this new statutory duty—hence, the consultation. She clearly and plainly makes the point that we need to ensure the necessary financial investment and support for these measures, and I am grateful for her support regarding those conversations with the Chancellor.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I am not sure whether the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) was present at the start of the exchanges—I was advised that he was not. Was he here?

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con) *indicated assent*.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman was chattering away to the Whip on duty, was he? Oh, very well; I will indulge him on this occasion.

Stephen Kerr: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. I also pay tribute to the excellent work of Stirling Women's Aid; Jess Lindhoff and her team do extraordinary work and it is always humbling to be with them.

Domestic abuse support services are devolved across the United Kingdom, but will my right hon. Friend assure the House that he will consider a UK-wide ombudsman or similar to guarantee standards across the entire United Kingdom?

James Brokenshire: As my hon. Friend will know, today's announcement relates to England, as these issues are devolved. The Domestic Abuse Bill, which has been published in draft format, contemplates and sets out a new domestic abuse commissioner to stand up for victims. I am sure that the point that he makes on the way in which that provision can be applied UK-wide will be part of the Bill's consideration.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I strongly welcome the Secretary of State's announcement. A statutory duty on local authorities was a specific recommendation of the Home Affairs Committee's report last year on domestic abuse. As part of the report, we raised the need for local areas to work together, given that people sometimes need to move to a different area because of the risks they face or to ensure they are safe. Will the Secretary of State make sure that his review recognises the need for areas to work together? Will he also consider our specific recommendation of a ring-fenced fund to ensure that the capacity gap is met and that nobody ends up unable to find a safe place?

James Brokenshire: I thank the right hon. Lady and the work of her Select Committee in ensuring a good evidence base, and in taking that evidence and presenting it in the way the Committee did. We have responded to that today. The statutory duty will do much to ensure a focus on commissioning, resources and delivering against the need in individual communities.

The right hon. Lady makes a valid and fair point about co-operation within and between areas. There have previously been problems, so we have given firmer and clearer guidance on people's ability to access services in an area even if they do not live in that area; somehow

that was previously a barrier, which it should not have been. It is important that we remain vigilant and conscious of such problems as we approach the consultation and what we learn from it.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement, which I support very strongly. It is very timely, of course. A recent Women's Aid report showed that about a third of domestic abuse services have been forced to reduce the support they provide in the past few years, and that one in 10 refugees received no funding from local authorities whatsoever in the past 12 months.

The Secretary of State refers to partnership with police and crime commissioners. Will he provide additional funds for police authorities such as Cumbria to reverse the cuts in police numbers in order to identify and protect victims? Will he say a little more about what assessment he has made of the impact on other local services, because councils inevitably raid important other budgets to subsidise new statutory services if they are not properly funded and, indeed, ring-fenced?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Gentleman heard what I said about the investment that was provided last November and the bed capacity it has given, and about other services that have been provided in that way. There is clearly much more to do, but the number of available bed spaces for victims has actually risen since 2010. Again, I want to see that there is proper, assessed support for the needs that are there, which is what the statutory duty is all about.

Police funding is obviously a matter for Home Office colleagues, but I would point out that more than £1 billion extra has been made available to the police during this financial year.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State's announcement. Ever since I was elected as a councillor, many years ago, I have been asking that this be made a statutory duty on councils. But the issue is funding. He made no mention of upfront funding. Will he elaborate on the resources that are, absolutely, needed to provide this service?

James Brokenshire: It is worth bearing in mind the timing. The statutory duty will require legislation to be implemented through the domestic abuse Bill that we want to progress later this year. The spending review then talks to the next financial year, 2020-21, and kicks in. We are consulting now to inform the discussion that I will have with the Treasury as part of the spending review, recognising the new burdens and the additional funding that will be required to follow through on this.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I welcome today's announcement and I am grateful for prior sight of the statement. The announcement refers to England only, although the Government's draft domestic abuse Bill applies to England and Wales, with some UK-wide aspects. Will the Secretary of State confirm that extra funding will be made available to the Welsh Government to support safe accommodation for victims and children fleeing violent homes in Wales?

James Brokenshire: As I have indicated, these services are for England. Yes, there are various aspects of the domestic abuse Bill, as we have discussed, relating to

other provisions within it that have operational impact. However, I will certainly commit to work with the Government of Wales to see how we can ensure that things are well co-ordinated.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on ending homelessness, I welcome this statement. Will the Secretary of State confirm that the Government will now ensure that automatic priority for housing is extended to everyone fleeing domestic violence so that they are guaranteed a safe, long-term home and not just emergency temporary accommodation?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point on move-on and how we ensure that prioritisation. There is guidance to that effect, but equally I will look to see whether further steps are required in the light of the consultation.

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): I, too, welcome this statement, which will be very welcome in my constituency. I have often raised concerns about Jane's Place in my constituency, which opened in 2017 to provide specialist support for victims of the most horrendous domestic abuse, which affected those victims in a very serious fashion. Since it opened, over 400 women and their children have benefited. The management of this excellent facility have regularly been in the very regrettable position of sending women away because it was full. Ever since it opened, its funding has been extremely precarious. I do welcome today's statement, but I fear that without funding—ring-fenced funding—it will not be in a position to guarantee that its excellent services are available next year, and to plan staffing and future provision.

James Brokenshire: I commend the hon. Lady. I know that she has spoken to the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mrs Wheeler), about the incredible work that Jane's Place does. The whole point of this new statutory duty on commissioning and assessment of need is to put funding on a sustainable basis, rather than have the uncertainty that the sector has faced over many years.

That is the intent behind the statutory duty. I hope the hon. Lady will be assured about the approach we are taking. We recognise the need for a lack of variability across areas and for a long-term financial position for the incredible work that is taking place.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I welcome the Government's statement. Some 60% of referrals to a refuge service were declined last year, which I am sure the Secretary of State will agree is a shockingly and unacceptably large statistic. As well as providing the sustainable funding that many Members have called for, what can be done to provide capacity in the sector, so that survivors of domestic violence are provided with the support they need?

James Brokenshire: I hope the hon. Lady will be assured about the responsibilities that we contemplate through the creation of this duty, which include firmly assessing the need and demand for accommodation-based support for all victims and their children, working on strategies for the provision of support and making commissioning decisions to sit alongside those. We envisage

that step-by-step approach as part of the statutory duty, to assess the needs in a particular area and commission accordingly.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. I am aware that this duty applies to England, but over the years some of my constituents have fled to England because of domestic abuse, and people have come to our constituency from England because of domestic abuse. Can the Secretary of State reassure me that co-operation with devolved government and local councils in Northern Ireland will continue and that lessons will be learned from how we have successfully handled cases of domestic abuse in Northern Ireland?

James Brokenshire: I commend what the hon. Gentleman says. I know from my ministerial experience the incredible work and support services that are provided in Northern Ireland. As I indicated in a previous answer, I would like to consider how we can ensure that there is a good connection with each of the devolved Administrations, and perhaps we can have a further conversation outside the Chamber about that.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Grimsby has had domestic violence provision for more than 40 years. The refuge is run by Denise Farman, who does an excellent job, and women arrive from all across the country to receive support, often with their children in tow. The service is funded only in terms of the property's rent, through housing benefit. There is no additional funding for any of the other services it provides, including specialist support for the children—everything from swings and play equipment to talking therapies. Does the Secretary of State agree that it is essential to ensure that this funding is ring-fenced, so that the broad provision of these services is available and sustainable for the long term, and they do not have to worry about year-to-year funding gaps or rely on public funding through donations?

James Brokenshire: I thank the hon. Lady for highlighting that specific service; I know that the Minister for Women, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), who is on the Front Bench, has visited it. Ultimately, we want to ensure long-term sustainability and confidence in service provision to meet local needs. I remain open-minded about how we look at this as the consultation develops. The duty is intended to place in the minds of local authorities the way in which funding is provided and the need for services for children or other specialist support, outreach or accommodation-based services. The point of the consultation is to listen and ensure that when we implement this through the Bill, we do it well.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I, too, welcome the statement from the Secretary of State, but both the supply of refuge places and whether women feel able to leave the abusive relationship they are in are very much dependent on social security support. What discussions has he had with the Work and Pensions Secretary, particularly in relation to universal credit—we believe that a split payment should be automatic—and the two-child limit?

James Brokenshire: I assure the hon. Lady that work across government is taking place on these issues—in the context of the Domestic Abuse Bill and more broadly

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on the availability of welfare, which, as she rightly says, is often one of the key elements in the support for and funding of rental and other aspects of need. On the point she makes about leaving the abusive relationship, a number of people actually want to stay in a particular home, and this is therefore about how the provisions in the Domestic Abuse Bill work in relation to extra sanctions and such measures. We talk about the concept of accommodation-based services, but important as refuges are, and they are hugely important, we equally recognise that there are other needs, and this is about the way in which that service and such support can be delivered.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): This is welcome news, as we have seen by how warmly it has been received. A woman in Nottingham fleeing abuse may be reliant on facilities elsewhere, so the decisions taken in other communities are of as much interest to me as those taken in my own. What does the Secretary of State foresee putting in the statutory guidance about the responsibility of local communities and authorities to work together so that we have a genuinely national network of refugees?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Gentleman makes a really important point. As part of the duty on local authorities, there is a responsibility to monitor and evaluate local delivery, as well as to report back to my Department about their strategies and the implementation of them. One of the things I will be very interested in and focused on as we look to deliver this is the issue of data sharing, which, as we know, can sometimes be challenging and problematic in other policy areas. This is about how we are best able to reflect on the fact that

people will understandably move from one area to another; indeed, that may be an imperative part of delivering their safety. As we look to the implementation and delivery, this is therefore an important part, and I hope we are able to get some good responses through the consultation.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I warmly commend all the work that is done by Rhondda Cynon Taf Women's Aid, which is primarily based in Pontypridd but serves the whole of RCT. In the next few weeks, it will open a new service in Dunraven Street in Tonypanyd that is publicly available, and it covers a whole series of different services that are non-residential, which is great.

May I raise a different element with the Secretary of State? There is the issue of so many women in prison who have now been shown, from substantial academic research, to have had acquired brain injuries prior to their offending behaviour. In the end, because we do not provide proper neuro-rehabilitation to women whose violence has come from a domestic relationship, we are not actually providing proper support and they end up in the criminal justice system, so the victim ends up becoming the criminal.

James Brokenshire: The hon. Gentleman makes a really important and relevant point about understanding someone's pathway into the criminal justice system. My hon. Friend the Minister for Women, who is alongside me on the Front Bench, has just told me about the £2 million being provided for work on female offenders. That is really important, as is recognising needs in different contexts and providing support in different ways, responding in a much more holistic way to where need is and, indeed, understanding properly the balance between how someone has become an offender while saying very firmly that they can be a victim, too.

Point of Order

4.49 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The learning disabilities mortality review programme is vital in trying to learn from the early deaths of people with learning disabilities. The programme's second report was handed over by its authors on 1 March. The Government have not published the report, but yesterday it was leaked in *The Sunday Times*. We now know that only one quarter of more than 4,300 cases have been reviewed and that there are some serious scandals, including 19 patients with learning disabilities or Down's syndrome having "do not resuscitate" notices put on their care because of their learning disability. That should never happen and it is appalling that this report has had to state that to doctors.

Mr Speaker, has a Minister notified you of their intention to make a statement to the House about the leaked report? That would allow hon. Members to question them on the vital issues, some of which I have just touched on. Some have emerged from the leak, but we should see the final report.

Mr Speaker: The short answer is no. The issues that the hon. Lady has highlighted are of enormous salience and there is great interest in them among Members across the House—of that I feel certain. I have not received any notification that a Minister intends to come to the House to deliver an oral statement on the matter. The hon. Lady can, of course, seek to ascertain, through the usual channels, whether such an intention exists. If not, through consultation with the Table Office she can explore opportunities to extract the information that she understandably seeks. I hope that is helpful to her for now.

Non-Domestic Rating (Preparation for Digital Services) Bill

Second Reading

4.51 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

This Government are committed to ensuring that the tax system is fit for the 21st century, that it is designed around the needs of the taxpayer and that we minimise as far as possible the administrative burden for businesses paying their taxes. The Government are also clear that this system should reflect and take full advantage of modern technology, and use that to make the process as simple and efficient as possible for taxpayers.

This very narrow Bill will support those aims in the context of the administration of business rates. This extremely short and simple measure will simply allow us to start exploring future digital reform of the business rates system. The same clauses appeared in the 2017 Local Government Finance Bill and passed through Committee without Division. The hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) was present during those debates, and I hope the clauses will receive the House's support again today.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Can the Minister give an idea of the cost involved and what sort of efficient and better system might emerge?

Rishi Sunak: The measure is even narrower than that; it is simply a paving measure, which I will come on to, that enables that exploratory work to start so that future Ministers will be able to come to this House with firmer proposals, with costs attached, depending on the eventual design of the system that is ultimately decided to be appropriate after extensive consultation with the sector. If my right hon. Friend bears with me, I hope his question will be answered later. If not, I will be happy to have him intervene again.

In the lead-up to the 2016 Budget, the Government undertook a wide-ranging review of the business rates system, in response to public calls to reform. As well as seeking views on the business rates tax itself, the review invited specific feedback on the administration of the rates system, including how business rates are collected.

Responding to the review, business groups called for a number of changes to the way the system is run, including switching the annual indexation of the business rates multiplier to the consumer prices index, rather than the retail prices index; implementing more frequent valuations; and modernising the billing and collection of business rates. I am pleased to say that the Government have already begun reforming the system to implement those changes.

Ratepayers are already benefiting from the change to the annual indexation of business rates from RPI to CPI, which was brought forward by two years, to April 2018. That measure alone is worth almost £6 billion to businesses over the next five years. The Government have also committed to increase the frequency of business rate revaluations from every five years to every three. To ensure that businesses benefit from that change at the earliest point, the Government have further announced that the next revaluation will be brought forward from

[*Rishi Sunak*]

2022 to 2021. That will ensure that, as requested, business rates bills more accurately reflect properties' up-to-date rental value and any relative changes in rents.

The Bill will enable us to begin exploring how to modernise the billing and collection of rates. Businesses in this country are of course already banking, paying bills and making sales online. Our tax system needs to keep pace.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Has the Minister seen press reports today that some major companies are calling for a 20% reduction in business rates? Does he have any comments to make about that?

Rishi Sunak: It is important to remember that the Bill is much narrower in scope than the design of the business rates system and how individual businesses pay the bills they are given. My hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry), the high streets Minister, is looking forward to winding up the debate, and he will be able to give the House chapter and verse on every single initiative the Government have undertaken to support businesses on the high street. In sum, there has been £13 billion of relief since the 2016 Budget, and a third of all businesses no longer pay any rates at all.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I thank the Minister for giving way—he is being very generous. On that point, however valuable and commendable many of the proposals he mentions may be, does he not feel that this is somewhat like fiddling while Rome burns, or indeed many of our town centres burn? There have been calls for a reduction of around 25% in high street business rates, and that could be funded by making sure that the tech giants pay their fair share of corporation tax.

Rishi Sunak: Madam Deputy Speaker, I am loth to get drawn on to topics that are much broader than the very narrow scope of this Bill. However, I am happy to reiterate that I do not think the £675 million high street fund my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and my hon. Friend the high streets Minister introduced earlier this year is a case of fiddling while Rome burns. The Government are committed to the vibrancy of our high streets through various initiatives that will be outlined in my hon. Friend's winding-up speech.

Indeed, the Bill is also an important measure; it is a measure that businesses have called for. Given the statutory nature of HMRC, it is impossible to move forward without this short piece of legislation. The reason for that is that businesses today receive separate business rates bills for each non-domestic property they occupy. Large businesses with property in different areas may receive bills from a number of local authorities responsible for issuing bills and collecting payment. It is worth bearing in mind that there are over 300 different billing authorities today, each with its own system of billing for business rates. While I pay tribute to the good work carried out by local authorities in administering business rates locally, the Government's clear view is that reforming the system to more closely link with the wider management of business taxes led by HMRC could unlock long-term improvements to the current system.

Members will appreciate that implementing any reform of this scale takes significant time and that it is critical that the Government engage with businesses and local government in developing and designing any new digital system; indeed, the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton brought that up in Committee during consideration of the previous Bill. I am pleased to tell him that the measure before us today will take many years to come to full fruition. The current intention announced by the Treasury is that any new design of the system will not come into force until after the next revaluation, in 2024. What we are doing today is therefore just a very small first step on a journey that requires an enormous amount of engagement and consultation.

The main measure in the Bill allows HMRC to expend resources on beginning to explore designs for a new digital service for business rates. That is necessary because HMRC's current statutory functions do not include activity in connection with the administration of business rates. To be clear, the legislation we are considering simply permits HMRC to begin the necessary design and engagement work for a potential new digital service. It does not implement any reforms to the current system of business rates administration.

That is important because, as I have noted, the Government are clear on the need to engage with businesses and local government to seek views on any specific options for reform. For example, the local government sector will want to ensure that any changes are fully compatible with the local retention of business rates and with plans to increase rates retention in the future. Equally, business organisations such as the Federation of Small Businesses, the British Independent Retailers Association and the CBI will be keen to engage in future design work to ensure any reforms deliver benefits to businesses and minimise any burdens. Members should also be aware that any practical reforms to the system are likely to require further changes to legislation and, as such, there will be opportunity for full scrutiny of any proposals once the design work has concluded.

The Government's efforts to improve digital tax services are already helping businesses seize the opportunities that digital technology offers. They are giving businesses more control over their finances, allowing them to spend their time focusing on innovation, growth and the creation of jobs. The Bill will support this by enabling HMRC simply to begin exploring potential options to link business rates with the administration of the wider tax system. It will also enable HMRC to undertake the necessary engagement with stakeholders to ensure any reforms work for business and for local government. While the Bill is just a small paving measure, it supports some potentially significant long-term improvements to the current system. I commend it to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Before I call the Opposition spokesman, with the leave of the House, and most unusually, I am sure the House would like to join me in wishing the Associate Serjeant at Arms, who occupies the Serjeant at Arms' Chair, a very happy birthday.

5.1 pm

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I will not put the House through a rendition of "Happy birthday"—[HON. MEMBERS: "Shame!"] But many happy returns.

Perhaps this is a missed opportunity. It is a shame, really, that the Bill is so narrow, because we have a good five hours where we could have talked about the real threats our businesses face, the dangers to our high streets and the many representations made on this issue. Nevertheless, this Bill is progress. Following the falling of the Local Government Finance Bill when the general election was called, we encouraged the Government to come forward with non-controversial elements of that Bill. Clause 14 was not controversial, so I am glad to see it in this Bill.

Local councils are on the frontline of government, delivering services that people rely on and which both support and enrich our communities on a day-to-day basis. Labour welcomes the modernisation of tax collection and the move to online payment and account facilities. However, the proposal to develop an online payment system led by HMRC, as set out in the Bill, does raise some questions.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I refer you to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as a vice-president of the Local Government Association, the body that represents councils, which are the billing authorities responsible for the collection of business rates. It, like me, wants confirmation that the move to develop an online payment collection facility will not change the fundamental and historical role of local councils as billing authorities with the legal responsibility for the collection of business rates. In the design of this new bridging system, to what extent have the Government sought input and representation from local government? Local government has significant experience in designing systems and processes, and it is important to draw on that to make the best of this proposal.

As the Government are investing in digital services, do they intend to streamline this online facility with the check, challenge and appeal process already in place? That would make it easier for businesses to have an end-to-end business rate system in place, marrying in one system the payment mechanism with the ability to check and appeal business rates. What payment mechanism will be in place to transfer funds to local authorities, especially in rate retention pilots? Who will be responsible for the collection of rates, and who will underwrite funds lost through non-collection?

The most critical issue is the wider sustainability of business rates and their role in funding local public services and encouraging local economies to thrive. Local government has already seen severe cuts after nine years of brutal and devastating Tory austerity.

Mr Jim Cunningham: One of the reasons that there is a reaction from businesses regarding the level of business rates is that while central Government should have been responsible for funding certain services, they have shoved that on to local authorities, which have had to put that through business rates, just like the police and fire authorities' precepts.

Jim McMahon: It is a matter of fact that the Government are moving towards the self-financing of local government. That is fine if a local authority can generate money through business rates and council tax in its local economy, but if, for whatever reason—usually for historical reasons—it is not able to do that, the Government do not care if councils sink or swim. That is no way to fund

adult social care or children's safeguarding services, or to make sure the homeless get the support they need either. Quite frankly, it shows a callous disregard for the role of central Government in making sure that every area gets its fair share of funding. That is a critical point.

Mr Cunningham: Anybody who has any experience of local government—my hon. Friend does, as do I and many others in here—knows that three or four years down the road, though they hint at looking again at business rates, Ministers will come along and tell everybody in local government, "You're profligate, you're spending too much, so we'll cap you." As I am sure he will remember, we have had all this before.

Jim McMahon: The hallmark of local government across parties—this is not a party point—is that people roll up their sleeves and get on with it. They do not complain; instead, they find solutions to the difficult challenges facing the community, but that is made much harder when central Government are disconnected.

Successive Secretaries of State have failed to champion local government, which is why I welcome our shadow Secretary of State having that local government background and experience and really believing in it. I hope he will be Secretary of State in the future, leading on this from the Government Benches. It is critical that the Secretary of State should not batter local government all the time. It needs a champion to celebrate what goes on in every community and, regardless of party affiliation, to fly the flag for what has been proven to be the most efficient arm of government—they are our champions, and we should thank them for all the work they do.

By 2025, there will be a funding gap in local government of £8 billion, and by 2020 local authorities will have faced core funding cuts at the hand of central Government of nearly £16 billion since 2010. That means that councils will have lost 60p for every £1 the Government previously provided to cover local public services. Next year, 168 councils will receive no funding whatever from central Government to meet the cost of rising demand for local public services.

What impact will that have? We can talk about the big numbers, and £16 billion is a huge number and has had a huge impact, but this is really about people and communities—the streets where people live, the communities that bind people together and make places decent places to live. The cuts have had a dramatic impact on government services. Youth centres have closed; libraries have reduced their hours, and hundreds have closed altogether; and meanwhile, social care is on the verge of collapse. Warning after warning has been issued, but the Government, particularly the Treasury, have not come to the table. As a result, our councils are having to make difficult and unwelcome decisions about where to make efficiency savings, and that is hampering their ability to prioritise social good above all else.

Moving to an online payment system administered by HMRC, but with links through to local billing authorities, raises a more fundamental point about taxation on business overall. Currently, many believe it operates in a silo and that the approach to business taxation is very disjointed. While our town centres and high streets are going to the wall, the online giants

[*Jim McMahon*]

are making record profits and ensuring that as much as possible is sent offshore. The Government should use this opportunity not just to introduce a digital payment system, but to undertake a more fundamental review of business taxation overall to ensure that tax is generated where the wealth is created and that our town centres and communities are properly supported. We look forward to scrutinising the Bill properly and to hearing answers to the questions posed.

5.8 pm

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I have declared my business interests in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, but I am not speaking for them of course; I wish to speak on behalf of the retail businesses in my constituency, as others have already done.

While I am sure it is well intended and necessary to develop a digital payment system for this tax, can the Minister reassure us that it will not be used as a device by the Treasury and others to accelerate payments and to damage further the cash flow of the shops and other businesses that have to pay it. There is the temptation to use the power of digital technology to have real-time information and then to knock the money off for the tax rather more quickly, when the timing of tax payments may be an important part of cash-flow planning, particularly of retail businesses.

I hope that Ministers are sensitive to the current position in many high streets up and down the country. Large chains and other sizeable independent shops are struggling because their cost base is very high, and they are competing with online retailers who have nothing like the same cost base in terms of property and staff numbers. They are finding it difficult to manage, and another hit on their cash flow from the Government would not be welcome.

Rents are now falling in shops generally in England and Wales, the area covered by the Bill. Some retailers are talking about reductions of 25% or 30% as and when the rents on various shop properties become due for review. That relief is welcome to some extent, but it takes time, because many of the leases are for several years and have to mature before renegotiation is possible. Some retailers must go through the agony of a voluntary administration to secure a change in their rents. Another problem is the fact that rents can go down through market processes, but rates never go down, except in the case of very small shops that benefit from one of the exemptions. So the total property cost does not fall at anything like the percentage that the market is suggesting that it should, because the Government element is very fixed. I hope that Ministers will be sensitive to that.

I realise that this is not the occasion—much as many of us would like it to be—for a proper debate on the balance of business rate taxation and its impact on the retail sector. However, in Wokingham, a lot of money has just been spent on refurbishment and the provision of new and more attractive space in the town centre. Securing the first lettings is an important part of promoting a more active town, but over-avaricious taxation, speedier payments and other changes in how the business rate is handled could offset what will otherwise, we hope, be a good-news story.

That is my prime concern, to which I hope the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry), will respond. I am delighted that he will be winding up the debate, because I know that he is very conscious of and sensitive to the need to do more to help retailers, and I am sure that he will mention that.

I should like to follow up my earlier intervention on the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak). It would be good, at some point—it may not be possible today—to have a better idea of the scope of the survey and of the costs that might be involved. Will it be conducted by our own Government officials, or will there be consultancy contracts? If there are consultancy contracts, will we get value, and will we be consulting people who actually know what they are talking about, so that we can end up with something that we are proud of?

The Government have a duty to taxpayers to ensure that money is well spent. It would be useful to have any more information that the Minister can give about the kind of sums that the Bill might authorise, and what the purpose is. What more can they learn that Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs does not already know from running perfectly good systems for a range of taxes on people and businesses? A fair amount of them are now handled electronically, so presumably there is quite a lot of in-house experience and expertise that could be drawn on. We always want to make the best possible use of the talent that the Government already have and the information that they have already gleaned both through their own researches and by buying it in through consultancies. I hope that Ministers will have some ability to discipline that work and to ensure that it is timely and provides value for money.

5.13 pm

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): This is probably the easiest summing-up that I have experienced so far in the Chamber. I thank the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) and the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron)—first, for turning up and, secondly, for making incisive comments about this short Bill.

As we know, this is paving legislation to enable the Government to deliver on their commitment to link the local authority business rate system to HMRC digital tax accounts so that businesses can manage their rates bill in one place alongside other taxes. As I think should be clear from what was said by my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon), we fully understand the Government's wish to modernise the administration of business rates for the 21st century, and we fully understand that linking the local authority business rates system to HMRC digital accounts will make it easier, simpler and less burdensome for businesses to understand and pay their business rates. Nevertheless, as I am sure the Minister would acknowledge, there is some way to go before that aspiration can be achieved and little of the detail of the new system is yet known.

The Bill provides HMRC with the ability to undertake the planning, consultation and testing that is needed to truly inform the design of the new service, and in their

factsheet the Government say they will engage locally with local government and the business sector in developing detailed proposals and seeking views. It would therefore have been really useful today for the Government to have provided more detail on how they intend to go about this; we have simply no idea about the detail of how they will take this forward. There is a money resolution but absolutely no idea of the costs of digitising, and it would be helpful to hear something from the Minister about the costs that will be incurred.

The Minister made it clear that the measures in this Bill are to be compatible with the 100% business rate retention system the Government are aiming for, but we need to stop for a moment and explore this further, because there is a real risk under the 100% business rate system of dividing the country further between the haves and have-nots, the wealthiest areas and deprived areas, the south and the north. So can the Minister confirm that councils, particularly those affected by austerity, will not lose out under this system?

As my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton said, since 2010 there has been a massive £16 billion-worth of cuts—a reduction of 60p in every pound for some councils—and the Centre for Cities found in January that the poorest areas have borne the brunt of council spending cuts. As a result of these cuts, councils have had to make £7 billion pounds of savings to adult social care, with less being spent on early intervention, libraries, youth services and so forth. In fact, these services have almost disappeared in some local authorities. So it might have been helpful for the Government to set out at the same time as this Bill how they see the whole of the local government finance system progressing in the future—for example, by having more information about the fair funding review and whether the Government will agree to independent scrutiny of the system and its implementation to test whether it actually is fair.

We know, too, that the current business rate system is broken, and we need firm proposals from the Government to ensure business rates are not an impediment to tackling regional inequalities in the way they are at the moment.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): The hon. Lady says we should talk about that to enable us to have a full discussion here today. This might be slightly beyond the scope of today's debate, but perhaps she will set out from the Dispatch Box Labour's position for business rate reform in some detail because we have time to do that, and then I will comment on that in the context of today's debate.

Dr Blackman-Woods: I thank the Minister for that intervention, because perhaps I was not clear: I was not suggesting that those measures necessarily needed to be in this Bill, but they do need to be set out so that we can place the Bill within the context of the Government's wider proposals, because the Government—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Lady has explained that very well and I understand why the Minister made his point, but of course matters that are not in this Bill are not subject to discussion this afternoon. As I said, the hon. Lady has

explained the context very well and I am sure the debate will not be widened—and actually it is not difficult for me to keep this as a narrow debate.

Dr Blackman-Woods: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will do my best to keep to what is in the Bill. However, the Government cannot continue to rely on a system of ever-increasing council tax bills and supplements to make up for the lack of Government funding for our essential public services such as policing, youth services, housing and social care. That is why we are interested in the wider picture, as well as the matters we are discussing today, but I will keep my points as narrow as possible.

The Local Government Information Unit has been pressing for a clear vision for the future shape of the council funding system, and it is worried that councils could continue to fail if no such a vision is put forward in the near future. We also need to know something about the redistribution mechanisms that could be attached to 100% business rate retention, and it would be extremely helpful if the Minister said something about that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton set out a series of questions for the Minister to address this afternoon. We need to know how the lessons from the retention pilots will become known and when they will be rolled out and whether there will be any additional costs for ratepayers. We need to know who will be responsible for collection rates and who will underwrite funds lost through non-collection. We also need to know how the system will be appealed and challenged, and who will administer the non-payment collection and the applications for discounts and exemptions. How will local government be involved, not only in the design of the new system but in bringing in the arrangements? I hope that the Minister will address all those detailed questions this afternoon. We understand the need for the Bill, and we will not seek to divide the House on it; instead, we look forward to improving it in Committee.

5.21 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): What a privilege it is to have this opportunity to close the debate today. I wish that it had been better attended, but it is great to have had a contribution from my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) and some contributions from Labour Members. There was no one here from Change UK or TIG or whatever it is called; it obviously does not care about business rates.

In our debate today, it is important for us to stick rigidly to the scope of the Bill, which sets out how we will empower HMRC to look at digitisation and at how it can modernise and simplify the business rates system. Before the 2016 Budget, the Government held an extensive consultation and set out a commitment to enter on this process. It is a commitment that, following the passage of this Bill, HMRC will then, and only then, be able to progress the necessary design work.

Today's Bill is an important step towards those reforms, and it will allow HMRC to start to explore some of the digital infrastructure that will link local authority business rates to digital tax accounts. This has been called for by businesses, and it is also being welcomed by them. Today's Bill is simple the first important step, and it rightly paves the way for further discussions on how the

[Jake Berry]

process will proceed. All those discussions will require legislation, which will pass through the House and be subject to the usual scrutiny of the Opposition parties.

Turning to the impact of business rates on businesses, we have heard clarion calls in the press this morning and from the Opposition during this debate for looking into a more wholesale reform of business rates rather than simply digitising them, and it is impossible to have a debate about digitisation without giving cognisance to that point. Let us not forget, however, that we have committed to £13 billion-worth of savings to business over the next five years through the reforms that we have already made to business rates. We have switched the annual indexation from RPI to CPI, which will, over the lifetime of that commitment, save ratepayers and businesses up and down the country some £6 billion. That is £6 billion that will remain in all our local communities and economies for the constituents that we represent. We have also reformed small business rate relief, doubling it to £12,000 and making it automatic, meaning that 650,000 businesses now pay no business rates at all. We have responded to calls from businesses for more frequent revaluations, which will now happen every three years from 2020-21.

Turning to the points raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham about business rates and revaluation, it is of course the case, thinking about cash flow and the impact that business rates may have on a business, that it is possible for business rates to go down if rent has gone down and other factors have reduced during the period since the previous revaluation. The last revaluation actually led to a majority of businesses seeing no change or a reduction in their business rates. Over time, that should happen more often with more frequent revaluations from 2021.

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): I am curious, based on the Minister's research, about how often businesses ask for a revaluation.

Jake Berry: I thank my hon. Friend for that helpful intervention. From speaking to business groups—I regularly consult with the Government's Future High Streets Forum, and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has the Retail Sector Council—it is clear that they seek more frequent revaluations because that stops bill shocks. I am sure that my hon. Friend knows about bills shocks from people who have visited his advice surgery, and he also runs his own business—[*Interruption.*] Although I do not think that farms have a big business rates bill, because they do not pay any business rates.

Bill Wiggin: However, I get continual complaints about business rates from the landlord at the Moody Cow pub, which is very near to my home.

Jake Berry: I am sure that those at the Moody Cow will be delighted not just with more frequent revaluations, but with when they can move on to the digitalisation of business rates, which we are discussing today.

People who make the clarion calls for the abolition, reduction or some other change to business rates will accept that they are already a key source of funding for local authorities, funding essential services, such as adult social care and children's services. I note that the

hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) did not take the opportunity in wider the context of this debate on business rates to elucidate the Labour party's policies, but those who seek to reform business rates have an obligation to say how the revenue would be made up.

Many people who talk about business rates reform have at their heart concerns about the health of our high streets, which was mentioned by the Opposition Front-Bench spokespeople and which should worry us all. The Government need to find a way of ensuring that high streets continue to thrive as shopping patterns and behaviours change. I cannot remember a period of more rapid change in how we choose to shop. High streets must clearly transition from bricks-led retail to a bricks-and-clicks online and offline model, with experiential leisure at its heart. High street retailers will be delighted that business rates were slashed by a third in the most recent Budget for retailers with a rateable value of under £51,000, and that formed part of our wider high street package.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I do not know whether you are a fan of "Sex and the City", but Sarah Jessica Parker recently bemused her Instagram followers on a recent visit to London, when she praised Timpson not just for its key-cutting service, but for its extensive selection of umbrellas, labelling the branch in High Street Kensington tube station as her new favourite shop. Timpson is of course a fine retailer, which is why I was delighted that Sir John Timpson worked so closely with the Government on his report into the future of the high street, business rates and retail. Leading directly from his report, the Government created the £675 million future high streets fund to support high streets and enable them to pay their business rates. Although all those reforms have been welcomed, people will continue to call for a more fundamental review of business rates, and the Government will, of course, continue to keep that under review.

The hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) raised a lot of specific questions about how the digitalisation of business rates will work. I am sorry to disappoint him, but I am unable to answer any of those questions today because the purpose of the Bill is to give HMRC the statutory power, which it currently does not have, to go away and work up that system. How the system will work cannot become clear until we have empowered HMRC, both on Second Reading and in Committee, to start work on it. That is why it is so important that we agree Second Reading this evening, and it is why it is so welcome that the Opposition Front-Bench team support the Bill.

This important Bill is just the start of our cross-party work to ensure that we create a business rates system fit for the future. Many people who run businesses will now be used to making the majority of their transactions online, whether it be paying their VAT bill, paying their utility bills or making sales and buying stock. If we truly want to create a modern tax system that is supportive and friendly to business, we must all work to create an online taxation system, including for business rates, that small businesses and large businesses alike will find workable and useful in driving productivity and efficiency in their business. That is why I have the pleasure of commending the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

NON-DOMESTIC RATING (PREPARATION FOR DIGITAL SERVICES) BILL (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Non-Domestic Rating (Preparation for Digital Services) Bill:

Committal

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Committee of the whole House.

Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading

(2) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and any proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion two hours after the commencement of proceedings in Committee of the whole House.

(3) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion three hours after the commencement of proceedings in Committee of the whole House.

(4) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings in Committee of the whole House, to any proceedings on Consideration or to other proceedings up to and including Third Reading.

Other proceedings

(5) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—*(Rebecca Harris.)*

Question agreed to.

NON-DOMESTIC RATING (PREPARATION FOR DIGITAL SERVICES) BILL (MONEY)

Queen's recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Non-Domestic Rating (Preparation for Digital Services) Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided.—*(Rebecca Harris.)*

Question agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 4 to 9 together.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (ANIMALS)

That the Animal Health, Alien Species in Aquaculture and Invasive Non-native Species (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 813), dated 4 April 2019, a copy of which was laid before this House on 5 April, be approved.

That the Animal Health, Plant Health, Seeds and Seed Potatoes (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 809), dated 4 April 2019, a copy of which was laid before this House on 5 April, be approved.

That the Trade in Animals and Related Products (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 811), dated 4 April 2019, a copy of which was laid before this House on 5 April, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (PLANT HEALTH)

That the Plant Health (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 820), dated 4 April 2019, a copy of which was laid before this House on 8 April, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (ARCHITECTS)

That the Architects Act 1997 (Swiss Qualifications) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 810), dated 4 April 2019, a copy of which was laid before this House on 5 April, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (AGRICULTURE)

That the Common Agricultural Policy and Market Measures (Miscellaneous Amendments) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 812), dated 4 April 2019, a copy of which was laid before this House on 5 April, be approved.—*(Rebecca Harris.)*

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

That the draft Buckinghamshire (Structural Changes) Order 2019, which was laid before this House on 2 April, be approved.—*(Rebecca Harris.)*

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

EDUCATION

That the draft Higher Education (Monetary Penalties and Refusal to Renew an Access and Participation Plan) (England) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 1 April, be approved.—*(Rebecca Harris.)*

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (VALUE ADDED TAX)

That the Value Added Tax (Tour Operators) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 73), dated 17 January 2019, a copy of which was laid before this House on 22 January, be approved.—*(Rebecca Harris.)*

Question agreed to.

ADJOURNMENT (WHITSUN)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 25),

That this House, at its rising on Thursday 23 May, do adjourn until Tuesday 4 June 2019.—*(Rebecca Harris.)*

Question agreed to.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (14 MAY)

Ordered,

That at the sitting on Tuesday 14 May, paragraph (2) of Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments) shall apply to the Motions in the name of the Leader of the Opposition as if the day were an Opposition Day; proceedings on those Motions may continue, though opposed, after the moment of interruption and for up to six hours from the commencement of proceedings on the first such Motion and shall then lapse if not previously disposed of; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—*(Rebecca Harris.)*

ENVIRONMENTAL AUDIT

Ordered,

That Colin Clark be discharged from the Environmental Audit Committee and Derek Thomas be added.—(*Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Selection Committee.*)

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Ordered,

That Dr Philippa Whitford be discharged from the Health and Social Care Committee and Angela Crawley be added.—(*Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Selection Committee.*)

Self-build Housing

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

5.36 pm

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): I wanted to call this debate “Kevin McCloud changed my life and I want him to change yours, too”, but I was told that was not entirely orderly.

What I do want to impress upon the House is that self-building produces houses that are better quality, cheaper and greener. My husband and I were gripped by “Grand Designs” when it was first shown about 20 years ago. I was aware that our French and German contemporaries had been brought up in houses that their parents had built, and they were starting to build their own at our sort of stage. We were thrilled when a run-down house on a large plot became available in our village. We definitely fall into the “creative” type, rather than the “engineering” one, so we got a local architect and a building firm in the village to do the work for us. But coping with the legal side of planning, as well as the design and organisation, was in itself a huge time commitment.

There were definitely television-worthy moments, and I am so glad we were not filmed: the day the glass wall broke into tiny shards as it was being installed; and when we moved in with two small children with only an outside loo and no floors. Thirteen years on, we still love our house. It was built for our needs: snooker, books and vinyl; and a large cooker. Where others have an eating area, we have a hose-down function room for community events. Most important to us are the incredible views of the Cherwell valley from every room.

Did the planners encourage us? No, they were horrified by discussions about reed beds and solar panels, and we had to appeal and argue. They did, however, eventually have the grace to commend the final result. But Cherwell District Council has come on leaps and bounds since, and it is as passionate about building as I am.

We are building at an enormous rate locally, with three new homes finished every day in our area; we regularly top the leaderboard. But much of my casework is about problems with the quality of build of large developers. We have a wall of shame in my office where we rank how many complaints we get for each major builder. Occasionally, I get their representatives in, in small groups, to show them who is at the top of that wall of shame. I find that that is quite effective, with householders suddenly finding that defects are rectified—safety in numbers not working is effective in those meetings. The lack of quality, as well as the uniformity of type, of so much mass development is a real concern to me, as it should be to Members across this House.

In 2012, Cherwell District Council created Build! to look at alternative ways to deliver affordable houses for local people who buy a share in the property, which they self-finish to their own specification.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her characteristically entertaining and thought-provoking speech. I only wish there was time for me to make a speech. [*Interruption.*] Oh, of course, given the time, there probably is.

When I was a district councillor, one of my most memorable visits was to my hon. Friend's constituency to see that Build! project. Does she agree that there are two wonderful things about self-build that she has not yet had time to mention, although I am sure she will: first, it strips out the profit element and therefore means it is much cheaper; and, secondly, there is individuality in each build—the place-making and the village aspect that is so important to our constituents?

Victoria Prentis: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Build! scheme is a good example of a halfway house before a full self-build, which we all know is quite a commitment to take on. The scheme enables people to self-finish, and brings many of the benefits that my hon. Friend just outlined, possibly without all the pain of a full self-build process.

We have quite a few examples of the Build! project throughout the constituency, but grouping is important, as I will come on to explain, and one great example is in Warwick road in Banbury, where there is a 16-house development on the site of a former care home. In creating the project, we learned that instant community cohesion is a major bonus to grouping self-builds: by the time people move in, they know not just their neighbours but the location and type of their soil pipes. That makes for a diverse but energetic community who look out for each other right from the beginning. It is quite extraordinary, and it is one of the very real benefits of grouping self-builds, even in quite small developments, such as blocks of flats.

Another example is in a large building in a car park in Banbury town centre. People in flats next-door to each other look out for each other. They carry each other's heavy pipes in for installation and help each other with other elements of building. It really makes a difference to how they go forward together as a community.

One of my newest town councillors has just bought a one-bedroom Build! flat near Bicester Village station. She told me:

“Without Build! and the support of CDC”—

Cherwell District Council—

“I would have really struggled to get on the property ladder. At 24, with a single income, I'm not very attractive to mortgage lenders. I bought a share in a self-finish flat. I pay a mortgage and a minimal amount of rent, and hope to work up to 100% ownership in a few years.”

She continued:

“This scheme has allowed me to finish my first property to my own specification. It was a bit of a shock to learn my doors wouldn't fit over the new carpets and needed to be cut down. I'm in the process of tiling my bathroom, which has been a learning experience. It hasn't been plain sailing but it will be an experience I'll treasure.”

That is somebody with, to put it politely, no self-build skills. She is a young woman doing it on her own aged 24. That is really commendable. It has enabled her to have a cheaper property finished to her own spec, and it has given her the confidence to get on to the property ladder. It is exactly the sort of scheme that we should roll out nationally.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Lady for bringing this idea to the House for consideration. The Minister and I were just at a meeting of the all-party group on healthy homes and buildings. Some

of the ideas that the hon. Lady refers to are coming through in the White Paper that the all-party group published.

Many years ago, before I got married, we did a project for my house back home. We referred to it as grip work—we employed a builder, a carpenter, an electrician, a plumber and so on to come in to do the work at each stage, thereby diminishing the cost factor at a time when, because we were younger, we were pushed for money and did not have very much. What does the hon. Lady feel that the House, and perhaps the Minister in particular—he is a good Minister—could do to help these projects and schemes for first-time new build owners?

Victoria Prentis: The hon. Gentleman has just helped—by telling us about his own experiences back home. What we can do is promote schemes such as Build! and the slightly more ambitious one that I am about to discuss, which are very easily rolled out across the country and which really can help new, young first-time buyers to realise their dream of property ownership.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): I have a constituent who is interested in home building, but they had difficulty accessing the register of available land, which local authorities are required to keep. Can the hon. Lady advise me on how that was done in her local authority?

Victoria Prentis: Yes, I will come on to that. My local authority actually has provided enough houses—as indeed all local authorities are obliged to do—for people who want to build their own home. People wishing to build their own house must register with their local authority and a plot is supposed to become available in time. That is not always the case, and it is one of my real worries about people achieving their goals of self-build. I will cover that, and I am sure that the Minister will, too. That is one of the reasons for holding this debate: it is really important that we continue to press for plots to be made available so that people can begin to realise their dreams.

Jim Shannon: I am listening very intently to the hon. Lady. We also have a co-ownership scheme in Northern Ireland, which enables people who are financially restricted in getting a mortgage to buy half a house, and the co-ownership scheme gets the other half. It is also another way of enabling people to get on the first rung of the ladder and to move forward to get their own place, which is probably similar to the self-build project that the hon. Lady refers to.

Victoria Prentis: That is really important. Often, those help-to-buy schemes, or similar schemes, are not available to self-builders. They are in my constituency, because of a forward-thinking local authority, but they are not available across the country, and that is of real concern to me. The way mortgage lenders lend money is often not very helpful to self-builders, either.

I come on to Cherwell District Council's most ambitious project and the one about which we really do want to sing from the rooftops. Graven Hill, which is former Ministry of Defence land, is a 188-hectare site south of Bicester. It is the UK's, and possibly the world's, largest custom build site. Plots with services already installed are easy to buy, and planning regulations—I cannot believe that I am saying this sentence—are relaxed and

[Victoria Prentis]

user-friendly. Two thousand custom build homes are being created, and those with a local connection have the chance to buy first.

I encourage everyone, particularly those involved in planning, to watch the fabulous programme, “The Street”, on Channel 4, the final episode of which aired last week during Self-Build Week. It is available to watch on catch-up for the next 30 days. There is a shortened taster programme, but you would miss the full experience, Madam Deputy Speaker, if you did not watch the whole thing. Watching the programme is six hours of your life very well spent.

In the programme, Kevin McCloud—need I say more?—provides gentle commentary on the construction process of the first 10 builds on Graven Hill, demonstrating the positives and the stresses and how these houses meet the specific needs of the young, the old, the disabled and the unwell. These homes are definitely cheaper—around 20% cheaper—than other new builds. They are definitely ecologically sound. Just as the build quality is much better when a person does it themselves, individuals are consistently keener to take risks and try new ecologically interesting ideas in a way that big developers simply will not. So far the site as a whole has saved a significant quantity of carbon by sourcing tarmac from a local plant and by recycling aggregate on site. Some 90% of the waste generated at Graven Hill has been recycled, which is extraordinary on a big building site. McCloud does not shy away from the problems—this is very good telly—causing the reviewer of the series in *The Daily Telegraph* to call for a solid Victorian terrace to live in. However, what is clear is that what has been created is much greater than the sum of its parts. These are not just houses, but Graven Hill custom build houses. Their builders feel a pride in what they have achieved and that really shines through. They will definitely help to build a fantastic community.

There are three major barriers to intrepid self-builders, the first of which is access to land, mentioned by the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous). All planning authorities are required to maintain a register of those seeking to self-build, and to ensure that sufficient permissions are granted. Some 18,000 plots have been promised by Right to Build Day on 30 October. Will the Minister assure me that this is on track and will happen?

The second barrier is mortgage and financing issues. When we inevitably went over budget in our own build, I remember that our mortgage company was distinctly unimpressed by our application for further funding and told us that our plot was worth less with our half-built house on it than it had been at the beginning. That was a low moment. My husband was self-employed, which also caused problems for the mortgage company. Low-deposit mortgages are not usually available to self-builders, and neither is Help to Buy because it relies on the purchase of a completed property by a single payment at legal completion. It is, however, available at Graven Hill for custom built homes. Central Government really could work more creatively with lenders to address those issues, and I would be grateful if the Minister thought further about that.

The third major barrier is undoubtedly planning. At Graven Hill, the council has adopted contemporary planning regulations to ensure a fast approval process

of a self-build plot in 28 days. This is revolutionary, and I do not see why every local authority in the country cannot follow suit. I remember the thousands of pounds in rent that we wasted while waiting for planners. I do not really know what they were doing, but whatever it was they did it very slowly. Addressing this issue is critical to the future promotion of self-building.

The Government and the Minister are making all the right noises in policy terms, but real change has to come from creative thinking by local authorities and mortgage lenders. Without it, we will not see the revolution in self-building that I seek. The UK has one of the lowest self and custom build sectors in the developed world, running at about 8% of the market. This is a real way to solve our housing problems, build communities, and ensure good quality and ecologically sound architecture. To Cherwell District Council led by the quietly inspirational Barry Wood, the Graven Hill pioneers and Kevin McCloud—I salute you.

5.52 pm

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) not only on securing this debate, which is customary, but on a really engaging, thoughtful and cogently argued speech. Her enthusiasm for self-build—withstanding her own tortured experience—shines through, and she is a great champion for it.

This debate comes on the back of last week’s National Custom and Self Build Week, in which I participated wholeheartedly, appearing on stage with the great Kevin McCloud at the ExCeL, in front of an audience of eager self-builders—a small number of the 93,000 people who I gather were due to go through that exhibition over a number of days. I have also visited the legendary Graven Hill in my hon. Friend’s constituency and seen for myself the site, which, as she quite rightly says, is the largest self and custom build site in Europe—I am not sure about the world. Graven Hill has been the subject of the series “The Street”, which is gripping us all. My favourite is the black one, which is built out of packing cases. It is a remarkable achievement.

As my hon. Friend quite rightly says, Graven Hill has an effervescence to it. To me, it seems like a kind of latter day Portmeirion. I have no doubt that, in time, it will become a conservation area—not least for the sheer variety and enthusiasm of the architecture, with a Cotswold cottage next to a Swiss chalet next to a house that looks like a stealth bomber next to a glass box. The variety of homes chosen by the occupants is extraordinary, as is the strong sense of community and ownership that is immediately apparent among the people there.

I know that, as a self-builder herself, my hon. Friend’s enthusiasm spreads far and wide in her constituency and has been noted by many people who live under her supervision. Like her, I have lived with the experience. When I was a small child, my parents built their own home—in the early 1970s, when it was a revolutionary thing to do. They bought a big old Victorian house, with a couple of other families, demolished it, and built a terrace of three houses that still stand today. We often visit and look back with fond memories, not least because my parents also had the Kevin McCloud moment that is in every “Grand Designs” programme where, two thirds of the way through, there is the conversation about money. With my parents, that conversation happened

at the end of the build, and we moved in without stairs. For the first few months, as a five-year-old—or whatever I was—I would climb three ladders to get to bed. I am sure that the EU working at height directive would have something to say about that now, but in those days it was *de rigueur*.

That personal experience is translating into personal support for this mission, but also, happily, into Government support. I speak regularly to Members who are enthusiastic, such as my hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr Bacon), whom we should mention in this regard, and to sector representatives. They highlight, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury, the structural barriers that can inhibit self and custom build, such as access to land, finance and navigating the planning system.

However, as result of this Government's interventions, there has been some progress. We have brought forward, as my hon. Friend said, the "right to build" legislation, inspired by my hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk, which requires local authorities to hold a register of people seeking to build or commission their own home locally. I will follow up with the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) the problem that his constituent is having in accessing that register. We have committed over £30 million to English authorities to meet their statutory duties to permission sufficient land to meet the demand on their registers within three years. We have published national planning guidance, in support of the legislation, and expect to update it to help local authorities with implementation later this year. I am encouraged that the demand is there, with authorities reporting about 42,000 people now signed up to the registers, indicating an increase of 133% in the past three years. We will continue to work with local authorities to ensure that the legislation is as effective as possible. However, we are not complacent. If the legislation is not having the impact we seek, we will look to reinforce it.

We have worked with the industry to identify barriers to the growth of the sector in England, and it has identified access to finance, as my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury rightly said—both developer finance and mortgage finance. The £4.5 billion home building fund launched in October 2016 offers £1 billion in short-term loan finance targeted to self and custom builders, innovators, and small and medium-sized enterprises. In July, a Homes England programme to deliver the community housing fund outside London was launched, with £163 million available up to 2019-20 to support community-led groups bringing forward local affordable housing schemes. We expect a similar programme for London to be announced shortly by the Greater London Assembly.

We have worked with major lenders to ensure that mortgages are available. For example, challenger bank Virgin Money has joined the market, launching new products for custom-build projects recently. As the self and custom build sector consolidates and mainstreams, we anticipate that the market will move into this space and provide new financial products.

The self and custom build sector has welcomed our ongoing and wide-ranging reforms to the planning system, including the new national planning policy framework. These reforms will help to reduce the time that self and custom builders have to spend on appeals, saving money

and resources. The new permission in principle, which promises to streamline planning on smaller sites for builders and developers, has also been welcomed. We know there is more to do, such as addressing concerns around capacity in some local authorities. Later this year, the Ministry will be publishing a Green Paper on accelerated planning to discuss how greater capacity, capability and performance improvements can accelerate the planning process.

Hon. Members may well ask why this Government want self and custom builders to build more homes. Last year, we delivered 222,000 new homes—the highest number in a decade, up 2% on the previous year. Since 2010, we have delivered more than 1 million new homes, and we are determined to get to 300,000 homes a year by the middle of the next decade. For too long, we have been overly reliant on a small group of large developers. Lack of diversity and competition has not been good for innovation and productivity, nor for consumer choice. As my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury rightly said, new homes that fall short in terms of quality and character, and that lack a sense of place and belonging in the area, seem ubiquitous.

We now have the opportunity to change things. Self and custom house building is much more common in all developed countries except the United Kingdom, and England sadly lags behind the rest of the UK. If we could increase annual levels of custom and self-build, which were about 10,000 homes in 2015, to levels comparable to the closest overseas country—Holland—we would deliver 30,000 to 40,000 homes annually. Any additional capacity in house building will relieve pressure on the market and other services. Self and custom builders have a vital role to play in delivering new homes that are welcomed in their communities, rather than resisted, and built to last.

We know that a wide cross-section of people are looking to build their own home, and our aim is to make it easier to access self and custom build opportunities. We are working closely with the National Custom and Self Build Association to resolve the structural barriers to self and custom build that it has identified. Like many Members, I want to see more affordable, accessible and innovative self and custom build schemes. I want to see inspiring schemes such as the Nelson project in Plymouth for veterans, and community-owned and focused projects such as the Rural Urban Synthesis Society—RUSS—in Lewisham.

Local authorities are rising to the challenge, playing their part to make custom and self-build part of the solution to our national housing crisis. Councils such as Cherwell, Teignbridge and Shropshire continue to lead the way with their ongoing commitment to custom and self-build. I want to see diverse custom building across the sector, spanning in-fill, small sites and large-scale projects on ex-public sector land such as at Graven Hill. The Right to Build Task Force is working with a number of authorities to bring forward custom and self-build on larger sites—for example, at Aylesbury Woodlands and Tresham Garden Village.

An issue that I have identified, which my hon. Friend will know well, is that local authorities often adopt custom and self-build at volume and scale because one councillor happens to be interested. That is certainly the case at Cherwell, where the visionary leader decided that the council would embrace this and, as a result, has

[Kit Malthouse]

produced a celebrated estate. At the moment, it has not been systemised—it is not something that civic leaders naturally embrace—and one challenge for me is to get in among those civic leaders and sell this as part of the housing mix in their areas.

I recognise that there is still some way to go to mainstream self and custom building as a housing option in this country. We can make the progress necessary only by demonstrating that self and custom build can be affordable. I was pleased to attend Grand Designs Live last week and have the opportunity to meet a number of people. It was a great event, and the message that came across loud and clear was that self and custom projects can be built on modest budgets by hard-working individuals and groups working in collaboration. These builds are as much delivered with passion and energy as with materials and finance.

We should also be designing for our changing and ageing society, ensuring that homes are accessible and fit for people of all ages, so that we build and maintain vibrant mixed communities that stand the test of time. That is certainly the case in Graven Hill, where, as my hon. Friend recognised, there is an immediate sense of ownership and community. There is something life-affirming about designing and building your own home. It is

about wanting to build something bespoke and individual, with character, that will be high-quality, accessible and enduring.

I want to finish by paying tribute to the National Custom and Self Build Association, which continues to provide leadership, expertise and experience to overcome sectoral barriers and challenges, and to my hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk and the Right to Build Task Force, who have done sterling work in banging the drum for custom and self-build, helping authorities and community groups to bring forward large affordable custom and self-build projects and demonstrating that that is possible.

I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury that custom and self-build can and should be a mainstream housing option in this country. With the measures that the Government are putting in place and the support of all Members in challenging the myths about custom and self-build, we are firmly on the path to realising that ambition. I thank my hon. Friend for securing the debate and for her work in pushing and championing what is undoubtedly a critical part of this country's future and the homes that we must build for the next generation.

Question put and agreed to.

6.4 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 13 May 2019

[SIOBHAIN McDONAGH *in the Chair*]

Bird Nesting Sites: Protection

4.30 pm

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 244233 relating to protecting nesting sites for birds.

It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. The petition is titled:

“Make ‘netting’ hedgerows to prevent birds from nesting a criminal offence.”

I will aim to reflect that. However, as we found through outreach work by Petitions Committee staff, including the live Facebook chat I held last week, the issue goes well beyond the detrimental effect of netting on nesting birds; netting affects the wellbeing of other wildlife, as well as having environmental consequences.

I am grateful to Margaret Moran for starting the petition, which has attracted in excess of 350,000 signatures. She acknowledges the broader repercussions of netting, stating in the text of the petition:

“Developers, and other interested parties are circumventing laws protecting birds by ‘netting’ hedgerows to prevent birds from nesting. This facilitates the uprooting of hedgerows which aid biodiversity and provide the only remaining nesting sites for birds, whose numbers are in sharp decline. ‘Netting’ hedgerows threatens declining species of birds, presents a danger by entrapment to wildlife, and produces large amounts of plastic waste.”

No doubt we will hear from colleagues, as I have learned from the public, that the practice of netting also applies to trees, buildings and even sand dunes.

A second live e-petition on bird nesting, which calls for legal protection for swallow, swift and martin nest sites, has more than 70,000 signatures. It was started in reaction to reports of the removal of swift, swallow and martin nests by supermarkets to prevent those migrating birds from returning to their nests the following year. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds reports that swift breeding numbers in the UK decreased by 53% between 1995 and 2016, which it attributes partly to the loss of nesting sites. I thank Simon Leadbeater, who started that petition, for raising the profile of that issue.

The practice of netting, especially the netting of hedgerows and trees by developers, appears to be on the increase. Experts say it is driven partly by the irrefutable demand for new housing, particularly affordable homes and bungalows. Indeed, *The Guardian* reported:

“The apparent rise in the use of netting this year has been partly fuelled...by a 78% increase in housebuilding over the last five years as developers respond to government pressure to build homes as quickly as possible.”

In the feedback that the Petitions Committee received, there are plenty of examples of the netting of hedgerows and trees up and down the country. In my constituency, a hedgerow was recently covered in green netting on behalf of developers seeking planning permission for up to eight new homes on adjoining land. Workers started to remove the netting and cut down the hedge, which does not require planning permission.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): My hon. Friend mentions an important aspect of this issue. Netting is being used more and more, almost as a safeguard—just in case—but it ought not to be. It should really be installed by an ecologist and checked several times a day to ensure that nothing is trapped inside. Developers are far too relaxed in their use of the procedure. It seems to me that there is very little regulation, inspection or checking.

Mike Hill: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I will come on to those issues, but I acknowledge that, sadly, a bird died in her constituency as a result of being trapped in netting.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): The hon. Gentleman may be aware of a recent controversy affecting my constituency, where netting was placed over cliffs before a major project called sandscaping to build up the beaches and improve coastal protection. Does he agree that it is really important that there is close collaboration on such schemes between councils and bodies such as the RSPB to ensure that everything is done absolutely properly to protect birds?

Mike Hill: Yes. I became aware of the Norfolk case through the Petitions Committee’s interactive work, and I was shocked that the practice extended to such schemes. The right hon. Gentleman makes a very valid point.

As we have seen in reaction to netting across the country, many of my constituents wrote to the council to protest against the installation of nets on the hedgerow in Hartlepool and its effect on wildlife and on birds’ nests. However, netting is used not just on housing developments but in all kinds of scenarios, including on major infrastructure projects such as High Speed 2.

Last month, HS2 contractors began netting hedgerows on the route near Quainton in Buckinghamshire, causing outrage among environmentalists. HS2 contends that all the work is legal, and it has employed an ecologist to monitor the site. In a statement, it said:

“The installation of this netting was carried out by HS2 contractors, as part of the pre-works for National Grid’s gas pipeline diversion scheme. This temporary netting is to discourage birds from nesting during construction and was installed before the nesting season started. The netting was installed under the direction of a suitably experienced ecologist and is monitored daily.”

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on opening the debate and I thank everyone who signed the petition. I think he must have read my speech, but the point bears repetition. Does he agree that the Government are the offender here, since HS2 is a Government project, so it is important that the Minister and her Front-Bench colleagues listen carefully to what environmentalists require so that schemes such as HS2 do not continue to murder our wildlife indiscriminately?

Mike Hill: I thank the right hon. Lady for her contribution. It shocked me that this was happening on a Government-led scheme, and that the contractors were working to Government directives on this matter. I hope that is a wake-up call for the management of any future projects of such scale.

[Mike Hill]

In response to the HS2 netting, the RSPB acknowledged that the practice was not illegal, but it said that

“careful consideration will be needed to develop rules around netting that really help birds, and allow legitimate activity to continue. But we cannot stand by and let the current practices spread unchallenged.”

Jenny Chapman: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way again. I should probably declare that I am a member of the RSPB. Part of the issue is that the use of netting is voluntary, and we use it because we wish to develop. It should be used only when absolutely necessary—when there is no other option and it is in the best interests of wildlife—but almost every time it is used, that is not the case.

Mike Hill: Again, I agree with my hon. Friend. I will come on to the way forward, as the industry describes it, but she is absolutely correct.

Although it is an offence to destroy an active nest, there are currently no laws to prevent the installation of netting. The RSPB and other charities, such as the Woodland Trust, propose changes to current practice and the introduction of laws that commit the Government to ensuring the recovery and protection of nature and wildlife, which would cause practices such as netting to come under much closer scrutiny.

The RSPB went on to say:

“We all need nature in our lives—which means giving birds and other wildlife, more, not less room to breed, feed and sing.”

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): There may be some good, practical reasons why the banning of netting in all circumstances would not be either desirable or enforceable, but should we not, at the very least, ban netting during the breeding season?

Mike Hill: The right hon. Gentleman makes an important point. At the heart of this debate is the fact that the netting typically goes on before the nesting season. That is the whole point of the netting, as far as I can derive, so that proposition is timely and important.

I have spoken to people in the construction industry, who state that the practice of netting is done before the nesting season, always on an ecologically sound footing and in accordance with the law. They claim that netting is applied in a manner that is sensitive to the environment and to wildlife, and under the supervision of specialists. They have raised concerns with me that where wildlife has come under threat or been trapped behind the netting, it is often as a result of the netting being tampered with or shredded after its application.

Current restrictions lead to developers using nets to cover hedgerows and trees in and around their sites before any nesting activity begins, as that could stop or restrict building during the summer months. Legislation protecting nesting birds is pretty much exclusive to section 1 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, which makes it an offence to destroy, damage or harm wild birds and nests that are in use or being built; to kill, injure or take any wild bird; to take, damage or destroy the nest of a wild bird; and to destroy an egg of any wild bird. To back that up, Natural England guidance states:

“You must not do any work which might harm nesting birds or destroy their nests. You’ll usually find nesting birds during the main nesting and breeding season from 1 March to 31 August.”

There is also legislation protecting hedgerows, which are described by the Woodland Trust as

“the most widespread semi-natural habitat in the UK”

that support

“a large diversity of flora and fauna.”

Many hedgerows are protected under the Hedgerows Regulations 1997, based on their age, length, location or importance. The regulations make it illegal to remove protected hedgerows without permission from the local planning authority. However, not all hedgerows are protected, and legal obligations on planning authorities are either complex or insufficient.

There is clearly strong opinion on this matter, and a mark of that is the fact that the petition calls for netting to become a criminal offence. There is no doubt that pressure has been put on developers, with some of them reviewing their practices; Bovis Homes and Bellway, for example, intend to change their policies to stop the use of netting at any of their sites. The industry’s union, the Home Builders Federation, says:

“As we build the homes the country needs, the industry is committed to supporting and enhancing biodiversity, proactively protecting wildlife and providing an overall increase in the number of trees.”

Is that enough to strike a balance between the need of people to have homes to live in and the need to protect our wildlife and green spaces?

There is no doubt that this petition has raised plenty of interest in the national press and media, as well as strong feelings. Perhaps it is time to make the law stronger, in an effort to protect our indigenous species and the environment.

4.44 pm

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. Once again, I congratulate the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) on opening the debate so well and referring to my main bugbear, HS2.

When I looked at the petition, of the 355,631 signatures, 1,162 came from my constituency, and 5,454 people from an area covering Aylesbury, Buckingham, Wycombe and Beaconsfield signed the petition to express their concern about netting and protecting birds. That is a sizeable number of people and reflects the great concern that is shown for our environment in Buckinghamshire.

When I was young, I spent a lot of time on my uncle’s farm in south Wales. One of the great joys was to go around the farm and pick up the egg shells after the birds had hatched—I used to save them. There were always a multitude of different birds nesting around the farm site. Over the years, living the countryside, I have noticed a reduction in bird life, not least among small hedgerow birds and birds that were very common in my youth. There used to be an abundance of sparrows, but in my back garden I do not see as many sparrows as I used to see 40 or 50 years ago. The RSPB says that, over the last 50 years, we have lost over 40 million birds in the UK; that is a great loss that cannot be replaced.

As the hon. Member for Hartlepool said, it is an offence to destroy an active nest but there are no laws to prevent the installation of nets. The Government need

to look at that and regulate for it, because it is not necessary to leave this to the market. We need to have a positive intervention that will make some difference. The RSPB spokesperson said:

“We cannot keep trying to squeeze nature into smaller and smaller spaces or demanding it fits in with our plans. This is an issue we are talking to the Government about as they look at what needs to happen over the next 25 years to stop our wildlife from continuing to vanish at an alarming rate.”

As I said in my intervention, the trouble is that the Government is just as big an offender as any housing developer; they need to take that on board. The route chosen for HS2 passes through irreplaceable natural habitats and unspoiled ecosystems. Constructing a railway line with a land-take equivalent to a four-lane motorway will have a devastating effect on the natural environment in these areas. Over 130 wildlife sites on the first stage alone will be directly affected, including 10 sites of special scientific interest, an area of outstanding natural beauty and 50 ancient woodlands. That is my backyard.

HS2 will cause an unacceptable level of damage to European, national and county-important species. A number of European protected species are present within the proposed HS2 route corridor, including the otter, the great crested newt and several species of bats. In addition, nationally protected species such as freshwater crayfish, stag beetle, smooth newt, great crested newt, common frog, slowworm, common lizard, European water vole, Eurasian badger, rare butterflies and breeding birds are known to be present in the impact zone.

The HS2 Action Alliance believes that insufficient regard has been paid to the impact of HS2 on biodiversity. Specific concerns about the risks facing wildlife include where the HS2 route is likely to cause direct loss or damage to the wildlife site through the land-take. This leads to the severance of habitats, causing fragmentation; reduction in the size of habitat areas; direct impacts on vegetation and on sedentary animal populations, for example in woodland and ponds; and/or the creation of barriers that affect behaviour of species on a site, such as foraging.

The further environmental impact on ancient woodlands—areas that have been covered by woods for over 400 years—is alarming. Their biodiversity value cannot be recreated by replacement planting; nor can the habitats for birds be replaced, because birds return to the same site, and their behaviour will not always coincide with the marvellous plantation that has been created by the developer in another area, in another place. HS2 is systematically destroying a large corridor of the countryside through the centre of Buckinghamshire, and elsewhere, to make way for a railway that is literally costing the earth.

As the hon. Gentleman said, HS2 says that while the work is being carried out, it is using an ecologist to monitor events; that includes the netting being used to prevent birds from using their regular nesting sites, which is monitored daily. I decided to test the water by putting in a written question asking who the ecologists monitoring the sites are, how often they visit—how many times a day—and how many birds or how much other wildlife they have found dead or dying, or have released. Without digging into the detail, it is easy to state that the work is being done under the guidance of ecologists, when what is happening on the ground could be completely different. I look to the Minister to encourage

the Department for Transport to give me not one of its brush-off answers to the question, but a detailed one, so that we can be reassured that where the Government are in charge, they are keeping up with their responsibilities.

Jenny Chapman: I cannot remember whether it is the RSPB or Natural England that says the nets need to be checked three times a day by people who know what they are doing. I do not believe that that is happening. Was the right hon. Lady able to glean any more information about that when she did her research?

Dame Cheryl Gillan: The hon. Lady will know that I often have a great deal of difficulty getting any information about HS2 out of the powers that be, but I continue to press because I do not believe we should give up. I have only been at it 10 years, trying to scrutinise the project. I hope I have another 10 years to go.

HS2 was clear in its statement about the bird netting:

“The netting was installed under the direction of a suitably experienced ecologist and is monitored daily”,

but I want further and better particulars, as they say. I am not entirely convinced that those nets will be monitored on a daily basis. Perhaps I will be called cynical, but I want to check. It is important, particularly in the light of the number of people showing great concern about what is a relatively new development, in terms of trying to get rid of some of our wildlife and bird species.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): The right hon. Lady is making an excellent point. In my constituency I have seen where the habitat of ground-nesting birds—lapwings in particular—has been destroyed by herbicides being put down on sites that developers hope to develop. Does she agree that we need not just stronger legislation but stronger penalties for such actions that deliberately harm our wildlife, including actions leading to the destruction of raptors? I see such actions happening across my constituency, and there is little repercussion.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: The hon. Lady makes a powerful point, and I shall let it stand, but I should certainly be interested to see where the route lies and where the path takes us. There is no doubt about it: 20 years ago, after I became the MP for Chesham and Amersham, one of the great joys in the Chiltern hills was the reintroduction of the red kite. One of the great pleasures,—if the hon. Lady would like to come out and visit the Chilterns area of outstanding natural beauty—is to see the red kites flying. They really are a source of great joy. It is a pity that we cannot do the same with some of our smaller nesting birds, which, sadly, we are losing.

I think I have made my point about HS2 and the Minister has heard it, but I must say that it begs the question why, if parts of the countryside have to be removed to make way for so-called progress, tree and hedge removals cannot be completed outside the nesting season. After all, it has taken 10 years and we do not even have the go-ahead for HS2, but we are already damaging the environment—irreparably, in my view—with the enabling works, even though we do not know whether the project will go ahead.

We are engaged in a major battle for the environment against global warming. Today we are discussing another battle—the battle for our birds in the United Kingdom. If we do not pay attention to the smallest creatures of our wildlife, we shall end up with a sorry, barren world, in which the next generations will be forced to live.

4.55 pm

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I think this is the first time that you have chaired a debate that I have taken part in, Ms McDonagh, so it is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today.

It is good to see so many hon. Members here to discuss this important environmental issue. We have already heard some excellent speeches on the consequences of netting and the action required. I commend the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill), who set the scene well.

In a short speech, I will concentrate mainly on my constituent, Maggie Moran, who started the petition that is the reason we are all here this afternoon. Maggie and her family are in Parliament today. She started her petition in the early hours of the morning after a long shift at Hull Royal Infirmary, where she works. At first it was shared among friends; it went on to gain more than 300,000 signatures, national media coverage and a response from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, which I understand has written to developers reminding them of their legal obligations.

Maggie was kind enough to write to me before the debate. I know that she has also spoken to the media and received a lot of media coverage, and has explained why this issue is so important to her. In her note to me, she talks powerfully of her upbringing and how her family instilled in her a deep love and respect for nature. She speaks fondly of holidays where she and her father calculated the age of hedgerows. As she reminds us, our hedgerows are ancient, beautiful, rich ecosystems. They are homes, breeding grounds, safe corridors and hibernation spots for birds, bats, dormice, reptiles, insects, hedgehogs and others. They play a major part in preventing soil loss and reducing flooding. I represent a constituency in east Yorkshire. The Humber estuary is prone to flooding and 95% of the city of Hull is below sea level, so flooding is an important issue for me and my constituents. Also, hedgerows help to reduce road noise, and they produce oxygen, which of course helps with the climate challenge. Hedgerows are not obstacles to be removed, but life support systems to be protected. As has been discussed in more depth today, netting puts those fragile ecosystems at risk. It can entrap birds, dormice, bats and hedgehogs, separating them from their nests and food, injuring them and even putting their lives at risk.

We must look seriously at ending the practice of netting, but we must also think beyond that. Last year in the UK, numbers of bats, hedgehogs, birds and insects continued to plummet. The UN report last week spoke powerfully of how nature's decline will presage our own. Awareness is growing that to support society, we must change the rules to give nature room to thrive. The Government must look again at how the developments we need—houses, schools and hospitals—can be achieved without destroying nature. As Maggie said, we must look at prioritising brownfield land, which the Campaign to Protect Rural England has said can be used for more than 1 million homes on 18,000 sites. When greenfield is the only option, we should include original habitats, including hedgerows and trees, in the designs.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech; I hope her constituent appreciates what she is saying on her behalf. As parliamentary species champion for the swift, I am keen to ensure that in urban development we put swift bricks

into houses, which provide those birds with a habitat. That is a really easy step and councils such as, I think, Exeter have made it compulsory for new developments. Does she agree that that is an excellent way to provide a home for swifts?

Diana Johnson: My hon. Friend, who is a great champion of nature and the environment, makes an important point. If that practice could be spread far and wide, it would be an excellent measure.

I will conclude by saying that it was nice to meet Maggie's children Nell and John today; they are seeing at first hand what campaigning can achieve. Maggie told me that she put together the petition and brought her children to Parliament today because she hopes they will witness the lesson that, if we speak out, we can create real change for the future. To use her words:

"I want them to see that...if they believe in a cause, and if they have conviction and are willing to speak out and work hard, then anything can be achieved".

I am profoundly thankful to Maggie for raising this issue with us. I hope that this debate will prove her right and that action will be forthcoming to deal with netting of hedgerows.

5 pm

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) on obtaining this debate in response to the public e-petition, which has rightly engendered a lot of support and interest up and down the country.

The petition comes virtually at the same time as the publication of the United Nations report that shows the extinction rates accelerating and "nature's dangerous decline". That report, from the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, raises some interesting points. It ascribes some of the loss of those natural species and habitats to

"changes in land and sea use; direct exploitation of organisms; climate change; pollution; and invasion of alien species".

I instigated a debate here on the latter subject not long ago, regarding the importing of plants, trees and so forth from overseas.

It seems to me that the RSPB strikes a chord when it states:

"We cannot keep trying to squeeze nature into smaller and smaller spaces or demanding it fits in with our plans."

The problem is that since 1970 the global human population has more than doubled, from 3.7 billion to 7.6 billion. Since 1900, the average abundance of native species in most major land-based habitats has fallen by at least 20%. There has also been a 100% growth of urban areas since 1992. All those things conspire to squeeze out nature or, if not to squeeze it out, to squeeze it into a tighter spot.

That is why I believe that, with the exception of some eminent hon. Members sitting around this Chamber, we have woken up very late to all this. There must be a trade-off between economic growth and the need to provide houses for people, which no one debates, and the requirement to ensure that the built environment is sustainable for the natural environment. We cannot have one without the other. Where would the world be without birdsong? A very sad place. Where would the world be without swallows? I have not spotted a swallow in my part of the world, Devon, at all this year.

Doing nothing is simply not an option. For too long we have put up with some of the behaviour of the volume house builders. It is perhaps unfair to paint them all with the same brush. It is an easy thing to castigate, but somebody has to build those houses. I lament that there are not more local house builders. I think this Government can do a lot more, as they have said they will, in encouraging smaller local house builders—those same house builders who were squeezed out by the last recession—to play their role, because they are from the communities in which they will be building, so they are likely to build in a more sustainable and environmentally friendly way.

Time and time again we have seen, up and down the country, the major volume house builders riding roughshod over local planning officers—because there are not enough of them and many of them are not qualified enough—changing the terms on which they develop and, too often, squeezing out the natural environment. I am not against profit; I am a Conservative, and I believe in profit and that a rising tide lifts all ships. However, I am a believer in responsible capitalism, and it is about time this Government, or any Government of any hue, were a little tougher with some of those volume house builders. Perhaps then we, as Members of Parliament, would not have to put up with so many constituents complaining to us about shoddy finishes and the like.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): The point the right hon. Gentleman is making about the volume house builders and their complete disregard, it seems to me, for some of the planning regulations in place has been reflected in my local authority area. In Humberston, Persimmon Homes has cut down about 200 perfectly healthy trees to build its properties without having the proper permissions in place. It will now have to replant all those trees, but they should not have been removed in the first place. Does he agree that there should be much more enforceable action on these big build companies to ensure that they adhere to the rules that are laid down in the first place?

Sir Hugo Swire: I do and I do not agree; I agree that that sort of behaviour is wholly unacceptable, but I do not agree that they should replace like for like, if it is the case that they have done this where there were tree preservation orders or the like. If they have cut down a number of trees, they should be obliged to plant many, many times the amount of trees they have cut down, to encourage a change in the pattern of their behaviour.

I am afraid that it often comes down to the lack of local planning officers or their inability to challenge those large companies. Local councils are terrified of being taken to appeal, because then they have to fund it, so it becomes a vicious circle and a win-win for the volume house builders, as we have seen—although I say again to the volume house builders, or their representatives watching this debate, that I do not view them all in the same light.

That is one of the points on which I wish to conclude. The Government have been quite clear, but they need to be a little bit clearer what they are going to do about this. Why do we not have a register run by the Department, naming and shaming the worst offenders, so we can see on a regular basis which house builders and developers are behaving responsibly and which are not? There are

also such things as shareholder action groups, and they and others can vote at annual general meetings and so forth and can bring the matter to the board's attention. Naming and shaming, in this instance, is an extraordinarily good way to proceed.

I believe it is time to stand up to that sort of abuse. We are in the slight conundrum—or I am—of castigating some of these volume house builders while at the same time recognising that we need to build more houses, and quickly, if we are to avert what is becoming a national crisis in getting younger people on to the housing ladder. However, with the current scrutiny of developers, I would have thought it would make eminent good sense from the point of view of their own public relations. Indeed, if I were advising them—I am not available to advise them, incidentally—on public relations, I would say, “This is precisely the sort of headline that we don't want to read about ourselves.”

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): In my constituency, there are a couple of developments on greenfield sites. I was pleased to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) report that Bellway has now decided not to use netting, because until a few weeks ago it had netted an area in my constituency where it was about to develop, which, as he said, caused great uproar and consternation among people who were opposed to the development in the first place.

Sir Hugo Swire: That is very good and shows that some of these companies are more concerned about the environment than gross profit—or, indeed, net profit. They should concentrate on having no netting, not net profit, in some instances.

To conclude, a list of offenders would be a good thing. However, I do not think that we should use a hammer to crack a nut. Parliamentarians should insist only on proportionate, enforceable legislation. As I said, I am not convinced that it is either desirable or practical to ban netting of hedgerows, bushes and trees throughout the year—because I am not really an environmentalist in this sense, I do not know whether it is. However, as a start, we should ban netting during the breeding season, which the Minister will hopefully say something about when she concludes the debate. If we can achieve that this afternoon, it seems to me that we will not have wasted our time.

5.10 pm

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. I thank the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill), along with the Petitions Committee, for securing this important debate.

Many of us will have sung the hymn “All Things Bright and Beautiful”. Some will have sung it rather well, and some, like me, less well, but we will all remember the line

“each little bird that sings”.

The dawn chorus provided by our feathered friends is one of life's most uplifting and natural sounds. Let us not lose it; it is diminished as it is. We need to cherish it.

Birds have played an important part in our lives for centuries, from the canary that protected the miners to the pigeon that carried messages in war and the budgerigar

[*Bill Grant*]

that perhaps provided companionship to a person on their own. The wild birds in our hedgerows are equally important for our wellbeing, the pollination of our plants and tourism, bringing twitchers, if I may call them that, to areas such as the Isle of Islay, where there is a host of wildlife—it is well worth visiting—and Loch Doon, in my constituency, where ospreys nest.

It is important that humans and wildlife co-exist in harmony for a balanced ecosystem. It is therefore disappointing to learn of the practice of netting trees, bushes and hedgerows prior to construction work commencing on various sites, with the clear aim of preventing birds from nesting, alleviating the risk of delay to those developments. However, there is some good news, as has been mentioned: I understand that Bovis Homes and Bellway will not use netting at any of their sites. That is a welcome step, although I fully appreciate there has to be a balance among supporting businesses, providing homes and protecting wildlife. Let us hope that other house builders, major and smaller—I am sure many smaller house builders have very good practices—follow the good practice of Bellway and Bovis.

The Woodland Trust believes that netting, while not necessarily unlawful—the relevant offence would be to take or destroy an active nest—shows a complete and selfish disregard for birds and other wildlife. The RSPB is campaigning to introduce a law to protect nest sites, to enable migrating birds to return and rear their young in a safe environment. I understand that the intention is to do so in a manner that does not prevent the development of land but encourages considerate and careful development. Potential options include the relocating or replacing of hedgerows at an early stage in development, prior to nesting season commencing, or putting up nesting boxes as a compensatory measure.

Birds and wildlife are part of our ecosystem and our planet, and we should embrace them, not evict them. Protection is available for bats nesting in buildings, with strict rules about disturbing their chosen habitat. Why should birds not be given the same or similar consideration, with a balanced approach between the needs of nature and of the developer? I ask the Minister to consider enhancing the protection under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, which already protects nesting wild birds, to make netting an offence as well, although in a sensitive and balanced manner, to allow all interests to co-exist.

Mike Hill: Does the hon. Gentleman agree with the points raised in the second petition, about returning birds, and that equal measures are needed for netting places where birds normally have their nests? They migrate and return to find netting there to prevent them from nesting. I opened up a small housing new build in Hartlepool only last Friday, and incorporated into those houses and bungalows were bat boxes and bird boxes. Such cheap and good practice should always be the way ahead.

Bill Grant: I totally agree. We cannot meet our housing need, which I think we all agree we have to secure for our fellow citizens, at the expense of evicting wildlife or birds. We have to embrace them. Innovative ways have

been suggested for how we can host them and make them part of our lives and part of our communities, because they are part of the planet and we need to share it. On that kindly note, I shall end my speech.

5.15 pm

John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. I add my congratulations to the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) on securing the debate. His observation on the plastic-waste debris from this practice flies in the face of pollution from plastic not ruining our planet. It is hard to believe that this is actually a practice at this moment.

I also liked what the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan) said on HS2. The reckless ruination of ancient woodlands and the subsequent impact on wildlife is not acceptable and should not go ahead. I particularly praise the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) and her constituents for raising the petition. I very much liked the points of the right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) on volume house-builders and championing local builders. We need to hear an awful lot more of that throughout the whole UK.

As we all know, there are few greater pleasures in life than the music of wild birdsong. The dawn chorus has just been mentioned, and blackbirds and robins in our gardens are an absolute pleasure for us all to watch. In fact, I have a one-eyed blackbird in my back garden who goes round in the same direction all the time. I do not know if that is because of where I put the food out, but that is the way that he manages to go. Birds are very much part of the sights and sounds of our communities. They are everywhere. They are the embodiment of the natural world, which is why it is abhorrent to see them taken for granted, to the extent that they can be disregarded like pests or vermin.

In my hometown of Denny and Stoneywood, I have witnessed probably some of the worst practices of developers. Some giant sequoias—giant redwoods—planted 50 or 60 years ago by local children were cut down accidentally by a developer, and I never felt such a gut-wrenching feeling in all my life. Netting prevents birds from breeding in their natural environment, and it has become so prevalent that their numbers could be at risk. If someone in the future reads of the practice of netting to aid housing development, they would be forgiven for thinking that this country and the planet was going through a pronounced period of planet stability and had an overabundance of wildlife. One would think the planet was managing very well, when we all know that that is not the case—perhaps apart from the developers of this mad scheme.

It appears to any casual observer that developers and conservationists have laid down together in amity on this, but I emphasise that that is not the case. Like others, I was taken aback when made aware of this practice. I was absolutely astonished and astounded to see those nets all over these trees. Stories are widespread that trees in some areas across the country have been covered in nets before developers even have planning permission. As if dealing with climate change is not enough, our birds, some returning from abroad, find their nesting sites on trees, bushes and hedges draped in plastic nets.

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): I congratulate the Morans for initiating the debate and for putting the issue on the agenda in the way that they have; I assume these are the Morans in the Gallery. We have heard about the massive decline in bird numbers in this country—14 million in the last 50 years, according to the RSPB. Habitat loss is a big part of that, and netting is increasingly a part of habitat loss. It may not be the biggest part, but does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is without doubt the crudest demonstration of, at best, our disregard for the natural world, and at worst the ongoing war against nature that we have seen in this country, which has massively reduced our biodiversity and which needs to be addressed, if necessary through legislation?

John Mc Nally: I totally agree. This practice sends all the wrong messages about what we are trying to do; it gives everyone the wrong message. We should be sending clear messages that we are environmentalists and are trying to protect our planet. This practice tells people the opposite, and the fact that those employing the practice think that they can get away with it is, again, unacceptable. Others have mentioned what we need to do about that.

As we have heard, there are two open parliamentary petitions concerned with bird nesting. The one that we are discussing is specifically about making the netting of hedgerows to prevent birds from nesting a criminal offence, and I believe that it had attracted more than 350,000 signatures by 2 May. As has been mentioned, articles in *The Guardian* and reports on the BBC have shown where nets are being used across the UK and have helped to highlight the deep concerns of the public and prominent environmentalists. Important organisations, including the Woodland Trust and the RSPB, have led the objections to the practice. Environmentalists Sir David Attenborough and Chris Packham have spoken out against it, warning of the impact of the widespread use of nets. Only a fool would ignore the warnings from those great people.

In Scotland, section 1 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 makes it an offence to obstruct or prevent any bird from using its nest, and section 5 makes it an offence to use a net to kill or take a wild bird. However, provided that the net is put on before nest building commences, no offence is committed under that legislation, which is strange. Under the habitats regulations, it is an offence deliberately or recklessly to obstruct access to a breeding site or resting place of a European protected species or otherwise to deny the animal use of the breeding site or resting place. Similarly, it is an offence under the Wildlife and Countryside Act to damage, destroy or obstruct access to any structure or place used by the species protected under schedule 5 to that Act.

Scotland, like other countries, is a nation of animal lovers. We take the welfare of our pets, wild creatures and livestock very seriously. Developers in Scotland are aware that they have a responsibility to preserve important environmental assets such as landscapes and wildlife habitats. They should act responsibly and care for our natural habitats. Given that there is a significant body of European Union legislation on animal welfare, the Scottish Government, through the SNP, will work to ensure that the Government here ensure that the protections that that offers are maintained and that there is no lapse in standards in this arena as the UK leaves the EU.

Calls have been made for those wishing to keep birds away from certain sites to work in harmony with nature, not against it. Why not work around the nesting season and employ someone who knows about wildlife to advise on how people should go about their business while causing the least harm? I take the point made by the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham about how often checks must be done. If nets cannot be avoided, regular checks should be made to ensure that no bird or wild animal has been caught in them.

I have to say that, even with some safeguards in place, my feeling is that this practice is in no way acceptable. If we treasure our precious wildlife at all, netting simply has to stop. If developers will not exercise proper care and diligence, suitable penalties should be applied to them.

5.22 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) on introducing the debate in the way he did and on setting out the need for urgent action to stop the cruel and inhumane practice of netting of bird nesting sites. Every bird matters, and because our wildlife does not have a political voice of its own, it is important that we in this place provide that voice. Today, the Minister will have heard a comprehensive and cross-party argument—on both sides of the House—as to why this cruel practice needs to be stopped and why measures need to be taken to discourage not only developers but, as a number of colleagues have said, the public sector and public organisations from using this practice.

Humans are threatening our planet's wildlife. They are causing huge and potentially irreversible climate change, and we all need to do something to stop it. A few weeks ago, the House agreed to a Labour motion declaring a climate emergency. The emergency is not just about carbon. Although it is about carbon, it is also about species loss, habitat decline and the pollution of our seas and waterways and our atmosphere. All of that needs to be taken together. When it comes to habitat decline, netting around bird nesting sites is a contributor to the wider issue of habitat loss—a point made by the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith). From the bees that pollinate our crops, to the forests that hold back flood waters, the report published last week by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services reveals how humans are ravaging the very ecosystems that support our society.

It is not a coincidence that the same quote has been given by both a Labour and a Conservative Member of Parliament:

“We cannot keep trying to squeeze nature into smaller and smaller spaces or demanding it fits in with our plans.”

We need cross-party consensus that we will not accept any form of economic behaviour without a plan as to how it will protect our environment.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I could not agree more. My hon. Friend is making a very good case for the need for cross-party consensus on what is a long-term problem. If we are to deal with nets on

[Helen Goodman]

nesting sites, does he agree that we should also do something about roosting sites, which are not mentioned in the current legislation? In Whorlton, in my constituency, thousands of starlings have been doing murmurations for the last two years, but some developers, where they are building new houses, want to knock down the hedges that have become the roosting sites of those starlings. Does my hon. Friend agree that we should also cover the issue of roosting sites if we are taking the time to change the legislation?

Luke Pollard: I agree that this is a complex area that requires detailed consultation not only with developers, but with public-sector land managers, such as Network Rail, HS2 and local councils. We also need to look at the way our wildlife uses not only our built environment but our natural environment in different ways. My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) made a clear distinction between building on brownfield and building on greenfield sites, but there can be bird nesting sites in beautiful trees on both brownfield and greenfield sites, so we need to take steps to deal with what is sometimes a false distinction in our legislation between brown and green, but also to deal with the different ways in which different species use our built environments. I am grateful for the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) has just made.

The report from the UN said that we need “transformative change” to stop the trend of habitat loss, and we do. That is why it is really important that the Minister take the concerns expressed in this debate not only back to her Department—I hope that she will speak about the built environment in a moment—but to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, because we need a cross-Government approach to address many of these concerns.

Kerry McCarthy: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. It is important that we look at how we farm our land. The vast majority of land in this country is used for growing food, and there is a real issue because as it becomes more industrialised in scale, there are fewer hedgerows, bigger fields and less attention to biodiversity. Does my hon. Friend agree that we should support measures to encourage farmers to farm more sustainably, with more regard for the biodiversity on the land?

Luke Pollard: I agree entirely. A few weeks ago, I visited a farm just outside Plymouth run by a fantastic farmer called Johnny Haimes, who demonstrated how agriculture could be more sustainable and still be profitable. That is the type of best practice that we need to encourage right across our agricultural sectors if we are to address the high levels of carbon that they use, but also to make our soils and our waterways in and around those agricultural lands more sustainable.

A number of hon. Members have made the point that it is not just developers that we need to look at. As the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan) said, we need to look at how the public sector should lead by example on this matter. The majority of that can be done by local councils, but the right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire), in

the good and passionate rebuke to austerity that I am glad he made, spoke about the loss of planning inspectors at local level. That has hollowed out some of the expertise, particularly in relation to wildlife; I am thinking of the loss of wildlife officers from our local councils.

I am very pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) mentioned the superb work that the Labour council in Exeter has done in choosing swift bricks. More councils should be looking at that. Indeed, about a month ago, there was a national day for putting up a bird box, and my mum—who should always get a good mention in these debates—bought me not one, not two, but three bird boxes for my birthday, so my garden in Plymouth has plenty more nesting sites.

That brings me to a good point about whether the habitats that are lost should be replaced one for one. That is a discussion that has just been had. I mentioned to the Minister before the debate that there was a fantastic piece on “Countryfile” last night about the net gain consultation—perfect wordplay for the debate that we are having today

That consultation was run by DEFRA, and it asked whether we should have a net gain of biodiversity if there is to be economic development. The Government consultation received 670 responses and closed in February. In theory, the results are to be published alongside the environment Bill later this year. I would be grateful if the Minister could tell us whether that is still the plan, because we know that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs publishes plenty of consultations, but takes very little concrete action. I would be grateful if the Minister set out what she intends to do in respect of that.

Dame Cheryl Gillan *rose*—

Luke Pollard: We are seeing species decline in all parts of our wildlife in every part of the United Kingdom. The breeding farmland bird index is falling. It has declined by more than half since 1970. The breeding woodland bird index for the UK declined by 25% between 1970 and 2017. We cannot keep squeezing nature into smaller spaces and we must put the environment at the heart of Government policy. The best way to do that is for the Government to lead by example in the projects that they run and the leadership that they can provide for the environment sector.

Liz Twist: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. In the past fortnight, many of us attended an RSPB drop-in called “Let nature sing”. I am sure that we all supported the goal of getting their nature CD into the charts. I am told it got to number 18 in the charts. There is a bigger issue. He is talking about planning issues and squeezing nature. Many residents are concerned that when we develop greenfield sites in particular, but other sites as well, it feels as if the environment is a long way down the priorities list. We look at off-site mitigation and other things, but what we want to do is preserve the site. This has been a huge issue in my constituency recently.

Luke Pollard: Singles like that would make a proud addition to my collection of Britney and Kylie songs on iTunes, so we need to promote it. We also need to ensure that every type of economic activity that we have as a

country becomes greener. If we are to meet our Paris climate change obligations, we need to remove 80% of the carbon from our economy. We will not be able to do that simply by recycling some more plastic bottles. We need fundamental economic change. The UN report on species loss outlined the transformative change that is required, and made it clear that when it comes to the loss of habitat in respect of the trees and hedgerows that are being lost through bird netting we need to take quicker action.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way, because he ignored me when I tried to ask him to give way earlier, when he was talking about net gain. Regarding the aim of net gain, I hope that we all will observe that in some instances it is impossible. If we destroy ancient woodland, we cannot replace it: it is irreplaceable. I look at net gain with a great deal of scepticism, as I hope others do.

Luke Pollard: The right hon. Lady is right to be cautious, because with net gain the devil is in the detail. It cannot simply be used as a stamp, to pretend that it makes the activity greener when it does not. A number of us share that suspicion about the consultation, so I would be grateful if the Minister could respond to that.

Finally, I thank all hon. Members who have contributed to the debate. I thank Maggie Moran, Nell and John for their work in setting up the petition, as well as Simon Leadbeater, who initiated the second petition, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool mentioned. We all need to do our bit to put pressure on developers, to ensure that the cruel and inhumane practice of netting precious bird-nesting sites comes to an end. I would be grateful if the Minister set out how the Government will be doing that with a cross-Government approach in the weeks and months ahead.

5.33 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler): It is also my first time serving with you in the Chair, Ms McDonagh. I congratulate the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) on securing the debate. I am sure it was a bit of a lottery and that probably many people applied for it.

As we have heard, more than 355,000 signatures are on the petition. That shows the strength of feeling about the misuse of anti-bird netting in our country, so I am pleased to see the passion shown in this debate. I am grateful for the contributions made by hon. Members from across the House and representing most parts of the country. The hon. Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman), who has unfortunately had to leave, highlighted the importance of developers using netting when it is not necessary. My right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) reminded us that netting should only be used outside the nesting and breeding season. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan) made such a powerful point about the great interest shown in this issue by the good citizens of the Buckinghamshire area in particular.

I am grateful for this opportunity to set out the Government's position and the action we are taking, and to respond to the important points made in the

debate. This Government share the public's concern about the misuse of anti-bird netting. That is why we lost no time in taking action. On 8 April, the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government set out the Government's views. In an open letter to major developers, circulated by the Home Builders Federation to all its members, he made clear that using anti-bird netting to prevent birds from nesting is not acceptable. He called on house builders to act, reminding them of the Natural England guidelines that specify what surveys of the potentially developed land are to be carried out, and how we can prevent or mitigate any danger to wildlife.

It is worth taking a moment to remember why this is so important. Native bird species have been in shocking decline since the 1960s, with 40 million birds vanishing from our skies. Some 56% of bird species in the UK are in decline. Nets stop birds getting through to make their nests. Gaps in the netting can leave birds trapped or young birds unfed.

I am aware that this is a complex issue. Nesting birds present in trees and hedges can cause real delays to construction. Some of the nets are placed with good intentions. In Norfolk recently, a district council draped nets over cliffs so that a landscaping project could proceed. However, the nets covered more than the spring breeding ground of sand martins than was necessary. In this case, with advice from the RSPB, the upper section of the netting was removed, allowing nesting where there was no risk to the birds during the work.

Kerry McCarthy: A lot of people were very distressed when they saw the pictures of the sand martins that had flown thousands of miles back from their winter migration and could not get back to their nests. I accept that there probably needed to be some work done on coastal erosion, or whatever the reason for the netting was, but there must be an issue of timing with such things. It was done at exactly the wrong time, when those birds were returning to their homes.

Mrs Wheeler: The hon. Lady makes a very good point. That council has learnt its lesson. It should have brought the RSPB in much earlier, but it did rectify the situation. I also watched that footage and it was very distressing.

Netting is permissible if the intention is to protect birds, but I suspect that many of those who signed the petition are concerned that these rules are often carefully misunderstood by some developers. Netting should never be used to hinder the natural cycle of nest building and the nurturing and feeding of young birds. Nets should protect birds not profits.

The law on protecting birds and preventing the disturbance of nests is clear. Under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and the Animal Welfare Act 2006, prosecutions can be brought if someone causes unnecessary suffering to a bird by an act or failure to act, especially when the person concerned knew or reasonably ought to have known that their action or inaction would cause harm. Breaches can lead to fines or imprisonment. I am happy to acknowledge that some developers get the message. As we have heard, Bellway and Bovis Homes have declared that they are both changing their policies to stop the use of bird netting, and Barratt Homes does not net hedges or trees on any of its 400 or so sites

[Mrs Wheeler]

across England, Scotland and Wales. Their actions show that it is possible not to use bird netting when firms plan ahead, so that construction does not clash with the nest-making and chick-rearing season.

As we have just marked Hedgehog Awareness Week, I am particularly aware that there must be wider recognition that we must do all we can to safeguard and enhance our biodiversity for the future. Today, local authorities already have a duty, under our national planning policy framework, to pursue net gains for biodiversity. The Government intend to give local authorities more powers to insist on the protection and enhancement of biodiversity. Our 25-year environment plan is a symbol of that deep commitment and a reflection of our shared desire to leave our environment in a better place than we found it. To answer the question of the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) specifically, our forthcoming Environment Bill will make biodiversity net gain mandatory for development.

Luke Pollard: Thank you.

Mrs Wheeler: There's a scoop for you.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: The Minister is doing well in picking up on all the points. If it will be made mandatory for all developers, why do the Government not make it mandatory right now for HS2 to stop its netting?

Mrs Wheeler: Regretfully, we need legislation to do that. When the Bill comes in, that will be the legislative vehicle for it, because whether it is birds or hedgehogs, we are determined that our wildlife does not just survive, but thrives.

Kerry McCarthy: I sit on the Environmental Audit Committee and the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, which have been conducting pre-legislative scrutiny on the bits of the Environment Bill that have been published. Although I welcome the idea of biodiversity net gain, there is real concern about how it would be enforced. It is not something that we can replace like for like; it would take an awfully long time to replace what was destroyed, and in some cases, it could not be replaced. I urge the Minister to talk to environmentalists, ecologists and other specialists about whether it is feasible to make the proposed swap.

Mrs Wheeler: Again, the hon. Lady makes a perfectly reasonable point. I am sure the people in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will have heard it and will pick up on it.

DEFRA's recent consultation proposed introducing a requirement for new developments to deliver a 10% net gain for biodiversity, onsite or off. It also includes an alternative tariff that developers could pay to offset the costs of providing environmental improvements. I look forward to seeing those proposals considered and debated in due course. I hope the hon. Lady will be involved in that.

Liz Twist: Does the Minister accept that many residents faced with the loss of hedges or the offsite mitigation of environmental benefits are unhappy? They want their

local environment to be preserved for birds and other wildlife and for local enjoyment, rather than some money to be paid to address the issue in another place.

Mrs Wheeler: In every planning application, the matter will be dealt with at the local level, so local wishes will be part of the decision-making process.

Helen Goodman: I am sorry to say this to the Minister, but if the legal framework is inadequate, the local planning authority cannot take such matters into account, because it does not have the vires—the powers—to do it. That is why we are looking for legal change in the area.

Mrs Wheeler: Indeed, and as I like to remind hon. Members, that will be debated as part of the Environment Bill when it is introduced. I am sure all hon. Members present would like to take part in that debate when it happens.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: Can the Minister tell hon. Members present when we can expect the Environment Bill?

Mrs Wheeler: In due course.

There is no question of making a choice between homes and nature. We can and must have both, because for us, as well as for animals, the benefits are clear. Our natural environment can have a profound impact on our physical and mental health. We need access to our natural environment; it is part of what makes life on earth worth while.

Ultimately, the responsibility lies with all of us. Our planning system and our planning authorities play an essential role in the mix; mechanisms allow them to say what can and cannot take place on a construction site, as well as when. Planning conditions, including surveys and other pre-construction stages, can be enforced by local authorities. If developers do not comply, a development may become unlawful.

The Government are working tirelessly to set up further protections. Through our revised national planning policy framework, and with help from stakeholders such as the Wildlife Trusts and the Woodland Trust, we are supporting planning tools that protect our natural environment. We have increased the protections for irreplaceable habitats such as ancient woodland and ancient and veteran trees; any loss or harm from development must be “wholly exceptional”. We have also clarified the importance of local wildlife sites in plan making by introducing the need for plan makers to take a proactive approach to rising temperatures and, wherever possible, to help to improve environmental conditions, including water and air quality.

As announced in the housing White Paper in 2017, we have provided £6.9 million over three years to Natural England, which will allow it to roll out a proportionate risk-based approach to protected species licensing nationally—principally, for great crested newts. That will provide greater protection at the same time as speeding up the process and reducing costs. We have also provided £210,000 to the Woodland Trust to support the first update of the ancient woodland inventory maps since the 1980s, to make protection more effective.

Developers must play their part in the wider wildlife agenda. They must provide access to new green space and develop green infrastructure, such as swift bricks,

bat bricks and hedgehog highways, because our wildlife and its habitats are interconnected. We would like developers to design in as many nature-friendly stipulations as are reasonable. The Housing Minister saw that done impressively on a visit to Kidbrooke Village last week, where natural corridors and landscapes are a core part of the masterplan behind the regeneration. Let me be clear that gains in biodiversity must be genuine, not just a token gesture by a developer ticking a box by drilling holes for a theoretical hedgehog highway.

We must all play our part. Existing householders, neighbourhood planning bodies and parish and town councils can help to ensure that wildlife-friendly features are built into every garden in every neighbourhood. People can also make their voices heard—for example, the recent public outcry about the netting spread over a hedgerow in Berkshire led to it being removed by the council. Today's petition is another example of democracy in action and people making their voices heard. Although we reject today's call for yet more detailed regulation on bird netting—I have described the protections that already exist—I have the deepest respect for the aims of the petitioners, in particular Mrs Moran and her family.

Even as we pursue our campaign to build the homes this country so badly needs, we must do all we can to champion our natural environment. In the words of Gerard Manley Hopkins:

“Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet”.

5.47 pm

Mike Hill: Equally, in the words of Joni Mitchell:

“They paved paradise
And put up a parking lot.”

I hope we do not get to that.

Next to Hartlepool is RSPB Saltholme, which is a lovely nature reserve in an industrial landscape. Recently, a site of special scientific interest was extended around Hartlepool's beautiful coast. Because netting had been used in my town for development, I was grateful that the Petitions Committee allowed me to introduce the debate.

I must thank the petitioner, Maggie Moran, who is present, and the second petitioner, Mr Leadbeater. I also thank the right hon. Members for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan) and for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire), my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson), the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant), and all hon. Members who intervened so wonderfully. I thank Petitions Committee staff for, as ever, getting involved in researching the subject and for all the interactive work they did on Facebook.

It has been a helpful and useful debate. I hope we make some progress to tighten up on a practice that has clearly been escalating lately, given the demands of the housing sector and the requirements to protect our wildlife. On the second petition, the netting of existing buildings to prevent migrant birds returning to their nests needs to be looked at as well. As has been pointed out in relation to HS2, the Government have a responsibility for the work that the contractors who work for them do on such big projects.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 244233 relating to protecting nesting sites for birds.

5.50 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statement

Monday 13 May 2019

JUSTICE

Court and Tribunal Estate Consultation

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): On 10 May I published the response to the “Fit for the future: transforming the court and tribunal estate” consultation. It sets out how decisions regarding the future of the estate should be made and makes clear that people will continue to be able to access courts and tribunals while providing value for money for the taxpayer and ensuring long-term efficiency.

The consultation published in January 2018, has been developed to complement HMCTS’ £1 billion reform programme, which is bringing new technology and modern ways of working to the justice system, making it more accessible for everyone. It received 249 responses and as a result, the response published today, strengthens and updates the principles underpinning future decisions relating to changes to our estate. It ensures that:

When visits to courts are necessary, travel times and ease of transport will continue to be prioritised—with added support for vulnerable users

Court and tribunal buildings will be fit for purpose and can be maintained at a reasonable cost to the taxpayer

Specialist front-of-house staff will be at courts to support the public and legal professionals, and will be trained in new technologies

The estate is aligned with the reform programme

The provision for hearings in physical court rooms will remain essential for the fair, just and proportionate delivery of justice. Yet we anticipate that fewer interactions with the court and tribunals system will happen in this way. Any future changes to the court estate which result in the relocation of a service from a local area will be consulted on publicly before a decision is made, using the criteria set out in the Fit for the Future principles.

We expect the modernisation being delivered by the reform programme to provide additional routes to justice and as a result lead to a reduction in the use of our court and tribunal buildings. These modern channels will be additional to, rather than substitutions for, existing routes. We make a commitment that we will not act on assumptions by proposing to close courts unless we have sound evidence that the reforms are actually reducing the use of those buildings.

Naturally, with an estate of this size there may be changes in demand for reasons other than uptake of digital services, and in those circumstances, it may be

sensible to close or merge courts. Furthermore, this consultation has no effect on previously announced closures which will go ahead as planned.

Our response to the consultation addresses several concerns which we have committed to improving. One is that journeys to and from court should be reasonable and, for the overwhelming majority of users, this would be one that allowed them to leave home no earlier than 7.30am, attend their hearing and return home by 7.30pm the same day by public transport. We also set out how we will measure this commitment and what other factors we will consider, for example, the circumstances of users including those that are vulnerable.

The consultation was broadly positive about proposals regarding the design of our court and tribunal buildings and reinforced the need for the security of those who use and work in our courts and tribunals to be paramount and for ensuring suitable facilities for vulnerable users. This is reflected in the new “Court and tribunal design guide” published today.

Our revised principles will strengthen and guide our analysis and assessment when we consider future changes. It will better align the management of our estate to the wider modernisation of our services and will make sure the court and tribunal estate remains fit for the 21st century.

Court and tribunal design guide

Alongside fit for the future, HMCTS has also published a new Court and tribunal design guide. This has been developed after engaging with user groups, to make sure the guide improves the experience for court and tribunal users, while providing value for the taxpayer.

It provides the standards for refurbishment and redevelopment of existing and future court and tribunal buildings. It aims to enable optimum use of facilities and improve user experience and, along with the key elements of safety and security, sets out five principles that must be incorporated into any building design. These principles define that court and tribunal buildings must be appropriate, effective, accessible, flexible and sustainable.

The guide was developed through extensive engagement with court and tribunal users to ensure standards and designs meet their needs. The “fit for the future” consultation sought views on the proposed principles and approach to improving the design of court and tribunal buildings and a total of 181 responses were received.

The guide will be used by HMCTS to help inform current and future building and refurbishment work undertaken across the court and tribunal estate. As lessons are learned and HMCTS reform initiatives develop, the design guide will be updated.

A copy of the consultation response has been placed in the libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS1554]

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WRITTEN STATEMENT

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**not later than
Monday 20 May 2019**

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