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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 13 February 2020

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

The Minister of State was asked—

Broadband

1. **Robert Courts** (Witney) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help support the roll-out of (a) full-fibre and (b) gigabit-capable broadband to homes and businesses throughout the UK by 2025. [900773]

3. **Gagan Mohindra** (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help support the roll-out of (a) full-fibre and (b) gigabit-capable broadband to homes and businesses throughout the UK by 2025. [900776]

5. **David Duguid** (Banff and Buchan) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help support the roll-out of (a) full-fibre and (b) gigabit-capable broadband to homes and businesses throughout the UK by 2025. [900778]

6. **Miss Sarah Dines** (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help support the roll-out of (a) full-fibre and (b) gigabit-capable broadband to homes and businesses throughout the UK by 2025. [900779]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Warman): Gigabit broadband roll-out is accelerating, and as a result of the steps that the Government are taking, full-fibre coverage has doubled in the past year. We have introduced legislation to make it easier for operators to deploy broadband in blocks of flats and will legislate to mandate gigabit connectivity in new builds, while providing £5 billion of funding to support the roll-out in hard-to-reach areas.

Robert Courts: I was delighted when this one nation Government announced a £5 billion package to roll out broadband to the hardest-to-reach areas, but can the Minister tell us when we will see that money being put into action, so that places such as west Oxfordshire can benefit?

Matt Warman: As my hon. Friend knows, through our rural gigabit connectivity programme we are already putting £200 million into some of the hardest-to-reach places, not least in west Oxfordshire. The £5 billion of

funding, which we will talk about in much greater detail in the Budget and beyond, will see us work with local authorities, particularly in areas such as west Oxfordshire, to get this broadband rolled out there as quickly as possible.

Gagan Mohindra: Does my hon. Friend agree that no business should be held back because of poor broadband infrastructure? Can he confirm that this one nation Conservative Government are making record investment in levelling up digital infrastructure?

Matt Warman: I can. The value of superfast and gigabit broadband to businesses is enormous, and it will allow the businesses of the future to power this country's economy. It is the fact that those benefits can be shared so widely that makes the £5 billion Government investment so valuable.

David Duguid: The percentage of residents without access to superfast broadband in Banff and Buchan has decreased from 18% to 16% in the last two years, but that is still far too many and nowhere near fast enough in both senses. In 2020, decent broadband is a necessity for everyone in my constituency, not a luxury. Can the Minister assure me and my constituents that the Government will do all they can, including keeping up pressure on the Scottish Government, to accelerate the roll-out of superfast broadband to my constituents?

Matt Warman: Like my hon. Friend, I welcome the progress that has been made in his constituency, but there is more to do. I recently spoke with my Scottish counterpart, Paul Wheelhouse, and the sense that we can work together to deliver this vital programme means that perhaps in Scotland we can have more broadband and less party politics.

Miss Dines: Does my hon. Friend agree that remote communities in the Derbyshire Dales, such as Chelmorton, Stanton in Peak, Birchover, Taddington and Cressbrook, like other parts of the country, need to be levelled up and have a chance of getting decent broadband, because they have been forgotten?

Matt Warman: It is precisely because of the needs of remote areas such as those in her constituency that we are investing £5 billion in gigabit-capable broadband. I know that, with her speaking up on behalf of her constituents, they will by no means be left behind.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): If only complacency built networks, we would have the fastest broadband in the world, but it does not, and neither does it keep our network secure. In June, the National Cyber Security Centre said that we had to act to mitigate the risk of high-risk vendors such as Huawei in our 5G and full-fibre networks. Since then, we have had more disturbing reports from our Five Eyes allies Canada and the US, while former Cabinet Ministers fall over themselves to criticise the Government, but we have had no legislation and not even a plan for legislation. Where is the plan to keep our networks safe?

Matt Warman: As the hon. Lady knows, the NCSC has published comprehensive guidance, which the networks are paying close attention to. The networks work closely

with our agencies. We will bring forward legislation on this as quickly as we can, because national security will always be at the top of our priority list. That is why we have taken the decision we have taken.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Scotland is approximately two thirds the size of England, but we have more challenging topography and islands to serve, yet Scotland will get a fifth of England's Building Digital UK fund, and for the R100 programme, the UK Government are only committing £20 million towards the £600 million programme. Does the Minister agree with the recommendation of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee that future allocations to Scotland should be based on need, taking into account all those factors?

Matt Warman: As I said a minute ago, I recently had a productive conversation with my Scottish counterpart on how the Scottish and UK Governments can work together to get the broadband into Scotland that it so clearly needs.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): It is a nice view from up here, Mr Speaker.

The Minister's Duracell Bunny-like enthusiasm is all very well, and I hope it stands him in good stead during the clear-out today, but it is not enough. Does the Government's ambition not fall pathetically short of what is really required?

Matt Warman: The £5 billion will go an awfully long way and build on the huge progress being made already, but the hon. Gentleman is right: this is not simply about money. That is why we are making legislative changes as well. The Prime Minister has been very clear on his ambition. The recent roundtable at No. 10 with all the broadband providers shows that this is far more than words; it is a real commitment in legislative and financial terms, and it will get Britain the broadband it deserves.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): The Prime Minister promised full fibre broadband roll-out by 2025, but pretty quickly that was watered down to "as soon as possible". What proportion of houses will have full fibre broadband by 2025?

Matt Warman: The hon. Member is right: we have said we will make gigabit-capable networks available as soon as possible. The Prime Minister has talked very clearly about that 2025 target and we will legislate to make sure that all new builds have gigabit-capable broadband, and of course we will focus our greatest attention on the hardest-to-reach areas where broadband is currently the worst in the country.

Problem Gambling

2. **Andrew Jones** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help tackle problem gambling. [900774]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (**Helen Whately**): We know that about 1% of the population are problem gamblers, and I want to make sure this group is helped, not harmed. That is why I have asked the Gambling Commission to

use its powers to make sure gamblers are not taken advantage of—for instance, through exploitative VIP schemes—and why we have recently banned gambling with credit cards and will be reviewing the Gambling Act 2005 to make sure it is fit for the modern age.

Andrew Jones: Too many people have had their lives turned upside down by gambling addiction, so I commend the Minister for her decision to ban people from gambling using credit cards—essentially gambling with money they do not have—but what more will the Government do to tackle the scourge of problem gambling? We have probably all seen constituents in surgeries who have had their lives ruined by this terrible problem.

Helen Whately: I thank my hon. Friend for his support for the ban on gambling with credit cards, which was an important decision, but our work to tackle problem gambling continues. The intention of the Gambling Act review is to make sure we have the right legislation to protect people from harm, but in the meantime, for those struggling with problem gambling, the Department of Health and Social Care is opening 14 new specialist NHS clinics, and we are working on a cross-Government addiction strategy, which will include gambling.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): As chair of the all-party group for gambling related harm, I am delighted that the Government have adopted so many of our recommendations over the last 18 months. Our latest one is that we would very much like to see no gambling advertising in sports activities. Will the Minister agree that this is a way forward?

Helen Whately: I know the hon. Lady is a determined campaigner on this issue. I am also well aware of concerns about gambling in sports. I have spoken about this with the Sports Minister, who is here beside me. There are already controls on advertising in sport—the whistle-to-whistle ban is a step forward—and as I said, the Gambling Act review is coming up. We are working on the scope of that at the moment.

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): The 2018 gaming machines review, the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, the NHS lead on mental health, the Children's Commissioner and many Members of the House have expressed concerns about loot boxes, skins and e-gaming. What discussions has the Minister had with the Gambling Commission about it exercising its powers to safeguard young gamers from gambling?

Helen Whately: My hon. Friend did a huge amount of work in this area when she was Minister with this responsibility. I have spoken to the Gambling Commission about loot boxes and the risks of online gambling, and we are working at the moment on the scope of the gambling review.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): The gambling arena currently resembles the wild west. This is resulting in increased harm and even suicides. Rather than tinkering around the edges of the Gambling Act, will the UK Government rip it up and write a new one fit for the 21st century and in doing so engage with those people with lived experience?

Helen Whately: Absolutely. We intend to engage with people with lived experience and a wide range of stakeholders as we review the Gambling Act. We must get a balance here: making sure we get on and update that legislation, hand in hand with doing it thoroughly and making the changes so that our gambling legislation is fit for the modern age.

Grassroots Sport

4. **Sarah Atherton** (Wrexham) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support grassroots sport. [900777]

The Minister for Sport, Media and Creative Industries (Nigel Adams): The Government are committed to making sure that everyone is able to participate in sport and physical activity, regardless of their background or ability. Sport England is investing over £1 billion of lottery and Exchequer funding in grassroots sports over the period 2017 to 2021 to support a physically active nation.

Sarah Atherton: As we all know, rugby is in the blood of the Welsh, but in Wrexham football is prevalent. Would the Minister like to accompany me to Wrexham rugby club to see the work it and Welsh Rugby Union are doing to introduce grassroots rugby to the children of Wrexham?

Nigel Adams: Of course, I would love to go to Wrexham. I would love to go to Wrexham regardless of whether I have still got the job. I can tell my hon. Friend that it will not be my first visit. If anybody remembers, Goole Town—the mighty Goole Town—played Wrexham in the FA cup third round in 1976, and I was there. If anybody can tell me the score, there will be a prize for them.

I would like to thank my hon. Friend for her interest in this area. Nowhere has a richer rugby heritage than Wales. I would like to offer my commiserations on Wales's disappointing Six Nations result on Saturday—a valiant clash—but we look forward to 7 March. She will know that sport is a devolved matter, but I look forward—fingers crossed—to coming to Wrexham very shortly.

Mr Speaker: And they play rugby league there.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): At the moment, horse racing is the only sport where there is a levy from gambling. Are the Government considering taking a levy from gambling in other sports to pay for grassroots sports participation, given that there has been a 20% drop since 2010 in grassroots cricket and tennis?

Nigel Adams: The hon. Member will be aware that there is huge investment going into grassroots sport, no more so than the £550 million that we announced for grassroots football. Of course, currently the lottery does play a big part in grassroots sport, and Exchequer funding goes in. She asks about the levy. We have no plans currently to introduce a levy on other sports, but like any Government, we keep an open mind.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): Just a few years ago, Buckingham Ladies hockey team were using marmite jars on a table top to plan their tactics, and they had

only five players and no goalkeeper, but I am delighted to say that, on 2 February, they lifted the cup, winning the Jaffa Super 6s final. Will my hon. Friend join me in warmly congratulating Buckingham Ladies, and let me know what plans the Government have to support more teams like them to thrive?

Nigel Adams: First, I congratulate my hon. Friend on taking his seat; it is great that Buckingham has a Conservative MP once again. I also congratulate Buckingham Ladies: what a fantastic effort to win the Jaffa Super 6s. I really encourage my hon. Friend to get the club to engage with local representatives from Sport England. These are exactly the sorts of clubs we need to nurture and see grow.

Online Harmful Material

7. **Charlotte Nichols** (Warrington North) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to help prevent the spread of harmful material online. [900780]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Warman): The Government are committed to making the UK the safest place in the world to go online. Yesterday, we published our initial response to the consultation on the world-leading proposals in our online harms White Paper. This document set out in additional detail how we will introduce a duty of care on companies to keep their users safe online while protecting freedom of expression.

Charlotte Nichols: It has been many months since the consultation on the Government's online harms White Paper closed, and we have only just received the initial response. Based on the latest police recorded crime data, it is estimated that an average of one online abuse offence against a child was recorded every 16 minutes in England and Wales, which equates to up to 90 online sexual offences against children every day. Can the Minister tell us today when we can expect to see legislation brought forward?

Matt Warman: This Government are absolutely committed to moving as quickly as we possibly can on this legislation. That is why we have said we will be publishing a full response in the spring, and why we will be legislating this Session. Many of the offences that she talks about are already covered by other legislation, but the online harms Bill will bring a coherent and world-leading approach to some of the most important issues of our age.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): Recent figures from Ofcom show that half of all parents are worried about the online safety of their children, and sadly, as we have heard, they are right to be worried. The Government's online harms consultation closed more than 200 days ago. If NSPCC estimates are right, there have been more than 20,000 unspeakable child offences and abuses in the time that it has taken for the Government to string together an initial response. We are told that legislation is on its way, but how many more days will anxious parents have to wait? Who will take responsibility for children who are harmed while this Government dither?

Matt Warman: The NSPCC has come out strongly and welcomed what we announced yesterday, which is a hugely important step. The hon. Lady is right to say that there is never an excuse for delay in this sort of area, but as the NSPCC said to me yesterday, bad regulation is worse than no regulation. We will take our time to get this right, but we will not delay for a second longer. That is why we will legislate in this Session.

Shared Rural Mobile Network

8. **Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help deliver a shared rural mobile network. [900781]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Warman): The Government announced support in principle for the mobile network operators shared rural network programme, which will see those operators collectively increase 4G mobile coverage throughout the UK to 95% by 2025. Although the SRN is not yet a done deal, the Prime Minister has made improvements to rural mobile coverage a key part of his “first 100 days” pledge.

Kevin Hollinrake: In answer to the Sports Minister’s question, I think that Wrexham won 1-0, and he was one of—off the top of my head—the 4,200 people in the crowd.

The Minister for Sport, Media and Creative Industries (Nigel Adams) *rose—*

Kevin Hollinrake: I’m being intervened on by the Sports Minister!

The £1 billion shared rural network, 50% of which is paid for by the taxpayer, has the support of just about every rural parliamentarian in this place, but apparently it is at risk because BT is increasing its charges to other operators. What can the Minister do to bring BT back to the table and ensure that the deal goes through?

Matt Warman: I am sorry there is a dispute about the important matter of the score at Wrexham. To return to my hon. Friend’s substantive point, I pay tribute to his work on behalf of so many rural MPs on this important issue, and I will continue to work with the sector to ensure that the shared rural network is delivered. It would be inappropriate to comment on the detail of commercial negotiations, but if mobile network operators are unable to reach an agreement for any reason—I very much hope they will be able to—we will continue to explore all possible options, including rural roaming.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): What discussions have been held with the Northern Ireland Executive to ensure that the roll-out of the rural network programme—that began in this place, and is now continued by the Assembly, which is operating again—is on a par with the rest of the United Kingdom?

Matt Warman: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that when we talk about “levelling up”, it is vital that we bring all parts of the United Kingdom with us. I have already been to Northern Ireland to talk about this and other issues, not least the roll-out of the fibre network in Dundrum, which was impressive. We will continue

those conversations to ensure that every aspect of the United Kingdom gets the broadband and mobile coverage it deserves.

Youth Projects

9. **Darren Henry** (Broxtowe) (Con): What steps he is taking to support youth projects. [900784]

10. **Stuart Anderson** (Wolverhampton South West) (Con): What steps he is taking to support youth projects. [900786]

The Minister for Sport, Media and Creative Industries (Nigel Adams): The Government are committed to investing in young people’s futures, and alongside delivering the national citizen service, we announced a new £500 million youth investment fund from April this year, which will provide capital and revenue investment in youth services for the next five years. The £7 million youth accelerator fund, which was launched last month by the Secretary of State, will deliver extra sessions and youth clubs, alongside a range of positive activities in sport and culture for young people.

Darren Henry: Local clubs are a great way to help young people participate in sport. In my Broxtowe constituency, Sarah Green, a parent volunteer, has worked tirelessly to renovate the Trent Vale community sports association clubhouse. Will the Minister join me in paying tribute to all community volunteers who support grassroots sport?

Nigel Adams: It gives me great pleasure to congratulate my hon. Friend’s constituents. There are 6.7 million volunteers in sport throughout the UK, which is an incredible number. We must recognise the people who give of their own time by volunteering specifically to help young people. Sport England is investing £15 million a year through its community asset fund between 2017 and 2021 to support communities just like my hon. Friend’s.

Stuart Anderson: The Way Youth Zone provides young people in Wolverhampton with a variety of facilities and fantastic activities in the heart of the city. However, many young people in Wolverhampton are unable to access the Way Youth Zone, as they live too far away. What plans does my hon. Friend have to provide investment opportunities for replicating that successful youth inclusion model in other areas of Wolverhampton, such as Whitmore Reans?

Nigel Adams: My hon. Friend is right. Young people in Wolverhampton and elsewhere should have access to high-quality youth services such as the Way Youth Zone regardless of where they live—whether that is in a city, a village or a town, or on the coast. The youth investment fund to which I referred will enable the development and expansion of capital resources, including buildings and mobile facilities for harder-to-reach areas, alongside investment for positive activities across the country.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): With youth services having been slashed by 73% since 2010 under savage local government cuts, and given that

a peer gets more for turning up for one day than an under-25 year old has to live on for a month under universal credit, when they are already suffering from job and housing insecurity, when will Ministers admit that, under this Government, youth have never had it so bad?

Nigel Adams: It is always a pleasure to listen to the hon. Member's questions, which are usually positive and upbeat, as we have seen this morning. I would just remind her—politely and gently—of what I said in reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Darren Henry). We have announced a £500 million youth investment fund, which starts this year. We also have the £7 million accelerator fund. I am not going use her words about having it so bad; I think she should recognise and reflect on the fact that the sums being invested in youth services are huge.

Local Theatres

11. **Elliot Colburn** (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support local theatres. [900787]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Helen Whately): Many of the stars of stage and screen who recently won awards at the BAFTAs and the Oscars started out on stage at a local theatre, but even if a role in a local panto does not lead to a BAFTA, we know that local theatres bring people together in a way that no west end theatre can rival. The Government recognise the importance of local theatres and we are actively supporting them. Arts Council England invested £650 million in theatres over the past five years. Theatres all around the country benefit from theatre tax relief. I recently attended the launch of this year's Theatres at Risk list, a successful scheme that has saved 80 theatres since it started.

Elliot Colburn: Carshalton and Wallington was left as nearly the only part of London that did not have a local theatre, so will the Minister join me in thanking and congratulating the team at CryerArts, a local community group which has stepped up and saved the Cryer in Carshalton to promote local artists?

Helen Whately: I am very glad to join my hon. Friend in congratulating the team at CryerArts. I understand that the theatre reopened in November and I hope it continues to be a much-loved local venue.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): In order to ensure the future of local theatres, what conversations is the Minister having with counterparts in the Department for Education to ensure that all children are given access to high-quality performing arts education from a young age?

Helen Whately: I am in conversation with the Department for Education about arts in school. The hon. Lady may be aware that an arts premium is coming in for secondary schools, which will mean more investment in arts in our schools.

BBC Licence Fee

12. **Eddie Hughes** (Walsall North) (Con): What his policy is on BBC licence fee penalties and payments. [900808]

The Minister for Sport, Media and Creative Industries (Nigel Adams): The Government have committed to maintain the licence fee funding model for the duration of this 11-year charter period. We want to help vulnerable people who may struggle to pay for their TV licence, which is why we have announced the simple payment plan, which will come into effect on 1 April. On penalties for evasion, we believe it is right to look again at whether the criminal sanction remains appropriate, given ongoing concerns about whether it is unfair and disproportionate.

Eddie Hughes: I thank the Minister for that answer. Does he agree that the BBC should stop focusing on criminalising customers who cannot pay for the licence and focus instead on its agreement to provide free TV licences for over-75s?

Nigel Adams: I agree with my hon. Friend. As we made clear in our manifesto, we recognise the value of free TV licences for over-75s. They should be funded by the BBC, and we remain disappointed with the BBC's decision to restrict the over-75 licence fee concession only to those in receipt of pension credit.

John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): As the Minister just made clear, he is aware that in only a few weeks' time, some of our poorest and most vulnerable pensioners will be hit with TV licence fee charges. The Government deliberately foisted what should be a social provision on to the BBC which, foolishly under Lord Hall, accepted this responsibility. Does the Minister agree with the Secretary of State that the Government have no business doing that, and will he commit today to stepping in to cover the cost for the most vulnerable in society?

Nigel Adams: Forgive me for repeating the answer that I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes), and the answer that I gave to the urgent question last week, but we are consulting on whether the decriminalisation of TV licence fee evasion should go ahead—that is absolutely the case. If the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (John Nicolson) is saying to me that, in 2020, the future of a broadcaster's financing is based on potentially sending someone to prison, we perhaps need to look at other models of funding.

Topical Questions

T1. [900788] **Dr Jamie Wallis** (Bridgend) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Minister for Sport, Media and Creative Industries (Nigel Adams): I am sure that the whole House will join me in congratulating the British film "1917" on picking up three awards at the Oscars, along with the seven BAFTAs that it picked up earlier this month. "1917" is one of thousands of film productions that has benefited from the Government's creative industry tax reliefs, which the producer of "1917" said were "crucial" to supporting our world-leading production industry.

As we heard, yesterday the Government published their initial response to the online harms White Paper, confirming their commitment to free speech and that they want the UK to be the safest place for users to be online.

Dr Wallis: Bridgend's local council is proposing to increase the fees that it charges local sports clubs by up to 500%. Many of these clubs tell me that they will need to close if that is implemented. Does my hon. Friend that every step should be taken, at all levels of government, to improve grassroots sport?

Nigel Adams: That is absolutely right. I agree that the Government should seek to support sport and physical activity at every level so that everyone, regardless of their age or ability, has the option to get more active. That is why, through Sport England, we are investing more than £1 billion between 2017 and 2021 to get more people active and to reach out to people who traditionally have not necessarily thought that sport and physical activity is for them.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): DCMS has not published impact data on the National Citizen Service since 2016. With former partner organisations going out of business and the transition to new contracts reported as being, at best, turbulent, what are the Government doing to ensure that taxpayers' money is spent appropriately and for the benefit of all young people across the UK?

Nigel Adams: I remind the hon. Lady that the National Citizen Service has benefited almost 600,000 young people in disadvantaged areas across the country. It teaches life skills, improves confidence—I have seen that in my constituency—and boosts employability. It is still the fastest-growing youth movement that we have had in this country for a century.

T2. [900789] **Gagan Mohindra** (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): Football fans have long called for safe standing in stadiums. Does my hon. Friend agree that if the fans want it, and it can be done safely, we should work with clubs towards introducing standing options in their stands?

Nigel Adams: I fully intend to deliver on our commitment to work with fans to move towards standing at football. In one of my first meetings following the election, I met the Premier League, the English Football League, the Football Association, the Sports Grounds Safety Authority and the Football Supporters' Association to discuss this pledge with them. Last week, I was pleased to receive the interim findings of the Sports Grounds Safety Authority's research, and I have asked it to continue that research with a view to delivering safe standing at football for football supporters.

T4. [900791] **Jonathan Edwards** (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): The Department's contribution to the funding of S4C is due to cease in 2022. Does the Minister intend the licence fee to make up the shortfall? Given the present uncertainty about the fee, will he, as a matter of urgency, make a statement about how the funding will be protected post 2022?

Nigel Adams: The funding model that was agreed in 2015 is guaranteed, and the licence fee model is guaranteed until 2027. S4C is a very important public service broadcaster. Conversations will continue from this period onwards, and the funding element of S4C will feature strongly in them.

T3. [900790] **Fay Jones** (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): While cities embrace 5G, 3G is a dream for many of my constituents, particularly in the Teme valley, which is a large rural notspot. Can the Minister confirm that tackling poor mobile signals in rural areas is very much part of the Government's commitment to levelling up?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Warman): I absolutely can confirm that. I know how important any kind of mobile coverage still is in some parts of the country. My hon. Friend will have heard the earlier answer about the shared rural network. It is still being negotiated, and the exact sites that will benefit first will be negotiated by the mobile networks themselves, but I would welcome the opportunity to meet my hon. Friend and talk about where we can benefit her constituents most.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Since the Glazers took over Manchester United in 2005, more than £1 billion has been taken out of the club, which they are using as a personal cash cow. Does the Minister agree that that model of ownership is not what we want for our football clubs?

Nigel Adams: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. Football clubs such as Manchester United are at the heart of local communities. They have unique social value, and many of them have a great history. We have committed ourselves to a fan-led review of football governance, which will include consideration of the owners and directors test, but, as the hon. Gentleman says, it is very important for us to ensure that our game is protected for the fans.

T5. [900792] **Bob Seely** (Isle of Wight) (Con): Given the almost weekly stories showing the unsuitability of Huawei as a high-risk, high-tech vendor of our 5G, is the Minister aware that while we in this country are saying that we can build a 5G network that separates core and periphery, nearly all our closest allies and their cyber agencies say that that cannot be done?

Matt Warman: As my hon. Friend knows, the Government will legislate at the earliest opportunity to ensure that we do everything in line with the advice of our agencies, which is that with the "ban and cap" approach, we can ensure that national security is our top priority while also building the 5G network that we deserve safely.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I have lost count of the number of times I have raised the faltering roll-out of broadband in my vast and remote constituency. The UK Government give money to the Scottish Government to ensure that that roll-out happens. May I suggest that the UK Government carry out some kind of audit to see where the money has gone—or, in my case, not gone?

Matt Warman: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that no one is happy with the speed of the roll-out in Scotland, particularly in constituencies such as his. That is why I look forward to working with my Scottish counterpart to improve the position. I expect the Scottish audit authorities to take careful note of what he has just said.

T6. [900793] **Christian Wakeford** (Bury South) (Con): Local newspapers are crucial both to our local democracy, in holding people to account, and to bringing our local communities together. What steps is my hon. Friend taking to ensure that newspapers such as the *Jewish Telegraph* in my constituency have the support that they need to flourish?

Nigel Adams: My hon. Friend is right to mention the important role played by local newspapers—not least the *Selby Times*. It is clear to the Government that they play an invaluable role in the fabric of our society, ensuring that there is a healthy democracy both nationally and locally. On 27 January, we published our formal response to the independent Cairncross review, which outlines the steps that regulators, Government and industry will take to support the future of the news publishing industry nationally and locally.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): In the first weekend of this year, nearly 200,000 people participated in parkrun events. As the chair of the new all-party parliamentary group on parkrun, may I ask the Minister to meet me to discuss how the Government can support this new social phenomenon and improve public health?

Nigel Adams: I will definitely meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss this issue. Park runs have taken off phenomenally well across the country. As yet, my schedule has been so busy that I have not managed to fit one in, but I am sure that the opportunity will arise. Park runs are great things—they are great for community meeting—so let us potentially do one together.

T7. [900795] **Sarah Atherton** (Wrexham) (Con): I should like to reiterate the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Fay Jones). Does the Minister agree that, while every effort is rightly being made to roll out 5G, it is not just rural communities that are having a problem? The peripheries of towns such as Wrexham are also struggling to obtain 3G. Will he please meet me as well?

Matt Warman: I look forward to having a meeting with my hon. Friend on this subject, but I reiterate that it is not only rural areas that will benefit from the shared rural network; urban and suburban areas will benefit as well.

ATTORNEY GENERAL

The Attorney General was asked—

Female Genital Mutilation: Prosecutions

1. **Alex Norris** (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): What steps the CPS is taking to improve the rate of prosecution of people responsible for female genital mutilation. [900796]

4. **Carolyn Harris** (Swansea East) (Lab): What steps the CPS is taking to improve the rate of prosecution of people responsible for female genital mutilation.

[900800]

The Solicitor General (Michael Ellis): The Crown Prosecution Service is determined to bring those responsible for female genital mutilation to justice. These are complex cases, usually involving very young and vulnerable victims. When expert medical evidence confirms that an offence has been committed, CPS prosecutors work closely with the police from the outset to build robust cases. This Government regard FGM as a serious criminal offence of child abuse, and we are committed to tackling this appalling crime.

Alex Norris: I am grateful to the Minister for that answer. In Nottingham, we are really proud to be the first community in the country to declare ourselves a zero-tolerance area for FGM, but we cannot do this alone. We need other parts of the system to work, too, so can the Minister assure me and the campaigners in my community that the Crown Prosecution Service is adequately resourced to do all the good things that he has just described and that it is focused on doing them as a priority?

The Solicitor General: I commend the hon. Gentleman and the city of Nottingham for what they are doing in this area. I have been told that piloting and trialling are taking place in some Nottingham schools. The CPS is working very hard to fight the scourge of female genital mutilation. We have lead FGM prosecutors in each CPS area, and there is a stakeholder group for so-called honour-based abuse and forced marriage, as well as FGM. That met twice in 2019, and it is already helping to improve investigation and prosecution performance.

Carolyn Harris: The lack of services to support the victims of female genital mutilation is often seen as a reason why so many cases are left unreported. What effect does the Attorney General—whoever that might be—think the cuts to the Crown Prosecution Service have had on the reporting of FGM cases?

The Solicitor General: I am pleased to say that £85 million has just been allocated by this Government to the Crown Prosecution Service. That enormous sum has been very well received. The reality is that FGM is a complex criminal offence. It is difficult to prosecute, but when these matters are made the subject of a complaint, every effort is made to gold-standard the process to make proceeding as easy as possible. I say again that the joint police-CPS taskforce—the stakeholder group—was established in order to make progress across this range of areas, including pre-prosecution.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): My hon. Friend has spoken a lot about FGM in the UK, but does he agree that a lot of the problems come when children go abroad? At the moment, the Gambian Government are rewriting their constitution and there is a question mark as to whether they will maintain the clause banning all forms of FGM. Will he reach out to his opposite number in Gambia, through the Foreign Office, and support them in drafting a constitution that is appropriate in this area? Will he also support the

work that people such as Nimco Ali are doing to ensure that our voice and the voices of women around the world are heard?

The Solicitor General: Nimco Ali is doing some great work in this area. We will liaise with the Foreign Office, where appropriate, to offer our views. I can also say that the point my hon. Friend makes has a tendency to raise jurisdictional issues, which is one of the points of complexity that we have in prosecuting these cases. However, every effort is—rightly so—being made to tackle this appalling crime.

Domestic Violence: Prosecutions

2. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Director of Public Prosecutions on the effectiveness of the CPS in prosecuting cases involving domestic violence. [900798]

The Solicitor General (Michael Ellis): Domestic abuse offences are horrific crimes that can have long-lasting traumatic effects on victims. It is of the utmost importance that victims are provided with robust protection to protect them from repeat offending. The Crown Prosecution Service is committed to prosecuting these crimes and ensuring victims are supported. That is why the CPS led the implementation of a national domestic abuse best practice framework for magistrates court cases in 2019. The framework provides a holistic approach, going further than the criminal justice system and ensuring consistent good practice by all agencies.

Liz Twist: Nearly three quarters of a million domestic abuse-related cases were recorded in total—a rise of almost a quarter on the previous year. What is the Attorney General doing to combat that and to ensure that many more cases are prosecuted?

The Solicitor General: I thank the hon. Lady for raising this important issue. In 2007-08, offences involving violence against women and girls accounted for 7.1% of CPS case load. The figure is now 17%, but I very much accept that more work needs to be done. There has been a rise of over 8% in prosecutions for crimes of violence against women and girls, and the conviction rate has risen—it is now 78.2%. However, I agree that more needs to be done, and it will be.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): In the year to March 2019, which is the last year for which we have a full set of statistics, the number of domestic abuse incidents and crimes recorded by the police in England and Wales increased by over 118,000 on the previous year. However, over the same period, police referrals to the CPS fell by 11%. What are the Government going to do about that?

The Solicitor General: The Government are working very hard in this area. In fact, I have personally dealt with a case in the Court of Appeal, trying to get the sentence raised on a domestic violence rape. However, I understand that the reduction in the number of suspects charged, together with the falling charge rate, is a cause for concern. We await the findings of what the hon. Gentleman knows is the cross-Government review of the criminal justice system's response to this matter, but

the report by Her Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate identifies a number of relevant issues, and I urge him to have a look at it.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The statistics show that 2.1 million people experienced domestic violence over this period—1.4 million women and 700,000 men. There is also this shocking disparity between the number of incidents and the number of subjects charged. The Solicitor General talks about there being a cause for concern and about reviews, but surely, given the scale of the problem, we need action now.

The Solicitor General: Action is being taken now. CPS policy on charging these matters, including on the charging of rape, has not changed. The code test has not changed; it still applies to all cases, no matter how minor, no matter how serious. Prosecutors do not apply a bookmaker's test on this. They do not try to second-guess the jury. Where there is sufficient evidence to prosecute, they do, and they will. The CPS will not hesitate to do that.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): My constituent Chloe was held captive by her former partner for several months, but she found the time waiting for her abuser's trial almost as traumatic. Does the Solicitor General agree that if we are to expect the survivors of domestic abuse and violence to have the bravery to come forward, they need to be confident that they will get the support they need at this horrific time?

The Solicitor General: Yes, it is very important that they have the maximum support. Delay is always undesirable. I might add that, in an inspection into domestic abuse cases that was published only a few weeks ago, inspectors noted that CPS prosecutors had applied the code correctly in 100% of cases they examined.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): The recent criminal justice joint inspection report noted that

“the domestic abuse caseload for both the CPS and the police has increased by 88% against the backdrop of a 25% reduction in police and CPS funding.”

This is leaving staff stretched and facing difficult decisions. Will the Solicitor General pursue the Chancellor for the resources necessary so that decisions are made according to public interest, rather than budgetary pressures?

The Solicitor General: These decisions are always made according to public interest and not to budgetary pressures. As I have mentioned before, the Treasury has already supplied £85 million more to the CPS, which is a very welcome sum and will be well spent.

County Lines Criminal Activity

3. **Andrew Griffith** (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): What steps the CPS is taking to prosecute people responsible for county lines criminal activity. [900799]

6. **John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the CPS in prosecuting perpetrators of criminal activity by county lines networks. [900802]

The Solicitor General (Michael Ellis): The county lines model of drug distribution blights communities and fuels serious violence. The CPS provides early advice to law enforcement to build strong cases against county lines and to ensure the robust prosecution of those using county lines to sell drugs. We have recent cases that highlight that model.

Andrew Griffith: We are all victims when it comes to county lines drug gangs, and no more so than my constituents in Hassocks, which lies on the main London to Brighton railway line. On their behalf, will my right hon. and learned Friend consider making involvement in county lines activity an aggravated offence?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. British Transport police is doing good work in this area, and the Home Office is providing £25 million of targeted investment over this year and next year to tackle this particular issue, £5 million of which is already in operational use. Overall, expanding the national county lines co-ordination centre will be very positive in getting results, including work with British Transport police to prevent disruption on the rail network. There is also investment in new technology, including automatic number plate recognition. We are working across the board with law enforcement agencies and partners to deal with these gangs.

John Lamont: As well as addressing county lines networks, what discussions is my right hon. and learned Friend having with the Scottish Government to deal with county lines across the border between Scotland and England?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is right to raise that point. I am pleased to say there is good co-operation across jurisdictions—between the English and Scottish authorities—and between the different counties in England that co-ordinate on these matters. The NCLCC is working in this area, and I understand it is working very effectively.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): The work of these gangs stretches right across the UK, with more than 20 known to be operating county lines in Scotland. Can the Solicitor General assure me that prosecutors in the different criminal jurisdictions are working closely together to ensure that those behind “country lines” are brought to justice as speedily and effectively as possible?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Lady raises a good point. We know that county lines do not respect internal borders, and Police Scotland is engaged in the national law enforcement response to this issue. I am pleased to say Police Scotland is working as part of the NCLCC, which was established with £3.6 million of Home Office funding in 2018.

Public Understanding of the Law

5. **Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab):** What steps the Government are taking to increase public understanding of the law. [900801]

The Solicitor General (Michael Ellis): I chair the public legal education committee, and I regularly engage with stakeholders and other Government Departments on public legal education to explore how we can increase public understanding of the law. Valuable work is ongoing in this area. During Justice Week, for example, the “big legal lesson” will be delivered in schools around the country on 24 February 2020. I will also attend an MP drop-in session in Portcullis House on 26 February—you will be very welcome, Mr Speaker—to raise awareness of the justice system. I urge all colleagues to pop by.

Jessica Morden: We are seeing more and more litigants-in-person due to the Government’s legal aid cuts, and many people never pursue their rights to see their children or to make financial claims because they do not know how. What will Ministers do to help people access justice, which is their right?

The Solicitor General: It is right that public legal education provides people with vital awareness, which is what it does. People need knowledge and understanding of their rights and responsibilities, but it is wrong to say it is a quid pro quo with legal aid. It acts as an adjunct to legal aid, and individuals face difficult challenges and sometimes require additional help. The pro bono work we see in the public legal education carried out by the legal and the third sectors helps to make a real difference. I have visited a number of locations, including the pro bono unit at the University of Leicester just last week, and they are helping people. This is a valuable exercise.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): Understanding of the law is vital for the rule of law, but as the president of the Law Society reminded us this week, in the light of the deportation rulings, so, too, is judicial review. So why does No. 10 keep attacking judges, instead of law-breaking Ministers? Is judicial review not all the more important because although Parliament might not be “dead”, as the former Attorney General described it, it is utterly supine on providing checks on ministerial powers?

The Solicitor General: I do not think Parliament is supine in any context. The reality of the matter is that public legal education provides valuable insight and awareness to young people, in particular, about rights and responsibilities. I do not recognise the characteristic the hon. Gentleman puts on the issue.

Offences Against Emergency Workers: Prosecutions

7. **Dr Jamie Wallis (Bridgend) (Con):** What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the CPS in prosecuting offences against emergency workers. [900803]

8. **Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con):** What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the CPS in prosecuting offences against emergency workers. [900804]

The Solicitor General (Michael Ellis): The CPS takes offences against emergency service personnel extremely seriously. Between November 2018 and November 2019, the first year of the offence coming into effect, almost

20,000 offences were charged under the Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Act 2018, three quarters of which were assaults by beating; there were 19,771 offences against emergency workers, including 5,362 common assaults. In January, the CPS published a joint agreement with the National Police Chiefs' Council, NHS England, the National Fire Chiefs Council and Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service. This shared understanding, and it will ensure that cases continue to be prosecuted and investigated effectively.

Dr Wallis: Reports of serious and violent crimes endured by emergency services staff have caused some of my constituents worry and anguish about loved ones who work in this area. What assurances can my right hon. and learned Friend give my constituents that the Government are taking steps to reduce serious and violent crime?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is right to raise this point. I warn anyone who engages in any type of offence against an emergency service worker that the law will deal with them harshly; the estimated conviction rate, based on the first cases to go through the courts, was 90%. It is right that we see uplifts in sentence for those who assault emergency service workers, who serve the public diligently and courageously.

Eddie Hughes: I thank the Minister for that answer. I think everybody in this House will endorse the idea that we should protect the protectors, so will he assure us that we will seek the maximum sentence when prosecuting these crimes?

The Solicitor General: Sentencing is a matter for the courts, but I agree with my hon. Friend in practice. A review sample revealed that nine in 10 assaults were against police officers. Almost all of those took place when the attacker was intoxicated by drink or drugs, and when they were being arrested or an unrelated offence was involved. Spitting was common. The violence perpetrated was wide-ranging, and included kicking, punching, headbutting, slapping and biting. The courts should and will come down on these offenders.

Leaving the EU: Human Rights and the Rule of Law

9. **Geraint Davies** (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): What recent assessment he has made of the effect of the UK's departure from the EU on (a) legal protections on human rights and (b) the rule of law. [900805]

The Solicitor General (Michael Ellis): The United Kingdom has a long tradition of ensuring that rights and liberties are protected domestically, fulfilling its international human rights obligations and upholding the rule of law. Leaving the European Union has not and will not change that.

Geraint Davies: The Solicitor General knows that our institutions of liberal democracy—the BBC, the judiciary and the civil service—are under attack. He is planning to water down the Human Rights Act. Will he give a solemn undertaking that we will not be withdrawing

from the European convention on human rights, which was established 62 years ago, with the help of Winston Churchill, and nor will we withdraw from the Council of Europe?

The Solicitor General: The UK is committed to human rights. The fact is that our EU exit does not change that; the UK will continue to champion human rights, at home and abroad—it is part of who we are as a people. We practised human rights before the 1998 Act and we will continue to do so. We are committed to upholding the rule of law. The UK is a beacon in this area around the world, and leaving the EU does not change that.

CPS Disclosure Obligations

10. **Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the correlation between the level of CPS resources and its ability to comply with its disclosure obligations. [900806]

The Solicitor General (Michael Ellis): The proper disclosure of unused material is vital if there is to be a fair trial, which is in the interests of the complainant, the accused and the whole community. There has been unprecedented joint commitment and focus from the police and the CPS on finding solutions to the problem of getting disclosure right. The £85 million investment in the CPS, to which I have alluded, will enable the CPS to respond effectively to the expected increase in case load resulting from the recruitment of 20,000 new police officers.

Justin Madders: It is pretty clear that currently justice is not being done. Does the Solicitor General accept that that fund is simply not going to be enough to get the justice that this country deserves?

The Solicitor General: No, I do not accept that. In fact, the £85 million that was given to the CPS recently was the largest sum, pro rata, given to any Government Department. It is right that it is a priority for the Government to deal with criminal justice robustly, which is what the Government are going to do.

Antisemitic Hate Crime: Prosecutions

11. **Robert Largan** (High Peak) (Con): What steps the CPS is taking to improve the prosecution rate for antisemitic hate crime. [900807]

The Solicitor General (Michael Ellis): The proper disclosure of unused material is vital if there is to be a fair trial, and we will continue to focus on these issues, including on the issue of better meeting the disclosure obligations. We will work with investigators to pursue all reasonable lines of inquiry.

Robert Largan: The CPS does not currently publish figures on hate crime prosecution rates disaggregated by racial and religious bias. Will the Solicitor General join me in urging the CPS to make that data available so that we can judge its performance on antisemitism and properly tackle this most hateful form of crime?

The Solicitor General: The issue of antisemitism, which my hon. Friend rightly raises, is one of very considerable concern. Just last week, I visited the Community Security

Trust in north London; the work that the trust does with the Jewish community to combat antisemitism is significant and very much appreciated. My hon. Friend is right that it is important that proper records are kept

by the CPS in respect of these matters, and we are constantly discussing with the CPS how better it can review its statistics and keep these things properly in the mind of the general public.

Online Harms Legislation

10.32 am

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Minister for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the Government's plans for online harms legislation.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Warman): I thank my hon. Friend for their question on this important issue.

The Government are taking significant action to tackle the issue of online harm and make this country the safest place in the world to go online. There is widespread consensus that online platforms must do more to make sure that their services are safe for all users, particularly children, while also promoting freedom of expression online. Strikingly, far fewer parents now believe that the benefits of their child being online outweigh the risks, with the proportion falling from 65% of parents in 2015 to 55% last year. That is a worrying trend that we must address. We can keep the benefits of the digital economy only if we can improve trust and confidence in technology and tackle what erodes it.

The "Online Harms" White Paper proposed a statutory duty of care, enforced by an independent regulator. Since its publication, we have consulted on our proposals and announced our intention to legislate in the Queen's Speech. The evidence given during the consultation will help us to get the balance right between an open and vibrant internet and one where users are protected from harm.

Yesterday, as set out in a written ministerial statement, the Government published our initial consultation response. The response set out our proposed direction of travel following the consultation, and we will publish a full response in the spring, before bringing forward legislation in this Session. I wish to bring to the attention of the House four specific points raised during the consultation.

First, we must ensure that in aiming to make the internet safer we do not inadvertently stifle legitimate debate. We will place safeguards in legislation, giving companies and the regulator the responsibility to protect users' rights, including freedom of expression, online. We will introduce greater transparency about content removals so that users can appeal if their content is taken down.

Secondly, we know that greater protections are needed to keep young people safe online. The new regulatory framework will require companies to take steps to prevent children from accessing age-inappropriate content and protect them from other harms.

Thirdly, some consultation responses raised concerns that the regulation would place undue burdens on sites where opportunities for harm to occur are limited. Our legislation will be proportionate and risk-based, affecting only those companies in respect of which there is a risk of harm. The duty of care will apply only to businesses facilitating the sharing of user-generated content, for example, through comments or video sharing, and only around 5% of UK businesses provide these functions.

Finally, the regulator will ensure that in-scope companies have appropriate systems and processes in place to protect users from harm, especially children and the

most vulnerable. We are minded to appoint Ofcom to regulate online harms, building on its experience and expertise to make further progress on this important issue. We also yesterday appointed Ofcom to regulate video-sharing platforms under the audiovisual media services directive, which aims to reduce harmful content on these sites. That will provide quicker protection for some harms and activities and will act as a stepping stone to the full online harms regulatory framework.

We will publish our full consultation response in the spring, setting out further details of our plans ahead of legislation and, alongside this, the Home Office will publish voluntary interim codes of practice to set out what companies should do to prevent terrorist use of the internet, or child sex exploitation and abuse on their platforms.

We are confident that this publication and the other plans that we are driving forward will help to make Britain the safest place to be online and the best digital economy in the world. No other country in the world is working faster to foster tackling this vital issue.

Julian Knight: I thank the Minister for his initial response. A regulator is nothing without the ability genuinely to disrupt the business practices of a firm that it is regulating. What assurances can he give the House that the proposed Ofcom plus regulator can genuinely bring social media companies to account with simply a bit of public shaming and fines? Does he agree that there needs to be a tech levy set at 2% of UK revenues in order properly to fund this super-regulator?

Will the Minister confirm that there will be a legal duty on companies to inform users of their personal privacy rights? Would not the new regulatory framework benefit from pre-legislative scrutiny by the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, as well as from allowing the Committee a veto over the appointment or dismissal of the head of the regulator, in exactly the same way that the Treasury Committee has over the head of the Office for Budget Responsibility? Will the Minister assure the House that legislation will be forthcoming this calendar year, as we have been waiting a very long time for this?

Matt Warman: The Chair of the Select Committee is absolutely right that regulation without teeth is not a valuable form of regulation. We will be talking to Ofcom about what it believes the most effective form of regulation will be, and we will obviously be feeding in our own thoughts as well. The decision that we made yesterday allows us to start having those formal conversations, and Ofcom to start talking to the industry as well. In the same vein, I agree with my hon. Friend that a levy has been much discussed. He mentions one figure. We will obviously have to discuss with Ofcom what it considers to be the level of resources that it needs, and I do not use that as a way of trying to weasel out of what he suggests by any means. It is a very interesting suggestion.

There will be, of course, a legal duty on companies to be more transparent with their customers. We are talking about transparency already in some working groups that I have been chairing. My hon. Friend mentions pre-legislative scrutiny. It is, of course, a tradition, although not a necessity, that full pre-legislative scrutiny in one Session would require the Bill to be introduced in

the following Session, and this Government are not content to introduce that kind of delay. However, he did in fact mention pre-legislative scrutiny by his Committee, rather than in the formal way, and it is an interesting suggestion. I look forward to working closely with him on what the best form of scrutiny looks like.

Similarly, another interesting suggestion is what role my hon. Friend's Committee might play when it comes to the regulator of this. We have compared regulation of financial services when we have been thinking about this, and he is right to make a comparison. It is another interesting suggestion. I look forward to working with him and his Committee—I hope. *[Interruption.]* I will put my phone on speaker on the Dispatch Box. I look forward to working with him, to be serious, because this is an area where I hope we can form genuine cross-party consensus on what is the right way forward without introducing a moment's delay.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I will allow up to 45 minutes on this urgent question, but first we will hear from Chi Onwurah.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Molly Russell was only 14 when she killed herself after viewing posts on Instagram. David Turnbull was 75 when he lost his pension through an unregulated financial product that was prominently advertised by Google. Last year TikTok live-streamed a teenager's suicide. Misinformation on the coronavirus is spreading on social media. An online abuse offence against a child is recorded every 16 minutes. When we talk about online harms, these are real people, real stories, real pain and real hurt.

Before becoming an MP, I was an engineer. I helped build out the internet. I am proud of my work, which enabled people to better communicate and connect, but it has been clear for years that the internet requires regulation. Tim Berners-Lee, the inventor of the internet, has said it; the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children has said it; and Facebook has said it.

This response on online harms is overdue, weak and ultimately ineffective. Social media companies will have a duty of care, which Ofcom will regulate—good. Tech companies always had a duty of care, in my opinion, but the first online suicide was over 10 years ago, and still victims await legislation. When will these proposals be law?

Instead of creating a new regulator, the Government have given responsibility to Ofcom. I like Ofcom—I used to work for it—but in the last ten years it has had the BBC, postal services and more added to its remit. What additional resource will it have? What powers of enforcement will it have? Companies will regulate complaints themselves, although we are told that it will be transparent—how? The transparency working group has been mentioned, so could we have some transparency on that?

New online harms are emerging. Just a few weeks ago the smart doorbell system Ring was hacked, putting children at risk. Algorithms, facial recognition and artificial intelligence are not addressed—why not? In a week's

time the European Union will announce measures for digital services regulation. Has the Minister spoken with the EU about alignment, and if not, why not?

Online harms cause untold damage in the real world. If the Minister cannot give clear answers to these questions, victims past and present will have lost out in another wasted year.

Matt Warman: I welcome the tone of the hon. Lady on this. These are hugely important issues that affect real people. We call them online harms, but they are profoundly real for the people affected. She is right that legislation is overdue; Parliament should have acted many years ago to address the issue. But the reality is that the duty of care that, in her opinion, social media companies have to their users will be put into law by this Parliament. That is progress, and I think we should welcome it.

We will bring forward the legislation in this Session. We will produce the full consultation response by the spring. We will be going as fast as possible. The hon. Lady wants us to go faster. I welcome the tone that she has struck, but I know that she would not want us to rush and then introduce half-formed legislation that would not work. If we committed to pre-legislative scrutiny, we would be introducing the legislation in the next Session, and that is too long a delay.

I will try to answer some of the many entirely legitimate questions that the hon. Lady asked. She is right that the NSPCC and Facebook have welcomed this. The industry is ready and ripe for regulation, and we should work together to deliver it. Like the Chair of the Select Committee, she asked what additional resources and enforcement powers Ofcom would have. We will ensure that Ofcom has the resources and the enforcement powers that it says are going to be the most effective. I hope that will be a transparent and open conversation.

The hon. Lady mentioned the internet of things, which is an important area. Harms that derive from being online are not limited to social media; they now extend to the doorbells she mentioned and a whole host of other things. She will know that this Government have already committed, through what we call “secure by design”, to legislate on that. I look forward to our bringing that forward by whatever vehicle as soon as we possibly can. That is why we have talked about it already.

The hon. Lady also mentioned the digital services regulation. Of course, we work in consultation with countries around the world. This is a global industry. Britain is taking the lead; it is right that an open and liberal democracy takes the lead on these difficult decisions. We will do this as fast as we possibly can. We will not be delayed by the activities of other countries, but we will work with them.

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): The Science and Technology Committee in the last Parliament conducted a significant inquiry into the impact of social media on young people's health, so I welcome the fact that the Minister has committed to the principal recommendation of the Committee's report—that Ofcom should be given the responsibility for regulation in this area. But may I press him on the timing of the statutory powers for Ofcom? There is no time to lose, as the Committee's report and Members today have made

[Greg Clark]

clear. I welcome the fact that the legislation will be introduced in this Session. When it comes to pre-legislative scrutiny, I hope that he will take into account the precedent set by the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee in relation to the Domestic Gas and Electricity (Tariff Cap) Bill, which was introduced very quickly within a Session and included all the recommendations of the Committee. There is a big opportunity for the work of both the Science and Technology Committee and the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee to inform rapid legislation that will give great comfort to our constituents.

Matt Warman: I have a great deal of time for the Science and Technology Committee, having served on it myself. This is an important area that cuts across a number of different Select Committees. If we are going to pay attention to the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, it is right that we should also look at how we can work with others—while not slowing things down—because this is a very important issue. We will continue that conversation with my right hon. Friend as soon as possible. As I said earlier, we will work with Ofcom to ensure its powers are in legislation as quickly as possible, but also that those powers are developed enough to ensure that they are really effective and persist beyond the current generation of technology, because we surely try to make legislation that does not need to be remade every year.

John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): It is important that we respond to the new cross-border challenges that have arisen as a result of our society moving increasingly online. I am sure that the Minister will be aware of the Scottish Government's internet safety plan for children, and I hope that he will co-operate with the devolved Administrations on this issue.

The consultation on this area closed last summer, and it has to be said that a delay of concrete proposals until spring does not suggest an atmosphere of urgency. Will the Minister commit to no further delays in Government action past the spring deadline and ensure that the tech companies do not dictate the pace of reform? Moreover, will he confirm whether the Government will be giving Ofcom powers to make directors of social media companies personally liable—including facing prosecution for harmful content—and that these proposals have not been removed from the Government's plans in the face of lobbying by tech execs? Does he agree that, although tightening regulations in this way is necessary, we also need regulations to close the loopholes that are seeing dark money being funnelled to political parties and campaigns in this country in a manner which, if it had happened in other states, would have the whole House of Commons united in condemnation?

Matt Warman: I look forward to working with the Scottish Government on their plans. As the hon. Gentleman knows, this is not a devolved matter, but it is important that we listen to all voices. What we did yesterday kicked off a process that I hope will be very collaborative, and we will work with as many stakeholders as we can possibly find.

I want to be absolutely clear that, whatever the hon. Gentleman might have read in some newspapers, not a single word of the response that we published yesterday was watered down at the request of tech companies. We have gone faster than many have suggested we might have been able to, and we will certainly not be delaying. My appetite is only for us to go as quickly as we possibly can.

The hon. Gentleman talked about director liability, which is something that has been effective—in financial services regulation, for instance. I look forward to looking at all possible options when it comes to sanctions. I want them to be as effective as possible, and nothing is off the table, whatever he might have read. I will leave his comments on financial matters, as they are issues that would be covered by other legislation.

Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): My hon. Friend has already helpfully recognised that what the regulator in this space requires is the legislative authority to act, the personnel and resources needed to act, and, of course, the sanctions and powers needed to act. Is it not also right, though, that the urgency in giving the regulator those things is not just the need, great though it is, to protect vulnerable people, but the fact that this country could and should lead globally on this, and we will only do so if we get on with it?

Matt Warman: I pay tribute to the work that my right hon. and learned Friend did as Secretary of State in leading this agenda. He is absolutely right. Ofcom needs the powers and resources to get this job done properly, but it also needs to make sure that we seize every possible opportunity that comes from the digital economy. Getting that balance right, alongside freedom of expression, is the priority that he set as Secretary of State. We will continue to do that, and we will not go any slower than we absolutely need to.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Two years ago, in debating the Bill that became the Offensive Weapons Act 2019, we discussed the problem that weapons that cannot be lawfully purchased in the UK are nevertheless freely available to buy online. Will the changes the Minister envisages address that specific problem?

Matt Warman: Obviously, the duty of care is wide-ranging. I am conscious that we would expect economic harms, for instance, to be picked up through other legislation. Similarly, the Offensive Weapons Act itself picks up some other areas. This is one of the issues that we have to look at to make sure that there are none of the loopholes that the right hon. Gentleman describes. It is a valuable point.

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is precisely Ofcom's experience in broadcasting and telecoms that make it ideally placed to take on this regulatory role of duty of care?

Matt Warman: Yes, I absolutely do agree. Ofcom is perfectly placed to balance our absolutely unequivocal commitment to free speech with the need to regulate an industry that is, as I said, ripe for regulation.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): Could the Minister share some more details about the scope of this announcement? Specifically, does it cover threats to

democracy and abuses of the electoral system that have been examined in the Lords by Lord Puttnam's Committee, and will Ofcom be given future-proofing powers to adjust regulations not only to take account of technological changes but to protect against future threats that do not yet exist?

Matt Warman: The work that the Cabinet Office is doing on protecting democracy is a hugely important, albeit complementary, part of the process, rather than something that is covered by online harms. Our intention is that the regulations and the codes of practice that Ofcom will draw up will be as future-proofed as possible, because we do not want to be coming back time and again having this debate in a whole series of forums. We need to get on with this.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) on tabling this urgent question, and the Government on their response. Today's focus has very much been on online content and protecting children, but will the Minister comment on how the internet continues to be used by jihadi extremists to recruit future terrorists? The Terrorist Offenders (Restriction of Early Release) Bill went through yesterday, so there is more money for counter-terrorism, policing, probation and rehabilitation. But ultimately, until we are able to remove harmful online content that is being used for recruitment, further terrorist attacks, I am afraid, will take place.

Matt Warman: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is important to say that the online harms Bill is being drawn up jointly with my colleagues in the Home Office to tackle exactly the areas that he suggests. The Bill also has a hugely important component on tackling disinformation, which is related to what he is talking about, albeit, I appreciate, not the same thing. It is important that we mount what we might call a full-spectrum response when it comes to these threats.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Nearly two years ago, the then Secretary of State stood at the Dispatch Box justifying the cancellation of the second phase of the Leveson inquiry. His rationale for that was that the harm was no longer in print media but instead all online. I asked why we could not deal with both, and he brushed me off, but now it looks as though we are in danger of the Government not yet having done either. The Minister says that he does not want to rush things, but I gently say to him that there is no danger of anyone accusing the Government of having done that. He gave lots of very welcome detail today, but has not answered the one really burning question—when will we see draft legislation?

Matt Warman: I say gently back to the hon. Gentleman that plenty of tech companies would like us to go slower on this. I understand his point, but as I have said, no other country in the world is going faster to tackle online harms. We will submit a full Government response in the spring, and we will introduce legislation in this Session.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): Does the Minister agree that we need to urge tech companies immediately to make it much easier for parents to set parental controls, to keep their children safer?

Matt Warman: Yes, I agree that the role and responsibilities of parents are hugely important. Some social media companies have made significant progress in that area and done good work in schools, but part of our media literacy work will focus specifically on parents, to ensure that they know exactly what is the right way for children to use the internet safely.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): This week saw celebrations to promote the safe and positive use of digital technology for children and young people on Safer Internet Day. Will the Minister join me in congratulating the work of the UK Safer Internet Centre, which works with more than 1,000 schools, children and businesses to make the internet a safer place for children and young people? Does he agree that the UK Government must do all they can to support that important work?

Matt Warman: I join the hon. Lady in congratulating all the work that goes on around Safer Internet Day. The Secretary of State attended the main conference on Tuesday, and I also appeared, albeit by video link. We are committed to working with all the charities and organisations that have made Safer Internet Day such a success, but with this legislation, we also recognise that it is important to go further.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, as the director of a company that provides technology solutions to help schools deal with online harms. Will the Minister applaud the work of teachers and senior leadership teams in helping young people to avoid the excesses of online harm? I encourage him to provide focus on protecting freedom of speech and prioritising the need to tackle the harm being done to our minors. May I urge him to provide clarity on the metrics and timetable for this regulation, so that the creativity of our technology companies can be put to good use as well as to profitable use?

Matt Warman: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the extreme contribution of teachers in this area. They have adapted remarkably quickly to a changing threat, and I pay tribute to them. He is right to imply that many of the solutions to challenges posed by technology will be driven by technology companies themselves, and we have already worked with companies such as SuperAwesome to ensure that that happens as much as possible. He is also right that legislation cannot come soon enough.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): During the consultation period, Samaritans highlighted the need for international action to create a suicide-safer internet, in their words. What action do the Government propose to lead that international co-operation and ensure a reduction in suicides?

Matt Warman: The hon. Lady is right that pro-suicide content online has to be a key target for this sort of legislation. She is also right that we have to think of this as a global conversation, because these are often global companies. I would be happy to meet her to talk about

[*Matt Warman*]

what she thinks is the best way forward, because that is one of the most egregious consequences of the lack of regulation online.

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): I very much welcome this world-leading approach, but can my hon. Friend reassure me that, in bearing down on harms to children and young people, the legislation will cover not only the promotion and glamorisation of self-harm and eating disorders but their prevalence and normalisation on social media and the internet, which ultimately has greater reach?

Matt Warman: I know that my right hon. Friend was particularly interested in that area when he was Education Secretary, and I pay tribute to his work. The grey areas that he describes are the hardest and, in some ways, the most important to tackle, particularly around self-harm and eating disorders. Again, it is important to balance this with free speech, but there is no public good in the promotion of eating disorders, and we have to ensure that this regulation picks that up.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I note what the Minister said about watering down, but there is a suspicion abroad—not just on the Opposition Benches—that there has been a change of direction in the Government on this policy and that things such as penalties and prosecution for directors and the banning of companies that egregiously breach the new approach will be dropped in the final proposals. If that happens, it will mean that this policy is being run not from Westminster but from the west coast of America.

Matt Warman: The hon. Member could not be more wrong. We will deliver a sanctions regime that is effective. This is a world-leading approach, and we will take a world-leading approach to sanctions as well. The response that we published yesterday mentions director liability—to take just one example—so the suggestion that it is off the table is simply not correct.

Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con): What discussions has the Minister had, particularly with social media companies, about them removing harmful online content as quickly as possible?

Matt Warman: We talk extensively to social media companies big and small—I draw my hon. Friend's attention, although I am sure he is aware of it already, to their welcoming of our response—and we will continue to work with them. They have done good work already, but the fact that we are introducing legislation demonstrates that we do not think they have gone far enough yet.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Five years ago, I introduced a private Member's Bill that would have made it illegal for explicit private and sexual pictures to be shared online without consent. Subsequently, a ban on so-called revenge porn was introduced. Thousands of victims are now coming forward to the police yet only a handful of cases are going to court because victims cannot have anonymity and have to prove malicious intent. Will the Minister ensure this is criminalised and that these obstacles are not in place, so that victims can get their just deserts and criminals can be punished?

Matt Warman: The hon. Member is right. Whether it is sexting or revenge porn, far too much has happened since his private Member's Bill that has not been positive. Our proposed legislation will be one way of tackling a part of that, but other important complementary pieces of draft legislation, to be introduced via the Ministry of Justice and the Home Office, will close all the loopholes with regard to the kind of behaviour he mentions.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): My hon. Friend has said he will ensure that Ofcom has the right resources and powers. Can he also assure the House that it has the right skills to keep abreast of all the changes in technology and potential new harms?

Matt Warman: My hon. Friend is right to imply that this is partly new for Ofcom. We will not only give it the resources it needs in the immediate future but make sure that it has a genuine plan to keep pace with technology so that we are no longer in the position we are in now, to some extent, of shutting the stable door after the horse has bolted.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): There is currently a divide between online gaming and online gambling, and this is resulting in children being groomed as the next generation of gamblers via the likes of loot boxes and skins. What are the UK Government doing to protect those children online?

Matt Warman: This came up earlier in DCMS oral questions, and we are looking at gambling through the review of the Gambling Act 2005, but the hon. Member is right that, in terms of gambling and gaming, the duty of care that we will introduce through our proposed legislation will range widely and will make sure that children in particular are protected online.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Can my hon. Friend reassure my constituents that the regulatory regime that he proposes will be fair and proportionate and will expect the most out of those with the capacity, resources and market share to take substantive action to tackle online harms on their platforms?

Matt Warman: My hon. Friend is right that we need to make sure that the companies themselves step up to the plate, which they have not yet done enough, but the fact that we are doing this through legislation is an important indicator that we do not think it is simply down to the companies; the Government have to act.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) *rose*—

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: We must now bring in Thangam Debbonaire.

Thangam Debbonaire: I wondered if it would be me or the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), Mr Speaker.

Will the Minister take the opportunity of the regrettable delay in bringing forward draft legislation to consider adopting a rebuttable principle that anything deemed illegal offline, whether the sale of guns, child pornography or whatever, should be similarly illegal online? Will he consider that principle in the legislation?

Matt Warman: The principle that the hon. Member describes is one that has long been at the heart of the thinking of Governments of all colours. What we are doing now is not only making sure that what is illegal offline is illegal online in theory, but through this legislation making sure that that is also the case in practice in terms of enforcement. I absolutely agree with what she is seeking to achieve.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): My hon. Friend will know that the online space is crucial for SME incubation. Does it remain the Minister's estimation that a very small percentage of UK businesses will be affected by our new online harms proposals, and that the vast majority of small firms will not need to worry about adapting to this new legal framework?

Matt Warman: Yes, the figure we have talked about in the consultation is that no more than 5% of UK businesses will be affected by this legislation. We are mindful of the challenges presented by technology, but this is a profoundly pro-tech Government. We see those opportunities, and we will make sure that businesses, small and large, can seize them in a way that is safe for all our citizens.

Jim Shannon: Will the Minister in particular underline the fact that there is a duty of care for digital users that extends not simply to monetary impropriety but to ensuring that digital forums are not seen as a mechanism for bullying under the freedom of expression banner. Will the duty of care be enshrined in law and enforced vigorously?

Matt Warman: Yes, is the short answer. The duty of care is a central part of this piece of legislation. It is the way in which we protect children and vulnerable people from exactly the kind of disgraceful behaviour that the hon. Member describes.

Maternity Services: East Kent

Mr Speaker: We now come to the next urgent question, which I will run for up to 30 minutes.

11.6 am

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care if he will make a statement on the provision and safety of maternity services in East Kent.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ms Nadine Dorries): I will set out the situation concerning East Kent Hospitals University NHS Foundation Trust in line with the written statement laid in Parliament this morning. In fact, I took steps to inform Parliament of this matter before the UQ was requested, and I hope that reflects the importance I place on this issue. Before I begin, I would like to express my deepest and most heartfelt sympathies for the patients and families who have been affected.

I made a statement on 28 January on concerns about maternity services in East Kent Hospitals University NHS Foundation Trust, and I would now like to update the House based on the reports from the independent Healthcare Safety Investigation Branch and the Care Quality Commission. I requested that both HSIB and the CQC report back to me within 14 days when I instructed them to go into East Kent trust two weeks ago, and they reported to me on Monday.

HSIB has already conducted a number of maternity investigations at the trust as part of its national maternity investigation programme. These identified a number of safety concerns, including the availability of skilled staff—particularly out of hours—access to neonatal resuscitation equipment and the speed with which patients' concerns are escalated up to senior clinicians and obstetricians, along with failings in leadership and governance.

As requested, the CQC carried out an unannounced inspection of the trust's maternity services between 22 January and 5 February. It has written to the trust with an oversight of its findings, and the full inspection report will be published in due course. The CQC received additional information from the trust this week, following its request for further assurances on triage, day care and medical staffing. The CQC is considering this information. It is important that everyone is aware that the CQC is in regular contact with the trust and will continue to be so for the foreseeable future.

From the findings provided to me by HSIB and the CQC, it is clear that the challenges at East Kent point to a range of issues, including having the right staff with the right skills in the right place, effective multidisciplinary working, clear collaborative working between midwives and doctors, good communication and effective leadership support, but it would be wrong to speculate that there is indeed one single cause.

NHS England and NHS Improvement are working closely with the trust and have taken some immediate actions. First, the regional director and regional chief nurse are providing support to the trust, and the medical director will address concerns surrounding appropriate senior medical oversight. Secondly, the regional chief nurse is providing support to the director of nursing

[*Ms Nadine Dorries*]

and head of midwifery, to prioritise and focus their local maternity improvement plans and address identified safety concerns. They will also review the effectiveness of clinical governance and executive leadership support. That will include ensuring that the trust learns from all historical cases, and disseminates that learning throughout the trust.

The Chief Midwifery Officer, Jacqueline Dunkley-Bent, has sent an independent clinical support team to the trust to provide assurances that all possible measures are being taken. That expert team includes a director of midwifery services from an outstanding trust, two consultant obstetricians, and a consultant paediatrician and neonatologist. She has placed the very best at the heart of the trust, on the wards, and at the bedsides of patients, with fresh eyes to oversee the care currently being delivered. The independent team is working with trust staff to deliver immediate improvements to care, and to put in place robust and comprehensive processes to support improvements in standards over the long term. Jacqueline Dunkley-Bent has personally visited the trust to assess the changes being put in place, and to ensure that improvements are moving at pace.

Jenny Hughes, chief midwife for the south-east region, is working with the trust directly, and regional and national teams from NHS England and NHS Improvement will continue to work with the trust. The trust is taking the issue seriously and is working closely with NHS England and NHS Improvement. It has created and filled several specialist midwife posts. Safety huddles, where safety issues are regularly and frequently discussed, have been embedded on both sites to anticipate problems before they occur, and multidisciplinary teams are working collaboratively.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister is supposed to speak for three minutes, but we are now at five minutes plus. I realise that she has been given a lot of notes, and I think officials ought to take on board the time. I am not looking to you, but I am looking to others to help in the future. I am sure we will be coming to the end of the remarks, as there are lots of questions.

Ms Dorries: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I think in defence of my officials, because this is such a sensitive issue—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am not getting into a debate about this. I do not make the rules of the House. The House makes the rules, and it has decided that responses should be for three minutes, not me.

Ms Dorries: I will go straight to my closing statement, Mr Speaker. I reiterate my condolences, particular to the family of Harry Richford and all those affected. I also thank my right hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) for raising this important issue. The Government are fully committed to reducing patient harm and improving the safety of maternity services.

Sir Roger Gale: I will try hard not to abuse your generosity, Mr Speaker, and on behalf of Tom and Sarah Richford I thank you for allowing me to ask this desperately sad and desperately urgent question. I

also thank the Minister for her swift and robust action since the report landed on her desk on Monday night, which was based largely on her personal professional experience. I am deeply grateful, and I know that the families are too.

This morning, at an early hour, I spoke for half an hour with a husband and wife who now live in Australia. Two months after the death of Harry Richford, they lost their own child under similarly tragic circumstances, and it was the most harrowing call I have taken in 36 years in this House. Those parents deserve and need the opportunity to achieve closure and move forward, and they need to know that the failures in protocol, in clinical judgment, and in management, have been addressed.

Will my hon. Friend publish the Care Quality Commission report to which she referred as soon as possible? Will she seriously consider establishing an independent inquiry, so that at the very least, Harry Richford's parents, Rosie's parents, and others, will know that their children have not died in vain, and that this will never, ever, happen again?

Ms Dorries: I thank my right hon. Friend for his comments and suggestions. In response to his call for an independent inquiry, last night I asked my officials to look into sending the independent Healthcare Safety Investigation Branch back in to do a deep dive into historical and existing cases at the trust. I want to reiterate that the trust is a safe place for any woman who is pregnant or giving birth. We have some of the very best people and clinicians working in that trust right now.

I would just like to add that NHS England and NHS Improvement are themselves commissioning an independent review into East Kent maternity services, so my right hon. Friend's question has been answered. That is the news I have just been given. We are taking this situation very seriously. We will publish the findings of the HSIB and CQC reports in due course, because we take this matter—I personally take this matter—very seriously.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Our thoughts go out to all the families, including the family of Harry Richford, who have endured unimaginable heartbreak because of avoidable and preventable failings at the trust. Harry Richford was aged just seven days when he died. His death was described by the coroner as “wholly avoidable”. This was a wholly avoidable tragedy and not, as the trust originally said, “expected”. After Harry died, the trust refused to refer the case to the coroner and it was only the persistence of the family that led to the inquiry.

The trust will now receive special support to help turn things around, but can the Minister outline exactly what that support will be, by whom and where the funding is coming from? Why has it taken us so long to get to this point? It was reported earlier this month that despite evidence in a report by the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists back in February 2016, the same mistakes were made in subsequent years. We need an explanation for why those warnings four years ago were allowed to go unnoticed and unaddressed. I understand that the trust will not be put into special measures and it seems that the chief executive and the medical director will be staying in post. However, given the trust's failure to deal with those identified failings at

the first opportunity, there must surely be questions about the local leadership. Can the Minister outline whether anyone in the trust will be held personally accountable?

Once again, we are unfortunately hearing about another tragedy where the culture has exacerbated the pain suffered by the family: denial, obfuscation and a staggering lack of transparency. Why is it that these issues only come to light because of the persistence and bravery of the affected families? We need to create a culture within the NHS where safety concerns can be raised by trained staff at all levels, free from fear so that issues are dealt with quickly. Perhaps the biggest concern we have is that we do not know the true number of avoidable maternity deaths at the trust.

I would like to join Harry's family and other Members in calling for a full independent inquiry. I understand that the HSIB deep dive will address matters to some extent, but I do not think it is the full transparent inquiry that the parents deserve and demand.

Ms Dorries: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his collaborative tone on this issue. I think he may have missed my last comment, which was that NHS England and NHS Improvement will be commissioning an independent inquiry. That has been decided this morning, so that will happen.

On the hon. Gentleman's first question about what is happening to support the trust now, NHS Improvement is in there. As I said, the chief midwife, Jacqueline Dunkley-Bent, has sent in some of the best midwives, obstetricians and neonatologists in the country from outstanding trusts to support the trust. They are having twice-daily huddles on the wards, which is where multi-disciplinary teams get together and discuss on an ongoing and regular basis what is happening on the wards, what disciplines are involved and what measures are being taken. We have fresh eyes looking at the cartography that measures foetal heart rates and contractions. We have a second pair of eyes reading those cartography read-outs, so it is not just down to one midwife.

A huge amount of support has gone into the trust. As I said, it is today a safe place for anyone to give birth. We are also asking HSIB to go in to do that deep dive to look at historical issues. Whether that will continue in light of the fact that NHS England is commissioning an independent inquiry is something I need to find out when I leave the Chamber. However, I want to reassure the hon. Gentleman and everybody that this is an issue that I take very, very seriously.

Babies bring joy and happiness when they arrive, and every family—every mother, every father and, indeed, every grandparent—is entitled to know that when they or their relative is in hospital, the delivery will happen in a safe environment, with the very best care. I can say that that is the case at East Kent now, and I—we all—will strive to make sure that it is the case at every hospital.

Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) for tabling this urgent question and for speaking so powerfully. I also thank the Minister for her work to respond to this. I, for one, hope that she continues in her role after the reshuffle because of her incredible commitment to patient safety.

What worries members of the public is that the NHS appears to be much better at transparency about care failures, but not always much better at learning from those failures. Does the Minister agree that that underlines the vital importance of the independent investigations that HSIB does into every Each Baby Counts incident, and the need for safe spaces so that doctors, nurses and midwives can talk openly and freely about what they think went wrong? Will she also consider publishing the report that CQC has already done into what is happening to reassure families that we are indeed confronting all these difficult issues?

Ms Dorries: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. One of the issues in dealing with the ongoing problem—this is a bit like the airline industry—is that we need to generate a culture in which NHS staff feel able to speak up without fear of blame or litigation and we can take learning forward. Another issue is that when we have inquiries, we should take the recommendations and ensure that they are implemented. That piece of work is also going forward, along with HSIB and inquiries. We should look at implementing absolutely everything that we can to make sure that the safest possible environment exists.

Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab): I am extremely grateful to the Minister for addressing these urgent issues and to the right hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) for securing the urgent question, as well as to the former Health Secretary, the right hon. Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt), who has shown a real interest in this case—especially now that he is Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee. I thank them very much.

I am grateful that we are talking about these inquiries and investigations. So many things have been brought up in the reports, and there are many questions from my constituents, dozens of whom are now really terrified about their future pregnancies and having babies in the area. Will the Minister think about committing to safe staffing levels, because there are so many issues in our trust, and that would be one way to reassure staff and patients?

Ms Dorries: I thank the hon. Lady for her commitment to working with her constituents, which is shared by my right hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) and my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Mrs Elphicke). I think that we should refrain from using words such as “terrified” because, as I said, the trust is a safe place for any woman to give birth. We have the best midwives, obstetricians and neonatologists from outstanding trusts working there now. She will know, as I do, that the trust's location is slightly remote. Recruitment outside the major cities is a difficult issue, and we have to look at that for maternity services in trusts that are outlying in geographical terms. She is absolutely right to raise that issue, but I reiterate that it is very important that she lets her constituents know that the trust is a safe and welcoming place for women to go and give birth, because some of the very best staff in the country are working there right now and making sure that that is the case.

Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) for his respect and diligence in securing

[Mrs Natalie Elphicke]

answers for the family of baby Harry Richford, and also the hard work, commitment and compassion that has been shown by the Minister, particularly over the last two weeks, when she has worked night and day to make sure that there is a healthy and safe environment for our constituents—I thank her for that. Such strong and compassionate leadership in the handling of these tragic matters has not been shown by the trust, and I would like assurances that matters of culture, leadership and management will be addressed in the next stage, together with any update on whether inquests will be extended in relation to situations such as baby Tallulah-Rai, when there cannot currently be an inquest?

Ms Dorries: My hon. Friend was not in her usual place when I referred to her earlier, but now she is! I thank her for her kind comments.

I think that we now need to let the NHS and NHS Improvement go in and do their work, and to have the independent inquiry. As my hon. Friend knows, when an independent inquiry is taking place, these issues become more difficult to talk about, but I am sure that the inquiry will include a full assessment of the executive team and the board at the hospital, because those at the top must take full responsibility for whatever has happened in the trust. I hope that Simon Stevens of NHS England will not mind my saying that no stone will be left unturned. I will certainly be seeking reassurances that that is the case, and, from ward level to the chief executive's office, this inquiry will be thorough and robust, because I will make sure that it is.

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): My right hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) described powerfully the devastation and grief that these families are going through. Can the Minister reassure us that they are being given support to help them through this really difficult time?

Ms Dorries: I must congratulate Jacqueline Dunkley-Bent, the chief midwifery officer at NHS Improvement—we are very lucky to have her. Compassion drives her, along with the absolute pursuit of excellent maternity standards. I know that there will be support for those families, and that NHS Improvement will also be reaching out to women who are pregnant and are due to go into the trust.

Let me say this, because I did not mention it in my original response. A number of measures are being taken in relation to the trust, which I probably cannot specify, but a written ministerial statement, which is in the House of Commons Library, gives the full list. I want Members to be reassured that those measures are thorough and robust, and they are working.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): I thank the Minister for her excellent work and I hope that she does indeed continue in her present position.

Tragically, East Kent is not just a one-off; there seems to be a more widespread culture of denial throughout the NHS. We have seen that in the trust in my constituency. The management is saying, “It is historic, it is scare-mongering, it is just a few preventable deaths.” Does the Minister agree that if those in hospital management are

to learn lessons, it is essential that that culture of denial is tackled and they recognise their shortcomings so that services improve?

Ms Dorries: As my hon. Friend knows, I have been to Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital NHS Trust to reassure myself—line by line—that every recommendation that was made by the Care Quality Commission has been implemented and is working. I thank her for raising this issue, but I also want to emphasise that Shrewsbury and Telford is a safe place for women to give birth, because the same robust approach is being taken there. It is a safe environment, and, as my hon. Friend will know, a new midwife-led unit will be opening shortly.

However, there is a culture that I know concerns the former Health Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt). In such circumstances, trusts do not feel able to put their arms around parents, to say sorry, to explain to them what has happened, and to show compassion or care. That culture must be broken, and I think that HSIB will go a long way towards contributing to the process.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): All too often when a baby dies, the shutters come down in a trust and we cannot get the answers that we need. Will the Minister—who is providing great leadership in this area—meet members of the all-party group on baby loss to discuss how best we can use MBRRACE-UK, HSIB and other investigators to get to the bottom of what happens? Will she also think about making maternal deaths a never event?

Ms Dorries: I fear that you will shout at me again, Mr Speaker, if I try to answer my hon. Friend's question fully, because I agree with everything that she has said. Maternal deaths absolutely must become a never event, and we must focus on making pre-eclampsia and postpartum haemorrhage, which lead to such deaths, never events. I went to the first meeting of the APPG on baby loss and, as my hon. Friend knows, I am always happy to go and hear anything that anyone has to say about this issue that will help our work in trying to improve maternity standards.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I should mention at the start of my question that I work as a consultant paediatrician, and that I look after babies and have attended a number of deliveries. I would like to thank the Minister for being so thorough, robust and dedicated in ensuring that this situation improves and that babies are safely delivered throughout the country. In my practice, I have noticed that all baby deaths and adverse outcomes are thoroughly investigated locally, but in my experience this tends to be done just locally. The lessons might be shared internally, but they are not being shared with other hospitals down the road, where the same mistake might be made. I welcome what she is doing, but can she reassure me that those lessons will be shared nationally, so that everyone can benefit from the lessons that are learned, and that such sharing will be widespread so that future tragedies are prevented? Can she also reassure me that, when she sets up the Healthcare Safety Investigation Branch process, its culture is such that doctors, nurses and midwives are able to give full and free answers, and that we get the balance between accountability and blame just right?

Ms Dorries: I thank my hon. Friend for her comments as a consultant paediatrician. She is a huge source of advice to me at times, including informally over a cup of tea. On her first question: yes, she is absolutely right to say that the investigations take place at local level and that that goes inwards into the local trust. I think that is something that we have to review. On her question about disseminating learning nationally, that comes through HSIB, but she is right to suggest that HSIB does not go into every investigation. One of the problems with a trust investigating itself and taking the learning inwards is the question of what reassurance we have that lessons are being learned and disseminated, and that improvements are taking place. I am going to ask officials to look at that, because we might have to work on developing a different model for maternity services, although we do have NHS Resolution and the HSIB, and a lot of work is going on in this area. However, we have seen too many cases in too short a space of time, and we now have to look at maternity services and patient safety with fresh eyes and decide how we make this the best for parents who have tragically lost a baby, from that moment onwards until they move forward.

Business of the House

11.31 am

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

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): The business for the week commencing 24 February will include:

MONDAY 24 FEBRUARY—Motions relating to the police grant and local government finance reports.

TUESDAY 25 FEBRUARY—If necessary, consideration of Lords amendments, followed by Opposition day (4th allotted day). There will be a debate on tax avoidance and evasion followed by a debate on social care. Both debates will arise on a motion in the name of the official Opposition. Followed by, if necessary, consideration of Lords amendments.

WEDNESDAY 26 FEBRUARY—If necessary, consideration of Lords amendments followed by Second Reading of the Environment Bill followed by, if necessary, consideration of Lords amendments, followed by a motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to terrorism.

THURSDAY 27 FEBRUARY—General debate on Welsh Affairs.

FRIDAY 28 FEBRUARY—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 2 March will include:

MONDAY 2 MARCH—Second Reading of the Medicines and Medical Devices Bill followed by: the House will be asked to agree all outstanding estimates.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for the business for the last week of February. I cannot believe time has flown so quickly! It is nine weeks since the last election, and already it seems that the few are abdicating their responsibilities for the many. Nothing has been said about the deaths resulting from smart motorways. The Minister who signed them off, the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), has called for a halt and accused Highways England of “casually ignoring commitments” on safety systems. At the same time, the bosses at Highways England have received a pay rise, with the number who have salaries over £100,000 rising from six to 63 since 2013. Why is this happening when the staff at the bottom have received a pay rise of 0% or 1%? Who are those bosses accountable to? This is exactly what contributes to the democratic deficit. May we have a statement on why they were able to award themselves that pay rise, and on when smart motorways will end?

It is nine weeks since the last election, and now it has all been revealed: border checks are inevitable. We did not hear that phrase during the Brexit debate. The smart border will apparently not be in place until 2025. The British Retail Consortium says an increase in border checks will affect fresh food supplies unless there is a massive upgrade in border facilities. Importers and exporters are going face huge costs. Could we have a statement on the readiness of smart borders or at least on what they are going to look like?

It has been nine weeks since the last election, and already the Government have run out of files, or did they intend to publish their process and procedure on

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their position on financial negotiations? We now know that the financial sector will get its permanent equivalence for decades, while the fishing industry may be under threat, from Grimsby to Brixham. We know that the EU wants existing reciprocal arrangements to be maintained. Could the Leader say whether the fishing industry is going to be sold down the river—or the ocean—from Grimsby to Brixham?

My right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) was right when he asked his urgent question and asked for a review. The review will look into the apparent injustices in the deportation process. The Government have to stop these deportations. Hon. Members on both sides have constituents involved. My hon. Friends the Members for Brent Central (Dawn Butler), for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) and for Birmingham, Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood) all had constituents on the flight concerned. It is right that those people had to be prevented from being deported. The courts have said, “We want due process.” These are British citizens; they deserve fairness, and they need to know their rights. I do not understand what the reason for the secrecy is—this is very simple. Can the Leader of the House guarantee that there will be no further deportations until that review has been published?

One review that has been published is the National Audit Office report into the death by suicide of benefit claimants. It said that an internal review of the cases was not properly implemented. Coroners are sending in reports of avoidable deaths. The Government’s policy is seriously affecting people’s lives. When will we have a statement from a Minister, as asked for by my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova), on these avoidable deaths?

Nazanin, Anoosheh, Kylie and others do not deserve to be in prison, as the Leader of the House has mentioned so many times. It is half-term for Gabriella. There has been no update from the Prime Minister for the last three weeks.

I want to ask the Leader of the House what it feels like to be replaced by three cartoon characters. It’s classic Dom, as John Crace—one of the journalists banned from a No. 10 briefing—said. We want Pugh, Pugh, Barney McGrew, Cuthbert, Dibble and Grubb. At least there are more of them—and that is classic BBC.

Mr Rees-Mogg: May I begin by saying what a real pleasure it was yesterday to be at the Privy Council, where the right hon. Lady was sworn as a member? I congratulate her on that. To my mind, it was a very special occasion, and certainly one I will remember.

The right hon. Lady raises some very important questions relating to the pay rises at Highways England when the smart motorways programme is under such question. I think we all have the deepest sympathy for those who have been affected by the failures on smart motorways, and these concerns have registered very clearly with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport, who has said in unequivocal terms:

“Smart motorways must be as safe or safer than regular motorways, or we shouldn’t have them at all.”

However, there is a review going on, and it would be wrong of me to try to pre-empt it.

As regards leaving the European Union and border checks, there will be an opportunity at Cabinet Office questions on Thursday the 27th to question the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster on the work that he has been doing. However, we are leaving the European Union, and therefore things will change. We will be negotiating with it as an independent sovereign state on an equal basis, not as a supplicant, and that is quite right. That will apply to all the negotiations that we have. I am absolutely confident that the interests of our fishing industry will be protected.

I am deeply puzzled by the Labour party’s opposition to the deportation of criminals, particularly as it is done under a 2007 Act of Parliament that was passed when the Labour party was in office. It is absolutely wrong and really surprising that the Labour party wishes to conflate criminals with people affected by the Windrush scandal. The Windrush scandal affected innocent people who were British citizens and had an absolute right to be here. They should not be confused with people who have broken the law, who have committed either many offences or offences leading to more than one year in prison, and who do not have a right to be in this country. Their deportation is right, and the clarification and compensation provided by the Windrush Compensation Scheme (Expenditure) Bill, on which we voted earlier this week, for those sadly affected by the Windrush scandal is a completely different and separate issue—it is of top priority and importance to emphasise that. The Government must keep the country safe, and deporting foreign criminals is part of that.

As always, the right hon. Lady is right to raise the issue of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. The Government continue to be in touch, but we must always remember that the Iranian Government are the Government who are at fault and who are behaving in a way that is not in accordance with international norms. That is where our criticism should be focused.

I have six children and, as could be imagined, I watch a lot of cartoons—I am quite an expert. I feel I have much in common with Daddy Pig. Certainly any DIY I ever try goes very badly wrong, so it is best left to others, and my children have me wrapped around their little finger. Alfred would not forgive me if I did not put in a word for “Thomas & Friends.” The good news there is for Gordon, who will be thundering down a new High Speed 2 line in the not-too-distant future.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The Leader of the House will no doubt know the importance of 23 June, which is, of course, Public Service Day. Would it not be right to have a bank holiday to celebrate that, and maybe also to celebrate the wonderful referendum on the same date, to celebrate the Queen’s official birthday and to celebrate the Union? Let us call it United Nations Day. Can we have a statement to that effect next week?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend possibly means United Kingdom Day rather than United Nations Day, which, from memory, is 24 October. If we are thinking of a date in June, is not 18 June a particularly special day, Mr Speaker?

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): Given the events of today, I suppose we should congratulate the Leader of the House on surviving, at least thus far,

the Cabinet cull that is currently under way. We should be grateful that our business is led by someone who has proven his indispensability to the Prime Minister.

I want to make a general comment on the business because, not for the first time, it appears to be somewhat lacklustre and thin. We now seem to be moving to having Opposition day debates on an almost weekly basis because of the Government's inability to fill their timetable. Some of the matters in this statement are relatively minor, or there is no great disagreement on the direction of travel, merely, as in the case of the environment, on the speed with which we should be progressing.

Given the Prime Minister's bravado in the aftermath of the election, when can we expect to see, in legislative proposals, the Johnsonian vision for the future of Britain? When can we expect something rather more meaty than the proposals before us today? Or is it the case that, in fact, the Government do not have the ideas to which they alluded during the election campaign?

Finally, I return to the question I have now asked several times simply because I have not yet had an adequate answer. When will this Government bring forward proposals to recognise the fact that they do not have a mandate for their programme in the nation of Scotland? The result on 12 December made it clear that people in Scotland wish to choose an alternative direction to the one proposed by the Government, and the Government should not continue to ignore public opinion in Scotland in this way.

When I have previously asked the Leader of the House about this, his response has been, "Oh, there was a referendum six years ago that settled the matter." Well, I ask him again. Does he accept the notion of the claim of right for Scotland and that the people who live in that country have the right to determine the form of government best suited to their needs? Does that right exist today, or is it just a matter of history?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his gracious welcome of my continuing presence. I am sure that if I am suddenly called away, the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries), will be more than able to take over for the rest of the session.

The Government are bubbling over with brilliant ideas; I have never known a Government with more ideas coming through. Chairing the Parliamentary Business and Legislation Committee, I see these fantastic ideas. Parliamentary draftsmen are drafting away at the speed of light to prepare an exciting outpouring of Bills, which were announced in the Queen's Speech and which will be coming through. To say that what we are offering up after the recess is "thin" is absurd. We are having a fundamental Environment Bill, which will legislate for the future of our environment and be a world-leading Bill. We also have the Medicines and Medical Devices Bill, which will ensure that we are at the forefront of medical technology. Those are two fundamentally important Bills. If necessary, we will also be dealing with the remaining parts relating to a terrorism Bill safeguarding the nation. Some Members really are hard to please! We then put in an Opposition day, and for the Opposition to complain about Opposition days is like turkeys complaining that Christmas has been cancelled—it seems

to me to be an eccentricity. As regards the claim of right, I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I have given several times before.

Mr Speaker: Let me help the House by saying that I am expecting to run business questions for 45 minutes or thereabouts.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Will the Leader of the House arrange for a debate on pension funds, particularly those in the local government sector? Evidence has emerged this week that in London there is a £17.98 billion deficit between the assets and the liabilities. Clearly the concern is that this is unsustainable, right across the piece. This ranges from Bromley Council having a £59.1 million deficit to Brent Council having an eye-watering £925.7 million deficit. Clearly there is a problem, and we should have a debate in Government time to expose this scandal and make sure that our hard-working public sector employees have their pensions protected.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Obviously, this is a very important point, affecting pension funds across the country, not just public sector ones. Fortunately, there is an opportunity to debate it, because we have a local government finance debate on 24 February. I advise my hon. Friend to take the matter up then. I will be more than happy to take it up with Ministers in advance of the debate, so that they are briefed and ready for his comments. The Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee is sitting poised, ready to ask me a question, and may no doubt have heard my hon. Friend's request for a debate.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): The Leader of the House has pre-empted me, because when Members from across the House request time for debates on subjects of interest to them, he will no doubt be tempted in this session, on more than one occasion, to refer Members to the Backbench Business Committee. May I suggest that just for today he wipes all such suggestions from his mind, because the Backbench Business Committee has not yet been established? Along with the Chairs of all the other Committees, I remain a Chair without a Committee. I cannot determine anything. My Committee cannot determine anything. My Committee does not exist. I do not know what the delay is on the Government side, but it is preventing the Committees of this House from getting about their business.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman makes an extremely important and valid point. The Government are keen that Committees should be set up as soon as is reasonably practicable, and we are, in the meantime, ensuring that the very popular debates that have been asked for historically and were given by the Government before the Backbench Business Committee existed are happening; so we will have the St David's Day debate, as I announced.

Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): Valuing Everyone training was made available to combat bullying and harassment, and all Members were encouraged to take part in that. Will my right hon. Friend confirm whether it is still available and that it is open to all parliamentary passholders?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I hope that Valuing Everyone training will improve the culture within this House, and it is available for all

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passholders. I know that that will be of particular interest to the Lobby, because a number of the complaints that came were from journalists who had been affected by these issues. It is not just about telling people to behave better; it is also about telling people that there is a system that will listen to them, where they can seek advice and consultations, and about how to make complaints. I encourage everybody to take this training, including the doyens of sketch-writers, who seem to find our proceedings so fascinating.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): Yesterday, the Equality and Human Rights Commission announced that it is progressing legal action against the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care over the failure to move people with learning disabilities and autism into appropriate accommodation. The action is unprecedented, but the issues that have led to it have been known and documented at least since the Winterbourne View scandal eight years ago. Those issues have been raised in the Chamber on countless occasions in relation to individual cases, such as that of Bethany and of my constituent Matthew Garnett, yet the Government have failed to act. That failure affects more than 2,000 families throughout the country whose loved ones are still trapped in inappropriate accommodation, and countless more who have battled over months and years to get them out. Their stories are heartbreaking and their experiences unjustifiable and unacceptable.

May we have an urgent debate, as soon as possible after the recess, on the accommodation for people with learning disabilities and autistic people, and can it be held in Government time, so that the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care can acknowledge the gravity of the situation, apologise to the families affected and set out the urgent action he will now take to right this wrong?

Mr Rees-Mogg: This is obviously an extraordinarily serious matter that the whole House takes seriously and that the Government take seriously and want to see put right. An investigation is about to take place and the Government must obviously wait for the outcome. Expenditure on special educational needs is increasing by £700 million, but that is not a complete answer to what the hon. Lady asked for and I will take up the issue with the relevant Ministers immediately after this session.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): The Prime Minister said in his Christmas message:

“We stand with Christians everywhere, in solidarity, and will defend your right to practise your faith.”

Plainly, that was meant to include the UK, so may we have a statement on whether we can really call ourselves a tolerant, inclusive and diverse society that respects freedom of speech, whatever one’s religion or beliefs, if we deny the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association a platform in this country?

Mr Rees-Mogg: No-platforming is a particularly disagreeable modern trend. Although venues are allowed to take their own decisions about whether or not to host Franklin Graham during his upcoming visit, they must,

like all service providers, be careful not to discriminate unlawfully on grounds of religion and belief. The UK has robust protections for freedom of speech and freedom of religion, and the price of living in a free, plural society is tolerating views and beliefs that we disagree with or are even offended by. That is fundamentally important. It is a sad truth that many people who tout themselves as being liberal are liberal only about what they like and are very intolerant of the views with which they disagree.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): My constituent’s elderly parents are due to return to China this Wednesday in order to meet their visa requirements. Given the coronavirus epidemic, they obviously want to delay their return without jeopardising future visas. In response to an urgent inquiry from my office, UK Visas and Immigration advised that it is “currently seeking guidance” on the issue. My constituent could contact an adviser, but that is not good enough, so can I get a Government statement confirming that my constituent’s parents can get an extended stay and that the Government will issue general guidance on the matter?

Mr Rees-Mogg: This is exactly the sort of matter on which the Government should be clear. The hon. Gentleman is right to raise this issue on behalf of his constituent. I cannot tell him the precise answer—I believe the Prime Minister was asked a similar question yesterday—but I will take up the issue after this session. That is absolutely what we ought to do for our constituents to try to get them clarity in such situations.

Siobhan Bailie (Stroud) (Con): I had a busy night out on Friday last week with the Gloucestershire police special constabulary. As we all know, the specials are trusted volunteers who work with the police and keep us safe. I really welcome the focus on the 20,000 new police officers, but it would be appropriate for there to be a statement in the House about the recruitment and equipment needs of the special police constabulary, together with an opportunity for the Government to show the specials just how valued their voluntary work in our communities is.

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: the work done by special constables is admirable. It is worth noting that the Under-Secretary of State for Wales, my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies), used to be a special constable and made an enormous contribution in that role. We are getting 20,000 extra police, but the special constables add to that. There will be a chance to raise the issue and to praise them and encourage more special constables to come forward in the debate on the police grant on Monday 24 February.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): Yesterday, in Westminster Hall, more than 30 Members of Parliament raised concerns about our constituents who are living in properties with unsafe cladding. Many of them are mortgage prisoners. They are facing life-changing bills and are having to put their lives on hold. Is it not about time that the Government had a longer debate in this Chamber about the real, serious concerns, as the Government, hopefully, come up with a swift solution to deal with this problem?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I can assure the hon. Lady that the Government are absolutely doing that and that the Department is pushing ahead with ensuring that unsafe cladding is removed as a priority. It has clear targets to do that. The debate has just taken place in Westminster Hall and, therefore, that is something that has been taken note of by the Government. So we have had the debate, but I can assure her that the Government take this matter properly seriously.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Earlier this week, we had the welcome announcement from the Prime Minister about additional funding for bus services. That will be particularly welcomed by my constituents in the rural part of the Cleethorpes constituency. May we have a debate in Government time to hear more details about this support and to give Members an opportunity to outline the needs in their own constituencies?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Every day in this House is Cleethorpes Day. We had a fantastic answer from the Prime Minister yesterday on ensuring that every possible service, junction and railway crossing was improved in Cleethorpes. Today, we are talking about the buses. This is a great priority, but I think it may be a subject for an Adjournment debate.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The charity Independent Age estimates that 2,754 pensioner households in my constituency of North Ayrshire and Arran are missing out on a combined £7.4 million every year in unclaimed pension credit. Worryingly, there have been no initiatives from the UK Government to improve pension credit take-up in recent years. Will the Leader of the House make a statement explaining why that is and what he personally will do to address the situation?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Members of Parliament can help with this in encouraging people to take up benefits to which they are entitled. I am sure that the hon. Lady does that in her constituency and I commend her for doing so. But the issues around pensioners have been tackled by this Government. More than £120 billion will be spent on benefits for pensioners, £99 billion of which will be on the state pension in 2019-20. The triple lock is being maintained and the warm home discount scheme is being introduced and extended. So every effort is being made to help pensioners and I encourage hon. Members to persuade pensioners in their constituencies to claim what is their due.

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): The constituents of Aylesbury are extremely disappointed by the decision to proceed with HS2 not only because of the financial and environmental costs of the project, but because of the appalling way in which HS2 Ltd has treated residents and businesses during its enabling works. Will my right hon. Friend arrange to provide a statement to the House on the need for the company to make immediate amends and, crucially, to pay people the money it owes and to comply with all the legal requirements that have been placed on it?

Mr Rees-Mogg: First, I commend my hon. Friend for his rightful championing of his constituents' interests. In all circumstances, Government and Government bodies must pay fair compensation justly and quickly to people.

We are a society that believes in the rights of property. As Conservatives, we particularly think that that is important. It is one of the bases of our constitution that rights of property are there and can be taken away from people only with just compensation. Therefore, what he says is of great importance and I know that the Prime Minister is concerned about the way that the HS2 board has behaved in this regard.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): The Leader of the House knows, obviously, that HS2 will mean that the time taken to get to Manchester will go down from two hours 10 minutes to one hour 10 minutes, but, at the same time, the time to get to Swansea will remain three hours. When will we have a proper debate to question why Wales gets only 1.5% of the rail money for 5% of the population? We must invest in a high-speed connection between Bristol, Cardiff and Swansea.

Mr Rees-Mogg: That matter was raised at Prime Minister's questions yesterday. The line is being electrified down to Cardiff. It happens to be the line that I use when I take the train, because very often the route is through Bath and Bristol. The improvements in that line benefit people as they go on into Wales, which I think is very important.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Inspired by Keats' view that

“Beauty is truth, truth beauty”,

the commission established by the Government to advise on the built environment recently published its report, “Living with beauty”. It sets out eight priorities for reform and makes a series of recommendations, which the Leader of the House will know were welcomed by the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government—he also took the opportunity to apologise for the sacking last year of Sir Roger Scruton, the commission's original chairman; the sacking was rescinded. Will the Leader of the House arrange for the relevant Minister to make a statement to the House on what the Government will do with the recommendations? It is only right that future generations can be proud of what we build and the places we make.

Mr Rees-Mogg: If I may, I will pay tribute to Sir Roger Scruton, who was one of the great conservative thinkers of recent decades. His point that beauty should be a fundamental part of our planning system is an essential one. It occurs to me that something as beautiful as the royal crescent at Bath would not be built under current regulations, and we need a system that would allow that. With regard to a statement, the Secretary of State will be here to answer questions on Monday 24 February and I am sure that my right hon. Friend will raise his point then.

Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab): The baseline public health funding for Enfield Council was set in 2013 and takes no account of the growth in population, in need and in poverty, which all affect the funding that Enfield actually needs. May we therefore have a debate on fair public health funding for local authorities?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am very glad to be helpful on this occasion by immediately granting what the hon. Lady has asked for, because on the first day back after the

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recess we will have a debate on local government funding, and I am sure that she will be able to raise her points then.

Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con): My right hon. Friend might be aware that on Boxing day 2015 the town of Padiham in my constituency suffered significant flooding, which caused serious damage to residents and businesses. Having been promised flood defences, and the funding having been put in place, residents were rightly concerned and angry last week when storm Ciara hit, as work on the defences has still not commenced. May we have a debate in Government time so that we can see whether we can speed up the delivery of those defences?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs made a statement to the House on Monday on the significant flooding caused by the heavy rain and the severe gale-force winds brought by the recent storm. We will be spending £4 billion on flood defences to protect homes and businesses better across the country from the devastating effects of flooding. Some £2.6 billion is being spent to protect the country from flooding more broadly, and 300,000 homes will have improved protection by 2020. But we also know that more needs to be done to ensure that households and businesses are more resilient to flooding, and the Government are implementing that.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Last month, my hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) raised the issue of Robert Skillen's company, HELMS—Home Energy & Lifestyle Management Ltd—which defrauded hundreds of households across Scotland through the Government's green deal scheme. I had constructive and positive engagement on the matter with the previous Minister, Claire O'Neill, but the promised improvements and the speed of decisions on complaints simply have not materialised. If the Leader of the House will not give us a debate, can he help to facilitate a meeting with the new Secretary of State, whoever that is—perhaps the departing Chancellor?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise that issue in this forum. If ever Members feel that they are not getting a satisfactory response from the Government, I will do whatever I can to facilitate a proper and full response.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): Just before Christmas, the Post Office made a settlement with 550 post office workers, including my constituent Tracy Felstead, who was imprisoned at age 19 in Holloway prison after her till did not balance due to a technical glitch. May we have a debate in Government time to consider what is fast becoming a national scandal?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I share my hon. Friend's concern that innocent people seem to have suffered because of IT flaws within the Post Office systems. That is entirely wrong and improper, and they ought to be compensated fairly. I think an Adjournment debate or a Westminster Hall debate would be very suitable.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Judging from media coverage this morning, it seems that the Government are planning to cut the payments to the Commonwealth secretariat due to the apparent scandal that is engulfing the secretary-general. I am not commenting on the rights and wrongs of that situation, but the Commonwealth is a very important institution to many of our constituents and is likely to be more important in the next few years—at least, I hope so. Could we have a statement on the situation?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman raises a point of great significance. The Commonwealth is of fundamental importance. It is a powerful organisation, and it is a matter of concern that a number of countries, including New Zealand and Australia, have cut their funding because of concerns over the auditing of the headquarters of the Commonwealth. We must ensure that the auditing is put right and that people can have confidence in the way in which such a valued organisation is run.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Since July 2018, junctions 8 to 10 of the M23 have been reconstructed into a so-called smart motorway. The closures continue. Both north and south sections will be completely closed every weekend next month while the work is taking place. The absurdity of this situation is that smart motorways are now under review, so it could be that one is built at great inconvenience to travellers and will then need to be undone, probably causing more years of work. Can we please have a statement from the Transport Secretary?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. If we are going to get everybody in, questions and answers will need to be brief.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I completely share and sympathise with my hon. Friend's concern because I travel down to Somerset almost every weekend on the M4, which is going through exactly the same pain. There are random closures without any proper warning and the gantries display messages saying that it will take a few minutes to get to an exit beyond the one that is closed. Highways England does not seem to give one proper information. It is a matter of great significance on which we should have debates, but I think it is more a subject for an Adjournment debate than a debate in Government time.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Following on from the question asked by the hon. Member for Telford (Lucy Allan), I wish to draw attention to the hundreds of sub-postmasters across the country, including constituents of mine, who have lost their businesses and homes after paying out of their own pockets to make up for the failure of the Post Office's Horizon IT system. May I also ask for a debate on how we can help them to get recompense and justice?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I reiterate the sympathy I have for these cases. Whether there is time for a debate in Government time, I cannot promise.

Robert Langan (High Peak) (Con): The Mottram bypass has been promised by politicians of all parties for well over 50 years. I am pleased that this Government have committed the money to build the bypass, and

have confirmed that a planning application will be made soon. My constituents are understandably still very sceptical. May we have a debate on the timely delivery of transport infrastructure projects so that we can finally get the Mottram bypass built as soon as possible?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am not sure that there is going to be time for a debate in Government time, but £29 billion is going to be spent on road projects, and I think there is a general desire to get over the inertia that has affected so many projects across the country.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): The changes planned for the IR35 regime raise major issues of uncertainty for contractors in the construction, IT and training sectors, and many others, in my constituency of Angus and, I am certain, right across the United Kingdom. May we have a statement on what steps the Government will take to protect the economy and industry from the very real threat of offshoring as a result of these changes, and on what support the Treasury will provide to contractors who face being driven out of business?

Mr Rees-Mogg: We will have the Budget on 11 March, but as I have said in answers to previous questions, it is of great importance that people know what tax they are expected to pay before the tax year in which they are expected to pay it. The Government are very conscious of that. A review of IR35 is under way, but I think we need answers relatively quickly.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): Councillor Christine Wild, who has served the people of Bolton for many years, sadly died last week, having served the people of Westhoughton, Hunger Hill and Chew Moor doing often thankless work. Can we have a debate in Government time on the importance of the work that councillors do right across the country?

Mr Rees-Mogg: That is a very good point. The selfless work done by councillors is of great importance. Although they get some expenses, it is basically voluntary work. We, of all parties, are lucky up and down this country to have people who are willing to give so much time to help their local communities. My hon. Friend might want to raise this in the coming debate on the forthcoming Adjournment.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): Last Friday, the National Audit Office published a report on information held by the Department for Work and Pensions on suicides related to social security. The report revealed that there had been 69 suicides. Given the seriousness of this and the lack of a statement from the Department for Work and Pensions, can we now have a debate in Government time so that Members across this House can hold the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to account for this failure?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I understand that the National Audit Office is continuing a review of this. It is deeply troubling when suicides take place in any circumstances. Anything that can be done by the Government to reduce the number of suicides is something that the Government ought to be doing.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): Post offices are very important in my constituency, particularly for the elderly and the vulnerable. Last year, South Kensington post office closed. Can we have a debate about the importance of post office provision in inner cities?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The number of post office closures has declined very significantly from an earlier peak, so post offices are now surviving in a way that they were not. I accept that they are very important community hubs, but I think that the specifics relating to an individual post office are best suited to an Adjournment debate.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): There is a growing problem of unscrupulous solicitors who seek out tenants taking out housing disrepair claims against housing associations and public bodies but do not warn their clients that they will be liable for costs when they lose. A constituent of mine was landed with a £12,000 bill having taken out a no win, no fee claim. May we have a debate on how we can protect tenants like my constituent against these unscrupulous solicitors?

Mr Rees-Mogg: That is an important point. There will be questions to Housing, Communities and Local Government Ministers on our first day back on 24 February. People should not be subject to unfair and unexpected fees; the fees should be set out clearly. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will raise this on the 24th.

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): Grove station in my constituency was one of those closed in the Beeching cuts, and for over 40 years now my constituents have campaigned to have it reopened because it would connect them better, get people off congested and often unsafe roads and support our efforts to tackle climate change. May we have a debate on the importance of reopening stations such as Grove to our local economy, community and environment?

Mr Rees-Mogg: May I congratulate my hon. Friend on the campaign that he is waging on behalf of his constituents? I believe that his constituency is the birthplace of King Alfred, and he is dealing with this in a way that King Alfred would, I think, be proud of. The Government agree with the value of reopening stations and lines closed following the Beeching report and will spend £500 million to start reconnecting smaller towns. The Government will listen carefully to proposals, prioritising projects of the greatest potential, viability and economic benefit. As we assess and develop schemes, there is an ambition to expand the funding available. I therefore encourage my hon. Friend to keep making his case, and avoid burning cakes.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Last month, FaithAction was informed that its funding under the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government's integrated communities English language programme would not be renewed next year. It is having to make staff redundant, and this will also leave a gap in vital ESOL provision. May we have a statement on what new funding will replace this, and when?

Mr Rees-Mogg: People cannot assume that funding will continue indefinitely and must always plan accordingly in an ordinary business way. There will be questions to that Department on the Monday that we come back, and I think that is the right time to raise this matter.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Green-belt development is often on the edges of urban conurbations, meaning that while the proposed building site may be in a rural planning authority, the communities most directly affected may be in a neighbouring urban authority. May we have a debate on how we can make sure that the communities directly affected by proposed green-belt development can have their views and concerns properly considered in the planning process?

Mr Rees-Mogg: This is an issue for many Members of Parliament—indeed, including for me in North East Somerset. In our manifesto, we were clear that we would protect and enhance the green belt, improve poor-quality land, increase biodiversity, and make our beautiful countryside more usable by local communities. To safeguard green spaces we will prioritise brownfield development for regeneration of our cities and towns. The national planning policy framework makes it clear that only in exceptional circumstances may a green-belt boundary be altered using the development plan process of consultation with local people. In answer to my hon. Friend's question, given that there is consultation, I am not sure that we need an immediate debate.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I would like to draw the attention of the Leader of the House to early-day motion 141, signed by 56 colleagues across five political parties.

[That this House acknowledges that the Department for Work and Pensions commissioned an evidence review on the drivers of food bank use in 2018; notes the Government's commitment to this House to publish the findings of the review; further notes the Government's failure to date to publish those findings; and urges the Government to provide a clear deadline as a matter of urgency for the publication of the review to inform a public debate on the reasons for growing demand for food aid provision in the UK.]

The EDM concerns a Department for Work and Pensions review of food bank use that should have been published six months ago. May we have a statement from the Government on when this review will be published so that we can have an informed debate on food aid provision and the increasing demand for it across these islands?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The issues surrounding food banks are various and complicated, but it is worth bearing in mind that there are 400,000 fewer people in absolute poverty than there were in 2010, and income inequality is down, so great strides are being made in ensuring that there is less poverty in this country. The publication date of reports is a matter to take up directly with the relevant Department.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): My right hon. Friend is a keen historian and he will know that in Kidsgrove and Talke in my constituency we have the amazing Chatterley Whitfield colliery, which is sadly at risk of falling down and has been listed as such by the Victorian Society. Is he prepared to give parliamentary time to enable us to have a debate about the importance of protecting and preserving our industrial and cultural heritage?

Mr Rees-Mogg: As it was once suggested that I should myself be listed, I have a great affection for listed buildings and their protection. I think it would be right to seek an Adjournment debate on the colliery that my hon. Friend refers to because, in my view, it is exactly the type of constituency issue that is very well highlighted in Adjournment debates.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): Before the EU referendum, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster said that

“the one thing that will not change will be our ability to trade freely with Europe”.

But he now says that it is likely that there will be physical checks, as well as, almost certainly, safety and security certificates, and that almost everybody exporting will need to complete customs declarations. Will the Leader of the House make a statement on whether he still thinks that concerns about broken promises on frictionless trade are, as he described them, Project Fear?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Project Fear was one of the reasons the Conservatives did so enormously well in the last election. People were fed up to the back teeth with Project Fear. I am glad to say that we are leaving the European Union. The consequence of that is that we will be dealing with the European Union as an independent, sovereign equal, and that will mean changes.

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on how Government and local authorities can support taxi drivers? Taxi drivers are the largest self-employed sector in my constituency. We must work to ensure that they are able to earn a sustainable living and are not weighed down by disproportionate costs and heavy-handed regulation.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I have the greatest admiration for taxi drivers. Disraeli called the London cab “the gondola of London”, and we should think of our taxi drivers as the gondoliers of London—not that they usually sing to us, but they send us merrily along our way with their incisive and well-informed conversation. *[Laughter.]* Well, I often find that I am in agreement with them—that is why I think their conversation is so well-informed and incisive. We should of course not bear down on them unduly with regulation—although I believe that the regulation that London taxis have to keep hay in their boot is no longer applicable.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Can we have a statement on the surprising news that the Chancellor of the Exchequer has been sacked?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman is ahead of me on the news cycle.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Leader of the House for last week's debate on the persecution of Christians. As a follow-up to one of the issues raised in that debate, can we have a ministerial statement on the recommendations to the British Government outlined in the report on the persecution of religious minorities in Pakistan by the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief?

Mr Rees-Mogg: May I begin by commending the hon. Gentleman for the excellent and consistent work he does to raise the issue of persecuted Christians and ensure that they have a voice in this House? I also commend him for securing the debate last week, which came about not at my whim but because so many Members wanted it. The Government are genuinely concerned about continuing reports of abuses against members of religious minorities in Pakistan and condemn in the strongest terms the persecution of all minorities, including the targeting of innocent people because of their beliefs. We urge the Government of Pakistan to guarantee the fundamental rights of all their citizens, and we regularly raise concerns about the protection of minority communities, including religious minorities and Christian minorities, with the Pakistani Government at senior level.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): As today is World Radio Day, will the Leader of the House join me in recognising the contribution that local radio stations make to people's lives in communities up and down the country, in particular through huge charity campaigns? There has been a recent focus on mental health, with 500 commercial radio stations coming together with the BBC to broadcast a simultaneous campaign.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I congratulate my hon. Friend on becoming the chairman of the APPG on commercial radio. It is marvellous that today is World Radio Day, although "World Wireless Day" is more alliterative, so let us rename it that. Community radio is so important. It not only brings local news to people but encourages and helps them, builds a sense of community and gives training to future journalists. We must cherish it, along with other radio, and if I may put in a word for the continuation for ever of "Test Match Special", Madam Deputy Speaker, I will do so.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): Figures published in *The Herald* this week show that free cash machines are disappearing at an alarming rate from communities across Scotland, with more than £10 million spent on cash machine charges last year.

Can we have a debate in Government time on the growing number of people paying for the privilege of accessing their own money?

Mr Rees-Mogg: That issue comes up in terms of both cash machines and bank branches. I see the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone), who may want to ask a question on a similar subject which he has raised with me before. I have arranged for meetings to take place with Ministers, and I am happy to continue to do so. It is ultimately a commercial decision for the banks, but customers should encourage them to provide a basic level of service.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): The Leader of the House anticipates my question. I thank him for enabling a constructive meeting with the Economic Secretary to the Treasury about bank closures, and my researcher, Emma Camp, wants to express her thanks too. Is it not time we had a debate in this place about bank closures?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I know that the Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee does not want me to say this, but I am afraid I will say it anyway. I think there is such demand for such a debate that, when the Backbench Business Committee is set up, there will be an application from Members across the House for one. If I were still on the Back Benches, it would have my support.

BILL PRESENTED

MEDICINES AND MEDICAL DEVICES BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Matt Hancock, supported by the Prime Minister, Michael Gove, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary Andrea Leadsom, Secretary Theresa Villiers and Jo Churchill, presented a Bill to confer power to amend or supplement the law relating to human medicines, veterinary medicines and medical devices; make provision about the enforcement of regulations, and the protection of health and safety, in relation to medical devices; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time Monday 24 February, and to be printed (Bill 90) with explanatory notes (Bill 90-EN).

February Adjournment

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That this House has considered matters to be raised before the forthcoming Adjournment.—(*David T. C. Davies.*)

12.23 pm

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): I would like to raise three issues that relate to my constituency. First and foremost, I am hugely excited by the prospect of a new arena in the Brabazon hangar on the former Filton airfield. Bristol is one of the most creative cultural cities in the country. Indeed, there can scarcely be anywhere in the country more famed for its contributions to sport, music, art, theatre and wider culture. That our area does not have a large arena of its own has long been a conspicuous absence in our local offering. I want to pay tribute to YTL Developments, the developer of the 400-acre airfield site. Its proposals will lead to the building of a new arena on the border between Bristol and South Gloucestershire, which will be funded without a penny of taxpayers' money. YTL's forecasts predict that the project will create 500 jobs, attract 1.4 million visitors per year and add around £1.5 billion to our local economy.

In reusing the existing Brabazon hangar, instead of building a brand-new arena from scratch, the proposals will save 18,600 tonnes of carbon emissions—the equivalent of 11,200 return flights to New York, so I am told. The innovative designs will mean that the Brabazon arena will be able to host touring bands, concerts and sport events in a single venue. Importantly, the arena will boast excellent transport links, including a brand-new railway station at North Filton, a regular MetroBus service and convenient walking and cycling routes. This project is a fantastic opportunity, and I urge Bristol City councillors to get on with granting the planning permission, because delays will only cause costs to increase. The Labour council's plans to spend £150 million of taxpayers' money on an arena at Temple Meads in the middle of Bristol were ill-fated, but there is now a great opportunity at the Brabazon hangar site to have a better facility with better transport links at zero cost to the taxpayer. I suggest that the councillors seize that opportunity with both hands.

The next issue that I would like to raise is transport infrastructure. The Prime Minister highlighted in his statement on Tuesday the upgrade to Bristol East junction, which is progressing well as part of our wider MetroWest suburban railway project. That project will deliver great things for our local area, with phase 1 reopening the Portishead branch rail line. The Severn Beach line will be extended to allow for direct journeys to Westbury and Bath, and that extension is on time to be delivered by 2021. Furthermore, we will see a reopened Henbury line, offering an hourly service to new stations in North Filton, Henbury and Ashley Down, and a new, more frequent half-hourly service between Bristol Parkway and Yate.

Our area is already becoming better connected, and I eagerly anticipate seeing the benefits of £350 million of investment in transport infrastructure over the next 20 years, but there are some issues that need addressing. First, a regular service must be restored to Pilning railway station. We are lucky enough in my constituency to have the Wave, the first inland surfing lake of its kind

in England, on the edge of Pilning and Easter Compton. That amazing facility opened recently and will attract thousands of tourists. If we do not want people to drive there, which would put pressure on rural road networks with limited capacity, it would be sensible to ensure that they have a reliable rail service, especially because there is a railway station already on the door step.

Secondly, and linked to the sustainability of the area, a park-and-ride facility at Severn Beach railway station would be greatly beneficial. It would capture a lot of traffic heading towards Bristol and avoid a large number of car journeys being taken. There is suitable land adjacent to the station, and I have made the case for it to be used for a park and ride. That would benefit those travelling towards Bristol from Gloucestershire and Wales, as the station is conveniently located near the A403 and M4, and those commuting towards work in Avonmouth and Severnside, which is a huge growth area for jobs and industry, as it is a 10-minute journey by train from Severn Beach to Avonmouth.

Finally, I would like to focus on the issue of education. Our local schools have faced challenges, but many of them are beginning to improve, thanks to the commitment of parents, hard-working teachers and school staff. In particular, I would like to pay tribute to South Gloucestershire and Stroud College, which was recognised last week for strong performance. Students studying A-levels at SGS College made more progress from their GCSE grades than other learners studying similar subjects across South Gloucestershire and England. I would also like to highlight the excellent work done by Bradley Stoke Community School, which continues to be the best school in South Gloucestershire.

I really enjoy visiting my local schools, and I am always inspired when I see young people eager to learn, teachers and staff striving to provide the best education, and governors and parents who are committed to providing the right supporting environment for that to happen. As someone who did not benefit from a fantastic education and left school at 16 with very few qualifications, I am passionate about social mobility and opportunities.

South Gloucestershire is the lowest-funded education authority in the country. There is no good reason for that, besides the arbitrary whims of a mathematical formula, and the impact of that is clear when we compare our results with those of our geographic and demographic neighbours. While the direction of travel is good, and many schools are improving, it cannot be argued that the lack of funding is not a factor in the underperformance of some schools. I have made a submission to the Chancellor ahead of the Budget arguing for more funding for our schools to assist with some of their capital needs, as many are unable to invest in heating, windows and other necessary maintenance to ensure children are studying in the kind of environment we would expect.

I have been working closely with many schools in south Gloucestershire and pay tribute to the members of staff working diligently to deliver a good education to our children, despite the limitations, in some cases, of the buildings they are operating in. In particular, I would highlight the situation at Patchway Community School, which is a school I have great affection for, as three of my children went there and received a great education before moving on to have great careers. Over a year ago, on a catch-up visit, I was shocked at the state

of the buildings and infrastructure: ceilings coming down, holes in the flooring, the whole place giving the impression of decay.

The staff are making an amazing effort to educate the pupils, but the limitations put on them by the shoddy state of the school buildings are extreme. I was really surprised. It still has the original resistant materials workbenches from the '50s. Children are working with equipment older than I am, not one mile from Rolls-Royce and Airbus, two of the leading technology and engineering companies in the world, and having to skirt around collapsed flooring that has been coned off because there is not the budget to repair it. Windows go unreplaced and staff have been forced to decide whether to replace their ageing heating system or undertake other routine maintenance. It is a choice they should not have to make. Parts of the school flood during periods of heavy rain and the changing rooms for sports are not fit for purpose.

I want every child in south Gloucestershire to feel valued at school, not to dread their daily attendance in a dilapidated, dismal and decaying place where the day-to-day experience must be disheartening at times. I have engaged with Ministers on this issue, and the Schools Minister came to visit the school. To date, we have not had much success, whether through increased funding or other help to address these important issues, but rest assured I will continue to campaign until schools in my area get the funding they need and deserve. In addition, I will continue to meet local companies, particularly in the STEM field, to explore whether there is scope for some support in this regard. The nation is desperately short of engineers and scientists. I represent an area that is the hub of south-west England's aerospace, technology and defence industries, yet I see children learning metalwork and woodwork on equipment that is older than I am, as I said earlier.

Schools should be places of inspiration and hope that highlight the great possibilities and opportunities of life—going back to the point about social mobility, aspiration and looking beyond one's circumstances. The staff at Patchway Community School are heroically doing their very best to provide this environment, but it must be very difficult and demoralising when the buildings are falling down around them. I would like to invite the Secretary of State for Education, whoever that will be by the end of the day, to visit the school with me to see what can be done.

12.32 pm

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti), not least because of his contribution about education and social mobility, which gives me the opportunity to plug the fourth university fair I have organised for my constituents in the London Borough of Harrow. It will take place on Monday 2 March from 3 pm to 6 pm at the excellent Whitmore High School in my constituency. Every student and parent in the borough thinking about university is extremely welcome to attend. All the leading universities will be there. There will also be options for working abroad. I pay tribute to those universities, including the Oxbridge pair, that will be attending the fair and which, as a result of the success of the previous three fairs, have now stationed a member of staff in the school to work

with staff to encourage applications to Russell Group universities and to continue the broader job of trying to increase aspiration among students in my constituency. It is extremely welcome.

I want to concentrate my remarks on the national health service in Harrow and north-west London more generally. Health Ministers will be aware of the collapse, after seven years, of the Shaping a Healthier Future programme, which was designed to plan the future of the NHS across the eight clinical commissioning group areas of north-west London. It originally envisaged the closure of four accident and emergency departments, two of which did take place, but then campaigns, led not least by my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), led to the successful defeat of the proposals to close his A&E department. That, coupled with Treasury concerns about the financing and population estimates, led last June to the Department of Health and Social Care formally cancelling the programme. On the surface, that was a good thing, because it helped to secure another two A&E departments in north-west London, and, at least for my constituents who rely on the A&E department at Northwick Park Hospital, it means there will not be even more pressure on our hospital.

As yet, however, there has not been any replacement strategy for the future of health services in north-west London, which is a particular concern for the future of Northwick Park Hospital, which has a £140 million backlog of essential maintenance, according to a written parliamentary answer from the Department of Health and Social Care; has been starved of substantial investment of late and is certainly short of intensive therapy unit beds; and has not been able to achieve its four-hour A&E target since August 2014. In that time, my partner has managed to have two children and Brad Pitt got married to and divorced from Angelina Jolie, which gives the House a sense of just how long it has been since the A&E department was able to provide a service that meets the key NHS targets.

That is not to decry the talents and dedication of the staff who work at Northwick Park Hospital. I have had to use the paediatric A&E department facilities many times, and the staff there are amazing—that view is widely shared in my constituency—but there is no clarity about the future of the hospital. That is brought into stark focus by the fact that the trust that runs the hospital is set to have one of the biggest deficits in the NHS. It is projected to be £92 million by the end of this financial year. It must be one of the first times in the history of the NHS that a hospital has approached the end of the financial year with close to a £100 million deficit. It raises the question: what is the future in terms of capital investment and funding for Northwick Park Hospital, given the wider problems in the NHS economy in north-west London? The Ealing, Brent and Harrow CCGs, in particular, are widely expected to have the highest deficits in NHS history by the end of the financial year. There is clearly something significantly wrong with the financing—and the formula on which that financing is based—of the NHS in north-west London. I would be grateful if the Minister conveyed those concerns to the Department and encouraged Ministers to get to grips with the challenges in north-west London, particularly those facing my constituency.

[Gareth Thomas]

As the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) would testify, the future of walk-in services run by local GPs, including the Pinn, Alexandra Avenue and the Belmont health centre was a significant issue at the general election. I am delighted to hear that the last surviving of those three walk-in services, the Pinn, has been saved, albeit it without any extra funding for the CCG. If true, it is genuinely excellent news.

The other two walk-in services at Alexandra Avenue and Belmont serve a more deprived and more economically challenged community than does the Pinn. It would be good to hear that there will be funding for walk-in services to be reopened at Alexandra Avenue and Belmont, because without that I fear the pressure on Northwick Park's accident and emergency department is only going to increase. As the chief executive of Northwick Park made clear to me, the closure particularly of the Alexandra Avenue walk-in centre was being felt very directly both in paediatric A&E and mainstream A&E services.

I should say that I am grateful to the Minister for Health for agreeing to meet me to discuss some of these concerns, but could the Minister on the Front Bench encourage the Department of Health and Social Care to respond? If he could give him a gentle prod to get me a proper briefing, I would be extremely grateful.

I particularly want to raise Mount Vernon cancer centre's future. Over 1,000 patients from the London Borough of Harrow use Mount Vernon cancer centre annually. Last July, a clinical advisory panel led by Professor Nick Slevin, who is a consultant clinical oncologist at the Christie Hospital, was commissioned to review the quality of services at Mount Vernon cancer centre and to come up with some suggestions for the way forward. It found that the hospital was so dilapidated and short staffed that it could not provide basic elements of treatment.

I understand that it is probably the first time in the NHS's 71-year history that such a major facility, specialising in what is clearly the country's second biggest killer disease, has been deemed to pose a risk to patients and been declared unfit for purpose. It was found to be so dilapidated and short staffed that it could not provide basic elements of treatment. Yet if we talk to those who have benefited or who have had relatives who have benefited from the treatment at Mount Vernon Hospital, we find it is a cancer centre that is held in extremely high regard. Again, it is blessed with some remarkably talented doctors and nurses, who have done a tremendous job over the years in saving numerous lives and making a huge difference.

Again, the question is: what is the future of the Mount Vernon cancer centre? Initially, there was a lot of concern, particularly with University College London Hospitals due to take over the running of the cancer centre, that cancer services would move from that site into central London. That does not now appear to be the likely ultimate plan for the cancer centre, but there is no clarity as yet about the cancer centre's future. It is clear from the review that it does not think, fundamentally, that the cancer centre can continue at the Mount Vernon site. That is creating a lot of concern among those currently undergoing treatment there or those who have benefited from treatment on the site.

Having been operated on at the Mount Vernon site in the dim and distant past when it was an acute hospital, I know the affection in which the hospital is held. As a matter of urgency, I urge NHS England to make sure there is no gap in the attention given to the future of Mount Vernon hospital. It sits in an uneasy place in terms of NHS boundaries, being very close to the boundary that NHS East of England manages, but just within the NHS London region. When UCLH takes over running the facilities on the site next year, apparently in March 2021, NHS East of England will pass over responsibility for working out its long-term future to NHS London. There has to be a concern that there will be some loss of focus on the future of the hospital.

Again, I urge the Minister to brief his colleague the Minister for Health on the concerns about Mount Vernon cancer centre. If it helps to encourage the Minister to take this seriously, Mount Vernon cancer centre serves the constituents of the Prime Minister as well as mine, and I suggest there will be many constituents in Uxbridge and South Ruislip who are very worried about the future of the cancer hospital. On that basis, I look forward to the Minister passing on my concerns.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): It is a pleasure to call Luke Evans to make his maiden speech.

12.44 pm

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) for his passionate talk about the NHS, something which he will probably find is dear to my heart.

One of the benefits of being one of those new Members who do their maiden speeches later is that you get to learn not only that the Opposition cannot intervene, but that it can be quite difficult for the Chair to intervene, especially when there is no time limit. The temptation is to go for a very long speech, but Members—and indeed you, Madam Deputy Speaker—will be very pleased to know that I actually take my advice from none other than Prince Philip, who once said, “The mind cannot absorb what the buttocks cannot endure.” With that in mind, I am going to keep it nice and short.

Actually, a royal connection is not a bad place for me to start my speech. After all, my seat is Bosworth, and most people know it because of the battle of Bosworth. In August 1485, Henry VII defeated Richard III, bringing to an end the English civil war of the Roses and the Plantagenet dynasty, and ushering in the Tudor era. But my constituency is so much more than a barren battlefield. We produced the Hansom cab—think what Sherlock Holmes went around in. We taught Ada Lovelace—think of the world's first ever computer programmer. We produce Triumph motorcycles—think Steve McQueen in “The Great Escape”—which are made in Hinckley; and there is much more.

My constituency is beautiful and diverse. It is broadly made up of three distinct areas: across the top we have Markfield, Bagworth and Thornton, which are steeped in mining history; across the middle, we have Twycross, Market Bosworth and some of the smaller villages, which are more rural and farming in nature; and across the bottom, we have Hinckley, Burbage, Earl Shilton

and Barwell, which are steeped in hosiery and shoes, and were renowned the world over for their products. Like those industries, times have changed, but the people of Leicestershire learned to adapt and they are innovative. In my constituency, we now have Twycross zoo, Mallory race park and MIRA. For those not familiar with MIRA, it is one of the world-leading research facilities for automotive technology—driverless cars; electric cars; electric batteries.

Having listening to other Members' maiden speeches, Madam Deputy Speaker, you may be forgiven for thinking that the world centres around their constituency. Well, I cannot debate that, but one thing I can say with the truest certainty is that the centre of England is actually in my patch—in Fenny Drayton in Bosworth. This was confirmed by the Ordnance Survey in 2013, much to the dismay of the then right hon. Member for Meriden. It is one of the absolute honours to represent the literal heart of our country here in the spiritual heart of our government.

At this point, I would like to pay my respects to and thank my predecessor, who represented Bosworth in Westminster for 33 years—David Tredinnick. From the outside, it may be perceived with a slight irony that I, a GP, was elected, given his interests in alternative medicine. However, from the inside, what we both share—I am in absolute admiration of it—is his innate desire for and pursuit of improving the wellness of the human state. That is something that I want to take with me as I go forward in my career.

As you heard me mention, Madam Deputy Speaker, I am a GP, and I have a declaration to make. My wife is a GP, my father is a GP and my mother is a retired nurse. My youngest brother is a GP and his fiancée is a hospital doctor. My middle brother broke the mould—he is a sports and exercise doctor, working for British Olympic swimming and Bath rugby. His wife—you guessed it—is a GP. Needless to say, when we have a Christmas dinner get-together, the conversation is riveting. My mother and father's dedication to public life was instilled in me, and that is why I am here today. However, I would not be here without the support, dedication, sacrifice and patience of my wife, Charlie, who is in the Gallery today. Thank you.

When people find out that someone is transitioning from being a GP to being a MP, a lot of them ask, "Why would you do that?"—I think my family thinks I am mad. I would answer with two retorts: first, there are lots of similarities between being a good local MP and a good local GP. We have to problem-solve, communicate effectively, distil complex information, and send it up towards the Government and down towards patients. Above all, we must care for the people we want to help and earn their respect. We do that by working hard, and I pledge to work tirelessly for the people of Bosworth. The only difference is that when a GP's consultation is over, they do not say to the patient, "Can you now vote for me?"—that is something I must get used to.

The second and probably more corny retort is that I want to make things better. Since being elected in December, I have spent the past few weeks fighting for the people of Hinckley and Bosworth. I have met Local Government Ministers to lobby for fairer funding for Leicestershire, and I met the Minister responsible for roads to ask for improvements to the A5. I have questioned Ministers from the Department for Digital, Culture,

Media and Sport about ensuring that we improve our broadband and mobile phone signals. I met the Transport Secretary and asked him to reopen the Ivanhoe line. I have joined the Health Committee, in the hope that I can use some of my professional experience to be a critical friend of Government, and help to improve the health of not only my constituents in Hinckley and Bosworth, but hopefully the nation. I will take those responsibilities forward and work tirelessly to deliver on them over the coming years.

The final question that I get asked—many new Members will find this—is about what I want to change, which I find really strange. I do not want to change the world; I want to solve the world. There are many problems up and down the country—indeed, across the globe—and I think we solve them by empowering people. If healthcare has taught me one thing, it is: help those who can't, and empower those who can. I want to be part of a body that helps to bring forward legislation that gives people the tools to help themselves and their communities. That is done by not only protecting people's rights, but giving them responsibilities. After all, we cannot escape the responsibilities of tomorrow by evading them today. That good motto works at many different levels, be it personal—the choices people make about what they eat, whether they exercise and where they spend their money—for organisations regarding how they hire and look after their staff, and from where they source their materials, or at Government level regarding how to deal with debt and the deficit, trade, and climate change.

As the new Member of Parliament for Bosworth, I will fight for the rights of my constituents. I will fulfil my responsibilities to them to the best of my ability, and I will drive the Government to empower the country, and its citizens, to make a better world.

12.53 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bosworth (Dr Evans) on his excellent peroration, and I wish him all the best in his career and in representing his constituents. I will also draw on some of his words about empowerment and choice, and I hope that as a member of the Health Committee, he will enjoy introducing new ideas and best practice from his recent experience as a GP.

The issue I wish to raise is also health-related. Last weekend in my constituency, some protesters assembled outside the British Pregnancy Advisory Service at Stroud Green, intent on disrupting the clinic's work and intimidating service users who were attending it. This issue is not new to the House. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) has raised it on a number of occasions, imploring the Health Secretary to take more action and create buffer zones around clinics so that women who have to make choices at what is often a stressful time in their lives are able to make those choices without experiencing harassment or degradation.

I was disappointed to see those protests in my constituency. As I follow the excellent speech by the hon. Member for Bosworth, I am sure that we all agree that choice is crucial in this debate, and that women's rights are human rights. The right for women to do what they choose with their own bodies is an important principle, and I have always stood up for that most basic of human rights.

[Catherine West]

The protests outside clinics that have been popping up in various constituencies can turn nasty, and I implore the Minister to seek advice from those senior to him about what can be done. As we know from the speech we have just heard, some patients need to make choices at various points in their lives. Women in particular should be supported at a difficult time, not bombarded by protesters who surround clinics, accuse service users of murder, and display graphic images that should not be tolerated while women are taking such a significant step in their lives. Turning a blind eye to such intimidatory tactics is not something that any Member of the House should encourage.

I am grateful to my local authority, Haringey Council, for its sympathetic approach to this issue when it appeared suddenly last weekend, as well as to our excellent borough commander. They immediately passed the issue to local community police officers, who are able to deal with issues of community cohesion that can arise quickly in a matter of hours. I hope I will gain the Government's support on this. We know that local authorities are hamstrung. The only legal tool currently available is the public spaces protection order, which is not really appropriate for this sort of issue, as a high threshold must be met to obtain a buffer zone.

I understand that such protests are a frequent occurrence. According to experts, over the past 18 months, 44 clinics across the UK have experienced some form of protest activity, including a number of GP surgeries. The hon. Member for Bosworth will know that a protest outside a GP's surgery could be particularly negative at a time when, as he said, it is important to empower a patient to make a decision. However, only a handful of those protests would meet the threshold for a PSPO.

Given that we are in the third decade of the 21st century, I ask for the law to be updated to protect women who choose to exercise their right to access pregnancy advice services, and in what they choose to do with their bodies. Will the Minister speak to the Home Secretary about the need for legislation to decriminalise abortion and to provide for buffer zones around registered clinics, with proper enforcement measures if those zones are breached?

I will conclude, Madam Deputy Speaker, as I know that lots of Members wish to speak. My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton has already led calls on this issue in the House, and she has long been a champion for buffer zones. I know that the issue is on the Government's mind—together with a number of other pressing matters—and if it is dealt with quickly, it might lead to a calmer situation. We know that arrangements are in place abroad to prevent disruptive and intimidating protesters from getting near clinics and pressuring women who are already under a great deal of stress and pressure.

Some may argue that buffer zones place a limit on free speech—we could have a debate about that. There is nothing to stop such debates taking place in a calm and measured way, and Members on both sides of the House will have different views. Nevertheless, we can demonstrate our ability to have calm discussions in this House about issues on which we disagree, and we do not need to shout at service users at critical times, show distressing images, or call people murderers outside a perfectly reasonable and well-established clinic.

Finally, may I beg the Minister a third time to take this issue up with the Home Secretary? Providing buffer zones would achieve protection and dignity for women while they make what is often the biggest or most difficult decision of their lives. We cannot let the protests continue and we cannot afford more delay.

Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wish you a lovely break next week.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): It is a pleasure to call Sarah Atherton to make her maiden speech.

1 pm

Sarah Atherton (Wrexham) (Con): Diolch yn fawr, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I am the first ever Conservative MP for Wrexham and I am Wrexham's first female MP. I stand humbled and privileged to serve every constituent, regardless of how they voted. The people of Wrexham are strong and proud, and they were affronted by the prospect of their democratic will being overruled. I have fulfilled my promise to the people of Wrexham and we have left the European Union.

Wrexham is a town some six miles from the English border and a gateway both to north-west England and beautiful Snowdonia. Inextricably linked to England for work and play, we are still fiercely and proudly Welsh. We in Wrexham illustrate all that is rich in our Union. I am very typical of someone living in north-east Wales. My father is from Chester and my mother is from Caernarfon. The walls of Chester did nothing to keep out the Welsh women. [Laughter.]

My mother came from a large humble "covie" family, where the women are matriarchs, resilient and strong. Indeed, Shakespeare was no stranger to the determination and the take-no-prisoners attitude of Welsh women, but I'll let you read "Henry IV, part 1" for further information. The women of my mother's generation were tasked with looking after the family and making ends meet. She never heard English until she attended school. How proud all the family are now, as one of them rises in this Chamber as the first ever female Conservative MP for Wales. I think they've even forgiven me for being a Tory. [Laughter.] But that goes to show how amazing this country of ours is and what we can offer to people when they put in hard work, commitment and sacrifice. We must ensure that all those opportunities are maintained and enhanced for our future generations.

Wrexham has a long history of welcoming people into the town. In world war two, we had an influx of Polish servicemen who integrated and settled. There is a large Polish community in Wrexham and a smaller, yet significant Portuguese community. They have woven themselves into the fabric of Wrexham, adding to the diversity and culture of our one nation.

For those who have not been to Wrexham, it is a hidden gem of a market town founded on mining, brewing, football and the military. Sadly, Wrexham claims the second largest mining disaster in Wales. In 1934, an explosion killed 266 men in the Gresford colliery. All but 11 remain buried beneath our feet as a lasting reminder of our industrial heritage. So many men died on that day, as they had changed their shifts to watch Wrexham play Tranmere Rovers. Indeed, as a student nurse back in 1990, I nursed an old man on a

medical ward at the local Wrexham Maelor Hospital. His body was covered in small blue scars. He told me that he had been dragged out of the pit that day and was one of the few who survived. It was poignant that, when I visited him at home in Gwersyllt, the same coal that almost killed him was keeping his house warm and water hot.

The mines have since closed, but the resilience and adaptability of the people of Wrexham have meant that other industries and business have filled the void. The people have risen to the challenge. These are the same people who voted me in and I thank them for their faith in me. Indeed, during the election campaign the shift in the political landscape was seismic. The *Daily Mail* reporter was somewhat surprised to find me and two former Ministers having a swift post-campaigning pint in the L Lay Miners Welfare Institute, having just left the opposition in a rather upmarket coffee shop.

As Members have heard, Wrexham's passion for football goes back a long way and Wrexham Association football club is arguably the oldest in Wales. The Football Association of Wales was founded in Wrexham and I was pleased to see the recent opening of Colliers Park, the national football development centre for Wales, symbolically located on the site of the Gresford colliery pithead. I would like to highlight the good work done by Gresford Athletic football club and Brickfield Rangers football club, including their work in ensuring football is accessible to all, including our young people.

In 1689, the Royal Welch Fusiliers was raised, recruiting from across north Wales. It has a long association with Wrexham's Hightown barracks. Sadly, this has all changed, but the connection with Wrexham and the Welch Fusiliers remains strong. Madam Deputy Speaker, I stand in the House as the only female MP who has served in the regular Army. It goes without saying that I will do all I can to support our military personnel, veterans and all their families.

Many of us have laid claim to a few firsts. In 1860, my constituency had over 19 breweries in the town. We obviously brew the best beer. Wrexham Lager began in 1882 and the lager is still brewed today. I, too, once dabbled in commercial brewing. I was a brewster—a female brewer. Those who follow me on social media will know that I appreciate a pint of real ale or two and I absolutely value the role pubs play in supporting our communities.

I pay tribute to Ian Lucas, the previous Member for Wrexham, who served the people of Wrexham for 18 years and was a good constituency Member of Parliament. Despite our political differences, Ian and I do have one thing in common: we both served on Gresford Community Council. This is why I value the role of our community councils and councillors in making our communities a better place to live.

Employment opportunities in Wrexham are relatively good. It is served by large businesses such as IPSEN, Money Penny, DTCC, JCB and Kellogg's, and we are within commuting distance of Airbus and Toyota. Wrexham is home to the second largest trading estate in the UK, directly employing about 12,000 people. With hopes of expansion comes the offer of further employment opportunities.

It was clear to me during the general election campaign that the residents of Wrexham feel let down by the Welsh Labour Government. The health service is our

main concern; a health service directly managed by Labour from Cardiff. Almost daily, I hear heartbreaking narratives from constituents about their disempowerment and suffering. I am listening. As one of seven Conservative MPs across north Wales, we are all listening and we are all looking at what we can do to influence the Welsh Labour Government.

Wrexham has not escaped the problems faced by many towns across the country, but there are now positive plans afoot for regeneration. I have met so many enterprising traders, butchers, bakers and restaurateurs, and I shall be meeting many more. They are the seedcorn of our prosperity. I will do all I can to work with all who seek the success of Wrexham, always seeking to ensure that the people's voice is heard.

There is renewed optimism in Wrexham, bringing with it the hope that missed opportunities will now be realised. I have lost count of the amount of times people have stopped their car or stopped me in the street, shaken my hand and said, "I'd hoped this day would come." Wrexham has indeed turned blue and I will prove to my constituents that they have made the right choice. Diolch yn fawr, bobl Wrecsam. Diolch am eich cefnogaeth.

1.9 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow the very assured maiden speeches of the hon. Members for Bosworth (Dr Evans) and for Wrexham (Sarah Atherton). I wish them well. As a fellow Welsh woman MP, may I say to the hon. Member for Wrexham that I very much look forward to her contribution to the annual St David's Day Welsh debate, which will be held after recess? I am also sure that the all-party beer group will be extremely interested to hear the views of a brewster.

The headlines this week have been understandably dominated by the Government's decision to move ahead with HS2. This will present not only new opportunities, but significant challenges for the Government in seeking to address the imbalance between the economies of the nations and regions of the UK. I will begin with the opportunities that have arisen, particularly as an hon. Member for a constituency and a city that produces steel and trains.

As Ministers will be aware, phases 1 and 2 of the HS2 project combined will require 2 million tonnes of steel, including for tracks, train components, bridges, tunnels, gantries, wire and more. That means there will be huge procurement opportunities for steel producers across the UK, including in south Wales. I hope that the Government will act to ensure that high-quality UK steel products are used for HS2 wherever possible. It is crucial that Ministers use this opportunity to give our steel industry the vote of confidence that it needs and deserves in extremely challenging times. I will re-emphasise that point to the Government with the members of the all-party group on steel, which I co-chair with the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Holly Mumby-Croft).

I also urge Ministers to look to Newport-based train builders CAF Rail UK to produce the trains that are needed for this major infrastructure project. Train production has been up and running at the site at Llanwern since 2018. I have been fortunate enough to visit the factory to see some of the exceptional units

[*Jessica Morden*]

being built for West Midlands trains and Northern. The company has received great support and investment from the Welsh Labour Government and already employs a skilled workforce of around 250 people, which is set to grow to 300 in the near future. CAF has the potential and the capacity to produce trains that are at the cutting edge of modern rail technology and offer travel speeds of over 360 km an hour. That makes CAF a perfect fit for HS2, and winning the contract for this major project would be a real boost to our local economy, which has been hit hard recently by the sad news of job losses at Orb, Liberty, EnerSys and Caldicot Tinmasters.

HS2 provides new opportunities to be grasped and I will continue to raise the points that I have made today with Ministers over the weeks and months ahead. However, it is also important to highlight, as Wales's First Minister Mark Drakeford rightly did this week, that the announcement to proceed with HS2 brings the Tory Government's historical under-investment in Welsh rail infrastructure into sharp and unflattering focus. Wales accounts for 11% of the UK rail network, yet since 2010, we have received only 2% of rail enhancement spending. In the meantime, the UK Government have cancelled electrification to Swansea and blocked the Welsh Government from providing much needed additional cross-border services that would benefit my constituents who commute from Newport and Severn Tunnel Junction to Bristol. That disparity in investment needs to be addressed urgently if the Prime Minister's pledge to "level up" the nations and regions of the UK is to be seen as anything other than grandstanding bluster. Wales has been the forgotten nation on rail infrastructure spending and this must end. We also need a new station for Magor and Undy and I pay tribute to the fabulous Magor rail group for its fantastic campaign. I hope that that progresses shortly.

In this end-of-term Adjournment debate, I will also touch on some other issues affecting my constituents. The system of claiming benefits through the special rules for terminal illnesses is still completely unfit for purpose. As Members across the House may be aware, those living with debilitating terminal conditions such as motor neurone disease still have to prove that they have a life expectancy of six months to access benefits. In the case of an unpredictable condition such as MND, that is almost impossible and it forces vulnerable people to spend the last months of their lives filling in lengthy forms, attending assessments, meeting work coaches and waiting months for payments. Equally degrading and cruel is the three-year benefit award, which means that anyone who lives with a condition like MND for over three years loses their benefits. That means that people who are extremely ill—in some cases, completely paralysed or unable to speak—are receiving letters telling them that their benefits are being stopped unless they make a new claim. We have to ask ourselves if this is the sort of country that we want to live in.

In July last year, the Government announced a review of the benefits system to support people who are terminally ill. Six months later, there is little sign of progress, other than the launch of a survey for clinicians and a claimants' roundtable. The disruption of a general election may have played a part in the delay, but it is still taking far

too long. We owe it to them, their families and everyone living with such awful diseases to reform a benefits system that is currently insulting and inhumane. The former Member for Bridgend, Madeleine Moon, did excellent work on this issue in the last Parliament and I intend to pursue it in this one.

I have also been contacted by constituents about the roll-out of the IR35 off-payroll tax. As hon. Members know, there are huge concerns about what that could mean for contractors around the country. Thousands of workers will be unfairly taxed as employees with no employment benefits, including sickness pay, holiday pay and maternity or paternity rights. During the general election, the then Chancellor promised a review of the IR35 legislation, but instead the Government have decided to go ahead with the off-payroll tax and have announced only a consultation on the implementation of the reforms. Just yesterday, contractors were in Parliament in numbers to protest and lobby. The Financial Secretary to the Treasury, the right hon. Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), said in reply to a Treasury question that I asked this week that he was not aware of big companies making blanket decisions on IR35—yet I say to him that my Twitter feed says otherwise. Contractors rightly feel that the Government are not engaging with them about how they will be affected by these changes. Ministers need to listen now, which means pausing the process and working with the industry to undertake a proper review.

Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for giving me the chance to take part in this debate. Like other honourable Welsh Members, I look forward to taking part in another debate in about two weeks' time, and I wish everyone a productive recess.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): It is a pleasure to call Angela Richardson to make her maiden speech.

1.16 pm

Angela Richardson (Guildford) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me to give my maiden speech in this general debate. I start by thanking the Speaker, the Deputies, including yourself, and the Speaker's Office for the excellent advice, care and concern that has been shown to new Members. It is greatly appreciated.

It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) and to have heard the wonderful maiden speeches from my hon. Friends the Members for Bosworth (Dr Evans) and for Wrexham (Sarah Atherton)—I have thoroughly enjoyed listening to all the maiden speeches from this intake so far.

I am delighted to be a Member of this Parliament, which is so wonderfully diverse and representative of the communities we serve. I would like to thank the Conservative Women's Organisation, Women2Win, and the cross-party 50:50 campaign for the investment that they made in me and for encouraging women to stand in public life.

My predecessor in Guildford, the right hon. Anne Milton, started her political journey as a borough councillor in nearby Reigate and Banstead. With her experience as an NHS nurse of 25 years and genuine warmth of character, she was close to our community and understood

local people and their concerns. Anne always acted with principle and did what she believed was right both for her constituents and in the national interest.

In Government, Anne was an effective Minister in the Department of Health and later a Government Whip—indeed, she was the first Conservative woman to hold the position of Deputy Chief Whip, where she introduced better access to physical and mental health provision as well as pioneering the induction programme for new Members, which we in this intake have all benefited from. Anne Milton's most recent post in Government was as Minister of State for Apprenticeships and Skills. I look forward to continuing to make the case for the value of apprenticeships, not least as someone who did not go to university but was able to learn and earn. I can see the enormous potential of apprenticeships as we invest in our young people as part of our future global Britain.

I have the wonderful privilege of representing a constituency that I believe encapsulates its name in so many ways. Guildford, or “Golden Ford”, is so named because it was the natural shallow crossing point of the River Wey, where the river bed shone with golden sand. The North Downs way is a footpath that stretches through Surrey, including the Hog's Back and the centre of Guildford, past the ancient castle built shortly after the Norman conquest in 1066. It provides stunning views—in fact, you do not have to go far from the centre of Guildford to enjoy a view, especially of our iconic cathedral, which sits proudly on the skyline.

Beyond the town, there are many beautiful villages in the Guildford constituency, with idyllic cricket greens and friendly pubs, many of which I managed to give good custom to during the general election as a well-earned break from knocking on doors. I have been proud to call the village of Ewhurst my home for the last decade and serve as a local councillor in the neighbouring community of Cranleigh, which still competes for the title of England's largest village.

There are hundreds of charities registered in Guildford, and scores more in the wider constituency. It is a kind-hearted, philanthropic place, and the borough council works extremely well in partnership with those charities, helping with all sorts of issues from rough sleeping to young carers. The council also has a fantastic ASPIRE programme to promote health and wellbeing. Homelessness and rough sleeping are high on my list of priorities, and I look forward to continuing to work with the council, and with charities such as Guildford Action, to ensure that the additional funding announced by the Government in December is put to good use. I will work both on a cross-party basis and with the Government to tackle those issues as an officer of the all-party parliamentary group for ending homelessness here in Westminster.

Community is at the heart of this one nation Conservative Government's agenda, and Guildford is uniquely placed to forge golden opportunities in linking the fantastic University of Surrey, Surrey Sports Park, the law college, Surrey Research Park, our entrepreneurs, our computer gaming industry and our leading 5G innovation, job creation and prosperity with our cultural gems of the performing arts and our beautiful cobbled high street, with its famous retail offering of shops, cafes and restaurants.

However, the economic revenue produced by Guildford needs to be nourished with inward investment of skill, talent and funding. I will be seeking Government investment

in infrastructure. It is time for a masterplan for Guildford town centre, and bold innovation to reduce traffic with green technology, road improvements, and a re-purposing of the old Cranleigh to Guildford Rail line to ease congestion on the A281. We know that a vibrant local community is more than its industry; it is about its services, its schools and its hospitals.

I am delighted to have Royal Surrey County Hospital in my constituency. Our three children were born there. The accident and emergency department looked after me during a difficult second-trimester miscarriage, and it was an NHS consultant at the hospital who diagnosed our son with autism and offered support. I was proud that the Prime Minister put our NHS at the front and centre of the general election campaign, and I give heartfelt thanks to all our hard-working NHS staff. I look forward to continuing to work on the provision of better car parking at the hospital for both staff and patients, and endeavouring to link the hospital with Onslow Park and Ride.

Let me say, as a proud immigrant to this country from New Zealand who ventured well beyond the famous antipodean settlements of Earl's Court and Shepherd's Bush, that community is something that I have had to invest in and build over the last two decades. The people of Guildford have been so welcoming to me, and through my work as their representative I hope to repay their trust.

Being the Member of Parliament for Guildford is the honour of my life, and it would not be possible without the steadfast support of my husband Jeremy, who is in the Gallery today. With your indulgence, Madam Deputy Speaker, may I also pay tribute to my parents, who are watching in New Zealand? My mother instilled in me a lifelong love of learning, and my father is immensely practical with a fine sense of humour. That upbringing will, I trust, stand me in good stead in this place, as we combine philosophical principles with pragmatism, meet our country where it is today, and work together to forge its bright future.

1.23 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): I, too, congratulate the hon. Members for Bosworth (Dr Evans), for Wrexham (Sarah Atherton) and for Guildford (Angela Richardson) on their eloquent and passionate speeches. They all have big shoes to fill, but I am sure that they will do so with integrity and compassion. Let me say to the hon. Member for Wrexham that while I cannot profess to share her love of real ale, if she decides to diversify into gin I shall be more than happy to offer myself as a sampler.

Today I wish to raise the issue of charity lottery reform. Many Members will be familiar with the people's postcode lottery, the local hospice lottery and the health lottery, but in fact there are 400 charity lotteries operating across Britain, which demonstrates just how crucial this form of fundraising is to the charity sector. The income generated from those lotteries enables charities to fulfil their purpose of helping and supporting many communities and causes across Britain. In my own constituency, charities such as Forest School Swansea Neath Port Talbot and Friends of Primrose Park rely heavily on lotteries.

[Carolyn Harris]

However, for years these charities have been operating under out-of-date legislation, which is hampering fund raising. Sales limits have a detrimental impact on both the charities and those who rely on the services that they offer. Sadly, it is the smaller local charities that are suffering the most. Ministers should already be aware of the nfpSynergy report “Small Change: How charity lottery limits impact on small charities”, which I helped to launch last year. Alarming, the report shows that local charities have lost out on a staggering £45 million of funding, and that, shockingly, only three in 10 applications from small charities could be awarded over two years. I was appalled to learn that as many as five small charities in my constituency had fallen victim to these sales limits, but, unsurprisingly, the report reveals that Swansea East is not alone. Virtually every constituency has been affected, and I urge all Members to read the report to see for themselves how many amazing charities in their own constituencies are losing out.

As someone who recognises the necessity for local charities in communities, I find the Government’s lack of urgent action to address charity lottery reform infuriating. I am not suggesting that this is a party-political issue; I know that Members across the House are as tired and riled about it as I am. However, I must give credit where credit is due—although it is painful! Last month the Government did introduce legislation to update the limits, which should, in theory, be a welcome catalyst for change. I also know that the Gambling Commission is conducting a short technical consultation, which will end on 12 March. I am pleased that charity lottery reform is under the spotlight, but it feels as though the issue has been discussed multiple times before, at length. How many more millions of pounds must charities lose before action is taken?

I hope that Ministers will encourage the Gambling Commission—I frequently challenge the commission on this—not to delay reviewing the responses to the consultation. I propose that a date should be fixed for it to publish the outcomes of its consultation so that reform can at last take place, and I ask Ministers to support me in that proposal.

Finally, in order to offer hope and assurance to the charity sector that change is coming, may I ask Ministers to clarify when exactly they expect the long-awaited charity lottery reform to come into force? Charities and communities alike have waited long enough: it is time to move on.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): It is a great pleasure to call Jerome Mayhew to make his maiden speech.

1.27 pm

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): I feel hugely privileged to be standing here as the Member of Parliament for Broadland. It is an exquisite sliver of breathtaking Norfolk, from Wighton in the north, where my parents were married, to the Halvergate Marshes near Breydon Water in the south-east. It is named after the eponymous Norfolk Broads, a magical combining of flooded medieval peat cuttings interconnected by rivers: the Yare, Bure,

Ant, Wensum, and Thurne, to name a few. Together they make up the great harbour of the Broads. The harbourmaster is the Broads Authority, whose key duty rightly remains to maintain navigation. The area is also a wonderful haven for nature, created by Norfolk reed-cutting and marsh grazing over centuries, a harmonious form of traditional husbandry serving both nature and man. Long may those traditional occupations be able to continue to do their good work.

However, to the north of the constituency, some 30 miles from the Broads, “Broadland” is a misnomer. Who would describe Fakenham, with its fine racecourse—but currently, shamefully, no post office—or the pilgrimage village of Walsingham as being in the Broads?

The boundaries of my constituency have been much changed in recent times, but my predecessor, the right hon. Keith Simpson, flexed with them to represent this part of Norfolk for the past 22 years. An academic, Keith describes himself as a

“military historian with an interest in defence and security”.

This political modesty belies his long and distinguished service on some of the key Committees of the House, and most notably his valued membership of the Intelligence and Security Committee. He is a charming and witty after-dinner speaker, and I will struggle to meet his standards and expertise.

Keith was a staunch advocate for Norfolk and for the infrastructure that it deserves. On reading his maiden speech, made back in 1997, I noticed his demand for the dualling of the A47, a key east-west artery for East Anglia. What I did not realise was that this is a tradition of the seat. Looking further back, I discovered that his predecessor, Richard Ryder, made an identical request 37 years ago, in 1983. I now join the club. I am still looking forward to the dualling of the A47, but with this Government’s welcome commitment to investing in our infrastructure, including the dualling of the A47, I am delighted that my eventual successor to the seat of Broadland—I hope in 2055 or thereabouts—will have something else to talk about.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker), in his moving maiden speech, evoked the slower pace of life associated with our part of the world, which is epitomised, in his mind, by the village of Sloely. Well, once he has tired of Sloely, I invite him gently to join me in Little Snoring, or even in Great Snoring. But to talk of modern Norfolk in such terms is to ignore the dynamic businesses that thrive there, particularly in the farming, agri-science and green energy sectors. As a rural-based businessman myself, I know the desperate need for improved mobile phone coverage and broadband connectivity to allow the businesses of Broadland to thrive. That is why I wholeheartedly welcome the shared rural network agreement to provide 95% of geographical coverage by 2025, and I am already working with Mobile UK and Norfolk County Council to ensure that Norfolk is in the first phase of this roll-out. I also eagerly await the Government’s 1 gigabit broadband. Entrepreneurialism is alive and well in Broadland, and business there could have the best of both worlds—unrivalled quality of life, together with great connectivity—but we need the tools to do the job.

I join this Parliament in what I believe to be an era-defining moment. For the last 40 years, the relative importance of this place has slowly diminished as more

powers were gradually ceded to the EU in its founding quest for ever greater political union. Is it a coincidence that, over the same period, the reputation of this House suffered commensurate decline? As the power of this place to effect meaningful change in the lives of our constituents has diminished, so too has its reputation fallen. I believe that Brexit provides us with the opportunity to change all that. If the decision over Brexit has taught us anything, it is surely that this country does not like to be governed by bodies that it cannot vote out. The people took the lead away from the political class and taught us all a lesson, and actually, it was a lesson in democracy. That lesson has profoundly changed my political thinking. We have been re-taught that democratic accountability is needed in the decisions of state.

That lesson does not just apply to international bodies. The European years also marked the proliferation of quangos, set up to be independent of politics in their delivery of key areas of national government. But what does independence mean? It means an organisation that is untrammelled by political pressures, and yet political pressure is the evidence of a democratic system at work. As we accelerate our already impressive response to the climate and environmental challenges that we face, we will be requiring huge changes to be made to the lives of all our constituents. Without the reform of quangos to bring them back within the structures of democratic government, I fear that we may be sowing the seeds of the next Brexit-style revolt when we can all least afford it.

To be clear, I do not want to stymie our effective environmental and climate response. I want to do the opposite, but I invite the House to look forward. As our new and necessary policies begin to bite, with the huge changes to everyday life that they will entail, not everyone will be happy. The absence of democratic pressure valves in the implementation of policy will leave us all vulnerable to a demagogic backlash. If we do not bring the people with us through the implementation of our plans, it will be at our peril. Now is the time to learn the true lesson of Brexit, to embrace democracy once more throughout our national conversation and to restore true accountability to the people, in organisations that are trusted. Perhaps then the people will once more believe that they have the politicians they deserve.

1.36 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, I should like to thank the hon. Member for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew) for his contribution. I have had time since the election to make it my business to introduce myself to many of the new Members, and he and I have had a cup of tea together. The giveaway to his political history is in his name, and we had a good discussion about Northern Ireland, in which he has a deep interest. I know that for a fact, because he told me so. He also told me that he had been involved in political life from an early age. He said that he might not have known exactly what was going on, but he used to go out on the canvass trail with his father and other members of his family. It was really nice to hear his contribution, and I look forward to hearing many more from him. I wish him well in the House. I should also like to thank the hon. Members for Bosworth (Dr Evans), for Wrexham (Sarah Atherton) and for Guildford (Angela Richardson) for their contributions. We have a wealth of talent in this House

among the new intake, and we very much look forward to the contributions that they will make from both sides of the Chamber. We wish them well.

I want to talk about a subject that I asked the Leader of the House about last week—namely, invasive species. I am not talking about the EU when I talk about invasive species; this is not about anyone coming in to take away our fishing in our waters around the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I want to talk about invasive species in relation to mammals, flora and fauna. The topic I have chosen is of great concern to me as a landowner and also as a country sports enthusiast. I live on a farm in Greyabbey in Northern Ireland, and I am very pleased and privileged to do so. The conservation projects that we have on our farm are all designed to ensure that the natural balance is in place and that the flora and fauna—the animals and the mammals that we have—are native. We have planted 3,500 trees and dug two ponds. We keep the hedgerows and we have control of the pests—the magpies and the grey-backed crows. By doing this, we have ensured that the songbirds, particularly the yellowhammers, have come back in some numbers in the past year. This is about the retention of the flora, the bird life and the mammals.

The non-native species are those that have been introduced, either intentionally or unintentionally, outside their natural range. Many of these non-native species live in harmony with our native species, causing no adverse impacts. However, a few non-native species have become known as invasive, as they thrive in our habitats and out-compete our own flora and fauna. It is time to get the balance back in nature and to retain what we already have, rather than changing it in a detrimental way. I am sure that there are few Members who have not been contacted by local landowners—and, increasingly, homeowners—about Japanese knotweed, which has the strength and the ability to shift the very foundations of a home. In the brighter bygone days, local authorities would have taken care of the eradication of this blight. It is now up to landowners to take the necessary steps, although some local authorities will give advice on it. Over the past four or five years, I have had to deal with Japanese knotweed not only in my town of Newtownards, but in the countryside. This destructive plant cost Britain a shocking estimated £200 million in 2018, but it is not the only invasive species of note affecting country life and conservation.

Invasive species such as mink have a negative effect on game management through excessive predation on game birds, which has a knock-on effect on shooting and conservation, and I should declare that I am a member of the British Association for Shooting and Conservation and of the Countryside Alliance. I recently read an interesting article on the BBC regarding the danger that invasive species pose to our beautiful countryside and delicately balanced ecosystems. How important it is that we get the balance right.

The mink is native to North America, but it can now be found close to rivers and water sources throughout the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Mink, which are often mistaken for otters, are popular for their thick fur. In the early 1950s, they were introduced into Ireland for fur farming. Over time, some escaped, and others were deliberately released. Inside this beautiful-looking creature lurks an indiscriminate

[Jim Shannon]

killer of birds, fish and small mammals. They decimate ground-nesting birds and tackle fish as large as themselves. The mink has no natural predator, so the species is thriving to the detriment of our own species.

I know that this is not the responsibility of the hon. Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew), who will respond to the debate, but I know that he will pass these matters on to DEFRA and, because this is a devolved matter, to the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in Northern Ireland and to the Assembly. I call on all those Departments to work hand in hand to embrace the knowledge and resources offered by the local responsible shooting community to assist with the control of not just the mink, but many other species.

In Strangford, we have undertaken a massive project to address the grey squirrel issue and to attempt to ensure that our indigenous red squirrel has a chance at life again in our farmlands and woodlands. At Mount Stewart outside Greyabbey on the Ards peninsula, the National Trust is running a conservation project for red squirrels that is showing remarkable success. Alongside that, there are red squirrel projects at Rosemount in Greyabbey and on the Ballywalter estate—two shooting estates both well known for their contribution to conservation, which again highlights the importance of balance.

I also highlight Ulster Wildlife's sterling work on the Red Squirrels United project, through which it has set up and co-ordinated a local red squirrel conservation group in North Down. Some 30 active volunteers are controlling grey squirrels in Cairn Wood, Clandeboye, Cultra, Redburn and Killynether to support the few red squirrels that remain, working closely with the Ards Red Squirrel Group to support one another's efforts. I thank the volunteers for all that they have done and will continue to do. The eradication or removal of the grey squirrel is important to save the other species—not just across Northern Ireland, but the whole United Kingdom—because the pox that it carries simply leaves no option for the two to cohabit.

In addition, there are a number of species associated with our rivers that are of particular conservation importance. For example, there are concentrations of remaining populations of the rare freshwater pearl mussel and the white-clawed crayfish. The freshwater crayfish is commonly found in alkaline streams, rivers and small lakes where levels of calcium carbonate are high, because the crayfish relies on the chemical to build up its exoskeleton. Such conditions are often provided in lakes, which may support large populations of the species. Some snails, such as the marsh snail, can persist during periods of drought under stones and in damp vegetation and are common in turloughs—a unique type of disappearing lake found mostly in limestone areas.

We all know about ash dieback, because no constituency will have been unaffected. The benefits of planting trees as a climate change abatement measure are widely reported, but rarely is there mention of invasive alien tree diseases across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the impact that they have on planting programmes. Over the past seven years, ash dieback disease has swept across the country and may kill between 95% to 99% of our European ash population. As our ash trees die, not only will Ireland's traditional

source of hurling sticks be lost, but the health of our ecosystems will decline, as will our biodiversity and our economy.

We can take steps to stop the disease. Recent research in the UK indicates that *H. fraxineus* is becoming more virulent and spreading more rapidly, so we need a Government strategy for England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Is there anything we can do to limit the rate of spread? Yes, there is, and the Government's website indicates steps that can be taken around hygiene. Twelve other serious alien tree diseases have arrived in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland but, unlike ash dieback, the consequences are not yet evident. We urgently need a national strategy to build resilience in the environment and to stop diseases at source, but until that is implemented, we must take action at individual, community, and organisational levels to raise awareness and introduce biosecurity and hygiene into all our activities.

As usual with such matters, we are on a timescale, and we should be doing everything in our power to enhance our environment and battle the problems of the modern world. However, it must be acknowledged that biodiversity needs to be monitored, structured and managed, and that requires a UK-wide strategy. The respected RSPB says:

“The introduction of invasive non-native species is the second biggest threat to global biodiversity after habitat loss. Islands and freshwater habitats are particularly vulnerable, and bird species across the world have experienced severe impacts—invasive non-native species have been involved in the extinction of 68 out of the 135 bird species lost in the wild globally over the last 500 years.”

We are blessed with a beautiful nation and some of the loveliest countryside. Every Member who has made their maiden speech today has said how nice their constituency is, which is true, but my constituency is equally as nice. We must take decisions to ensure that we work to keep our nation beautifully balanced for future generations.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish you and everyone in the House a peaceful and restful recess next week. You certainly deserve it.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. It is a great pleasure to call Dr Neil Hudson to make his maiden speech.

1.46 pm

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con): It is a great honour to stand to make my maiden speech as the Member of Parliament for Penrith and The Border. It is a tremendous privilege to be in this House, and I thank my electors for putting their trust in me. The three MPs before me—William Whitelaw, Lord David MacLean, and Rory Stewart—had amazing parliamentary careers, covering roles such as Home Secretary, Chief Whip and International Development Secretary. I pay special tribute to my predecessor, Rory Stewart. When I was selected as the candidate for my seat, Rory reached out to me and was extremely kind and generous with his support, for which I am grateful.

Rory was a tireless champion for Penrith and The Border, famously walking around the entire vast constituency—even that did not tire him out. He helped

countless numbers of constituents and campaigned hard for better broadband, overcoming rural isolation, protecting the environment, and flood management, which sadly has been critical again in Cumbria in recent days—my sympathies go out to the people of Appleby at this time. As a Minister, he was incredibly thoughtful, articulate and rational in portfolios such as the environment and prisons and, latterly, as International Development Secretary. As he moves on, I wish him and his family well. By the way, Rory, when you are next in Cumbria, you are welcome to come and kip with me. *[Laughter.]*

Penrith and The Border has a population of over 82,000 and an area of 3,120 sq km. As such, it is geographically vast and sparsely populated. The constituency contains many diverse and beautiful villages and towns. I will name but a few, with apologies to those that I miss out: Penrith, Wigton, Appleby, Longtown, Brampton, Alston, Kirkby Stephen and Shap. I am also proud to have parts of the original Hadrian's wall in my constituency, as well as parts of the original "blue wall".

Agriculture is the lifeblood of the constituency, accounting for about 50% of land use, but there are other industries, too. Tourism is a hugely important sector for our local economy. Indeed, Cumbria has one of the largest tourist economies in the UK. There were 47 million visits to Cumbria in 2018 alone. In addition, there are over 5,700 businesses in Penrith and The Border. Such businesses are absolutely vital to our communities.

Such a vast area has problems with connectivity, be it virtual or real. Whether it is broadband, mobile phone coverage or transport links such as trains and rural buses, communities and people need to be connected and joined together so that people can interact with and access their local services. I will champion these causes.

As the name suggests, my seat goes right up to the Scottish border. I will join hands with my colleagues along and across the border. Working together, we can bring investment and infrastructure to the area through initiatives such as the Borderlands Partnership. I will also passionately stand up with all my heart for the precious Union that is our United Kingdom.

I am a veterinary surgeon by background, and I believe I may be the first vet to be elected to the House of Commons since 1884, when Sir Frederick Fitzwygram was elected as the Member of Parliament for Fareham. The other vets at Westminster have included the late, great Professor Lord Soulsby, who was brought up in Penrith and was the dean of Cambridge Veterinary School, where I trained. Now there is Professor Lord Trees, who sits in another place. All three served as president of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, of which I am proud to be a fellow.

So why has this particular vet ventured into politics? My involvement as a veterinary inspector in the 2001 foot and mouth crisis spurred me into wanting to use my background in public service. I am sure Members will recall the dreadful scenes from that crisis—scenes we hope are never repeated. Supervising the culling of many, many animals is sadly emblazoned in my memory. Nationally, over 6 million animals were slaughtered. Cumbria was hit especially hard, with over 1.25 million animals lost. Forty-five per cent. of Cumbria's farms were subject to culls, and this rose to 70% in the north.

The crisis had severe effects on agriculture and the economy, and also on the mental health and welfare of the people who live and work in this area.

As we all know, agriculture is incredibly important to the UK, contributing £9.6 billion to UK economic output in 2018, but it goes much wider than this. We are a nation of animal lovers. Some 40% to 50% of households have a pet and, as an equine vet, of particular relevance to me is the fact that there are over a quarter of a million horses in the UK. Issues in areas such as animal health and welfare, disease surveillance, public health and trade are pivotal, now more than ever, as we enter a crucial time of legislation and common frameworks in these areas.

It is vital that, now we have left the EU, we stand up for our first-class standards of farming and animal welfare as we go on to secure trade deals. Indeed, this will be a great opportunity for the UK to be a beacon to the rest of the world on animal welfare. We can send out the message that if other countries want to trade with us, they need to bring their animal welfare standards up to our level.

Sadly, the veterinary profession is over-represented in mental health issues and the incidence of suicide. I very much welcome the cross-party and, indeed, Government commitment to parity of esteem between mental health and physical health so that people, both young and old, can access the best mental health care in hospital and in the community.

On a lighter note, being a vet in politics has some advantages on the doorstep. As I said, half of households have a pet, frequently a dog. When I am out canvassing and a dog hears a vet knocking at the door, either they run a mile, thinking they are about to get an injection or, worse, have their anal glands emptied—"anal glands" is something you will not read in *Hansard* every day—or they run towards me. I am reminded of the time a dog did just that and latched on to my leg, not in an aggressive fashion but more in an amorous manner. I looked down and said to the owner, "Well, I think I've secured his vote." To which the owner smiled and replied, "Well, you've got mine now, too."

Finally, I would like to thank some specific people. First, I thank my family and friends for their enduring and steadfast love and support over the years—I could not have done this without you. I also thank Penrith and The Border Conservative association for all its help and support.

I also thank specific Members of this House and another place for their support and encouragement in my journey here. To my right hon. Friends the Members for North Somerset (Dr Fox), for Epping Forest (Dame Eleanor Laing), for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay) and for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell), my hon. Friends the Members for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) and for Moray (Douglas Ross) and, in another place, Lord McInnes of Kilwinning, thank you so much.

On the other side of the House, I specifically mention the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray), whom I was up against as a candidate in 2010. When I was selected as the candidate for Penrith and The Border, he contacted me to wish me well, and he did so again when I arrived here. I feel strongly about that

[Dr Neil Hudson]

spirit of cross-party working. If someone on the other team has an idea that is good for the country, we should work together to bring it forward for the benefit of everyone. It is in that spirit that I enter this House and hope to continue.

Finally, if you will permit me, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will say a final few words about someone you knew well, as he was a constituent of yours. My father, Christopher Hudson, sadly passed away just a few days ago. I have debated whether to say this and, indeed, whether to go ahead with my maiden speech this week, but I know it is what he would have wanted me to do.

My dad, Christopher Hudson, was a professor of obstetrics and gynaecology, and he devoted his life to the service of his patients in the NHS and in Australia, and during periods spent in Nigeria and Pakistan. He notably worked to reduce maternal mortality and postpartum complications in the developing world. He delivered countless babies and saved countless lives through pioneering surgery in this area and, especially, in cancer surgery—those procedures are still making a difference today. In addition, he trained and mentored so many health professionals right up until the end. I am so sorry that he is not here today, but he is at peace now. With all my heart and soul: thank you, mum and dad. God bless you, dad. This one's for you.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I would also like to pay tribute to Professor Hudson on behalf of the whole community in Epping Forest, where he will be very greatly missed not only for his considerable achievements during a distinguished medical career, but for the good work he did and the charitable causes he helped in our local community. He was unique, and he would be a very proud man today.

1.58 pm

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow five outstanding maiden speeches by five new hon. Friends, each of whom clearly has a very bright future in this House. They each painted a vivid picture of the delights of their constituency and paid warm and generous tribute to their predecessors—those of us who knew them will remember them fondly and with great affection. I was particularly pleased to hear so many of my hon. Friends refer to the importance of pubs and breweries to their constituencies. Speaking as the chairman of the all-party group on beer, I hope that the new ministerial team at the Treasury were listening to those speeches and will consider that these important industries merit support in proportion to the exceptionally high economic and social contribution that pubs and British beer make to each of our constituencies.

I wish to raise a matter of great concern to many of my constituents. It relates to the issue I raised at business questions today: proposals for development of green-belt land on the edge of the west midlands metropolitan conurbation. South Staffordshire District Council, where the land lies, recently consulted on its spatial housing strategy, as part of its local plan review. The land lies within South Staffordshire, but it borders my constituency, and those of my hon. Friends the Members for Stourbridge (Suzanne Webb), for Dudley North (Marco Longhi) and for Wolverhampton South West (Stuart Anderson).

Stuart Anderson (Wolverhampton South West) (Con): My hon. Friend will be well aware of the beautiful Seven Cornfields, which sits between our constituencies. He will also be aware of the campaigns that many of us have been involved in with the great West Midlands Mayor, Andy Street, for “brownfield first”. I think we need to go even further. Does my hon. Friend agree that more must be done to protect all the green belt in the Black Country?

Mike Wood: I thank my hon. Friend for that important intervention, and he is of course absolutely right; this green-belt land, although lying outside our boundaries, is very much part of our communities. For many of our constituents it is their back garden, it is their local environment and it supports local wildlife. It is so important to local quality of life for so many residents in the Black Country. The proposals for development of Ridgehill woods, at Lawnswood and on neighbouring land adjoining my constituency would be particularly harmful for many residents of the towns of Kingswinford, Wordsley and Wall Heath in Dudley South. The local green belt acts as the lungs of the west midlands and helps to protect air quality levels for our communities. Wordsley High Street, where my office is situated, has some of the worst air quality anywhere in the west midlands, and the proposal to build large housing developments on greenfield land barely half a mile down the road from that junction can only make an already terrible problem far, far worse.

Pursuing a policy of developing new housing on green-belt land such as this would also place significant additional pressure on local infrastructure and on already busy local public services, be they local road networks, schools or GPs. As I have said, although the building work would be in South Staffordshire district, the bulk of the impact of this development would lie with my constituents and with communities in Dudley South. Congestion on the A449 and A491 is already extremely heavy during peak times, and the extra housing on the edge of Wordsley and Kingswinford would only make that problem worse. Natural population growth and demographic changes on the western edge of Dudley borough have led to many services being at full capacity already. Again, those pressures will only get worse if there was development on the scale that has been suggested on green-belt land in South Staffordshire.

Not only would this development have a negative impact on my constituents and on our communities, but it is unnecessary, as my hon. Friend has mentioned. There is no need to build housing on the green belt around Dudley metropolitan borough, and therefore there is no justification within the current national planning framework for releasing green-belt land in these areas. The substantial work that Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council has done to remediate former industrial sites—work that has been replicated in other local authorities, in the Black Country and in Birmingham—means that we do have sufficient brownfield sites available to meet our housing need in the medium term. Andy Street has also worked across the west midlands conurbation, with the combined authority—all seven local authority leaders, of both major parties—to make many more brownfield sites available for housing. The £450 million midland metro tram extension, from Wednesbury through to Brierley Hill, connecting the western edge of the west midlands to Birmingham city

centre and the main line national rail network, brings in yet more former industrial land and makes it suitable and attractive for housing development. So we need to be looking at how we can accelerate this land remediation and make better use of former industrial land, rather than looking at how we build on green-belt land, destroying so much of our natural environment, which, once it is gone, can never be restored.

Questions as to whether this development goes ahead will, of course, be down to South Staffordshire District Council, once the formal planning process is under way, but I ask the Government to reflect upon three very relevant issues during the recess. The first relates to how local communities in urban districts such as Dudley can properly have their views considered when planning decisions are being made in neighbouring areas that adjoin their own communities. Similarly, we should consider how urban councils such as Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council can have a more formal role in that planning process, going beyond the duty to co-operate.

The second issue I ask the Government to consider is how the impact of such development on services and infrastructure can be mitigated. National planning law already recognises that there is an infrastructure cost associated with large housing developments, and that is reflected in community infrastructure levy payments that are made by developers. If a development spans two local planning authorities, the infrastructure levy is split between those two authorities, to reflect the cost. However, the same is not the case where the physical development is in one local authority, but the bulk of the impact lies in a neighbouring planning authority. I ask the Government to reflect on that.

The third point is how we can make even better use of brownfield sites in Dudley, the wider Black Country and across the west midlands. I ask the new Treasury team to give the utmost consideration to the submission that the West Midlands Combined Authority, led by Andy Street, has made for £200 million for an urban transformation fund to allow development on brownfield sites, particularly challenging brownfield sites, that are not currently economically viable for market-based developers but which, with modest gap funding, could be brought back into use, benefiting all our communities and providing the extra housing that is needed, without posing a risk to the green belt.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): It is a particular pleasure to call to make her maiden speech Siobhan Baillie.

2.10 pm

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood)—especially without having had to do the weird Westminster thigh workout that is bobbing up and down for ages to get your attention, Madam Deputy Speaker.

First, I wish to thank the people of Stroud, who put their faith in me. I am particularly proud to be the first ever female MP for Stroud. I am also an optimist. I said on the telly last year that I was the luckiest candidate in the UK, and now I am the luckiest MP. So I thank you all; I do not take this responsibility lightly.

I like the custom of giving credit to our predecessors in maiden speeches. Throughout his long career in politics, David Drew was known for his idealism and his commitment to his constituents. He had one of the longest-running political bromances with my predecessor, Neil Carmichael. They fought each other for nearly 20 years—that is some dedication. I wish David well in whatever he decides to do next.

Anybody who has read Laurie Lee's "Cider with Rosie" will know of the beauty and charm of Stroud's five valleys. Please read his work soon if you have not already done so. Historically, the area was made prosperous through an early recognition that the local fast-flowing, clean river water could be used to power cloth mills. You will forgive me, Madam Deputy Speaker, for not wearing vintage Stroud cloth today; the truth is that I could not find it in animal print. *[Laughter.]* I am, however, wearing the creation of a young Stroud fashion designer who dedicates her talent to making sustainable fashion, completely without waste. And she does it in baby-bump size, which is very kind.

As my constituency goes beyond the magnificent town of Stroud, the breadth and physical geography and the diversity of human activity found in the valleys and vale just defies simple description. From Sharpness to Stroud, Hardwicke to Horsley, Cranham to Cam, Berkeley to Bisley and Arlingham to Amberley, I am always impressed with people's ideas and passion. So when people ask me why I am optimistic, I say, "Look at our current creativity, innovation and drive." It is the people who are the real stars. They are some of the most innovative, hard-working, caring and creative souls I have ever met. Look at the young designers; our schoolchildren, who are leading on environmental change; and the energy packed into every quirky festival, litter-pick and Stroud town in bloom competition.

Look, too, at our businesses: a company founded in Stroud is leading innovations in battery-powered aeroplanes; the Prince of Wales' Aston Martin and the royal train are fuelled with Stroud biofuel; the fastest ever land rocket is being built in one of our schools; and stunning local wallpaper and fabric designs can be found in homes around the world, including those of the rich and famous.

However, my job is not just to love-bomb Stroud or to talk idly about change. I am in this place to get things done. The people of this great country have given us a mandate; now, we must deliver for them. So I have cobbled together a few key thoughts. From my time as a councillor and having fought for local campaigns, I know that it is often the changes around us in our communities and neighbourhoods that we notice the most. It is often local effort and kindnesses that make the biggest difference to where we live. Therefore, while I welcome the recognition of the importance of place and the investment that is coming into infrastructure, we must not forget the people in that process. As I said before, it is the people who are the real stars.

From my experience on the doorsteps across the Stroud constituency, I know that we must support our high streets. They need investment so that they can be the hub of communities once again. The Chancellor and the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government saw that for themselves in Stroud during the election—this speech was only correct as

[*Siobhan Baillie*]

drafted and the Chancellor has now changed, but I will not be put off seeking funding for my local high streets by a reshuffle.

We must support our farmers. They are the great custodians of our land. All new legislation should focus on maximising their potential and maximising food production.

We must support our schools and children with special educational needs. They are our future. The new school funding formula is welcome, but we have to correct long-standing issues with funding in Gloucestershire.

We must support new green initiatives and lead the global emergency response. A commitment to the environment runs through every single thing that we do in Stroud, the valleys and vale.

From my experience, working my way up to be a family law solicitor and being before the House today quite against the odds, in many respects, I know that we must support further education. University is great for some, but what about everybody else? Come to see the students at South Gloucestershire and Stroud College: be inspired by them, see what Government funding can do, and realise that we will all benefit from unleashing the potential of lifelong learning.

We must support initiatives that strengthen relationships and early intervention for children. We know that mental health issues are established by the time of the teenage years, and we know about the five pathways to poverty. It is daft simply to throw money at problems for adults without a true preventive programme backing up children.

We must support families going through times of separation. Children get caught in the middle, and couples now frequently litigate without any representation at all. Nobody wants this—not the parents, not the couples, not the judges and not the lawyers. We can and should change that system.

I started by saying that I am an optimist, but of course we face challenges: we live in a world where competition is global; the pace of technological change is accelerating; and climate change threatens our very way of life. Addressing these challenges will require hard work and difficult choices. That is why our constituents sent us here. I look forward to working for all the people of Stroud and I look forward to working with Members on both sides of the House to deliver for this great nation. I, for one, truly believe that the best is yet to come.

2.17 pm

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): It is an absolute pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (*Siobhan Baillie*) and that powerful maiden speech. I had the pleasure of being teamed up with my hon. Friend when we tramped the streets of Peterborough together during the by-election last June. That election produced the wrong result, but I am glad that the general election produced a better one for my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (*Paul Bristow*). I urge my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud to look after one of my family's favourite days out: the wetlands centre at Slimbridge, which I believe is in her constituency.

It is also a great pleasure to follow the maiden speeches of my hon. Friends the Members for Penrith and The Border (*Dr Hudson*), for Broadland (*Jerome Mayhew*),

for Guildford (*Angela Richardson*), for Wrexham (*Sarah Atherton*) and for Bosworth (*Dr Evans*). I thought that I had missed many of my colleagues' maiden speeches when I was on paternity leave the other week, but it turns out that I have more than made up for it by hearing some excellent ones in this debate.

I agree with the sentiment expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley South (*Mike Wood*) in respect of the items he brought up in his speech. In Buckingham, we are currently also under the threat of a land grab by a neighbouring authority, in our case Labour-run Milton Keynes Council, which wants to expand to a town of 500,000 people. That would involve its coming miles and miles into my constituency—to which, to be very clear, the answer is no.

I wish to raise an issue that is important to my constituents, and it relates to some of the issues raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley South. The issue is the threat of a brand new road to come through the Buckingham constituency and, indeed, to go through the constituencies of many right hon. and hon. Members. The Oxford to Cambridge expressway is not just a new road but a new road that comes with a desire, along the whole route, for a million new homes.

I am no opponent of house building. We need new homes in our country—new homes that people can afford to buy. Indeed, we also need to build more social housing. However, 1 million new homes across the Buckinghamshire countryside in particular is an unacceptable proposition for my constituents. Let us look at some of the themes that surround the building of this road.

There is a great deal of uncertainty. The Highways Agency has come up with what it calls its preferred route, which is named in typical public-sector speak simply corridor B. Corridor B is actually about three quarters of my constituency. To put it into context, my constituency is 335 square miles, so, were this expressway to go ahead, there would be absolutely no certainty for my constituents about exactly the route that it would follow. It would bring with it significant environmental destruction not just to our beautiful countryside but to wildlife, to ancient woodland, and to our biodiversity. Most important, though, is the effect that it would have on people's lives and on their property. There would be disruption from the construction and the destruction of their property, as farms are taken, homes are taken, and businesses are taken. Indeed, once it is built—if it goes ahead—there would be the impact of noise, the impact on people's health, the impact on people's enjoyment of their property, and, I fear to say, in some cases, the impact on people's mental health.

The road plus the housing development and the green-belt land that would be required would massively increase the risk of flooding, and we are already suffering considerably in Buckinghamshire from an increase in flooding as a result of over-development. It cannot be lost on the House that, at a time when we are trying to reduce carbon output and get to net zero by 2050, building a new motorway is not a sensible step to take.

Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way on that point. I should, at this point, declare an interest. As well as knowing his constituency incredibly well—beautiful as it is—I represent a council ward in that constituency,

and that council ward is in the corridor, as he described it. Does he agree that there are many things wrong with this idea? There is this idea that building a new road will somehow increase productivity, but we all know that the great cities of Oxford and Cambridge are renowned for their contribution to research and science, and, as far as I know, intellectual property does not travel by road. There is the economic case, which is incredibly flimsy, and my hon. Friend referred to the suspiciously round figure of 1 million new homes. However, as I am sure you will agree Madam Deputy Speaker, it is the environmental case that is the most poignant. Sixty miles of new road, with two and a half miles either side of building, does not make environmental sense.

Greg Smith: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. Indeed, it is always sensible to listen to one's constituents, and I am delighted that he has raised that point this afternoon. Indeed, there is significant local opposition to this scheme. Aylesbury Vale District Council, on which my hon. Friend sits, and Buckinghamshire County Council have, on a cross-party basis, opposed the expressway scheme. They should be given full credit for refusing to sign the non-disclosure agreements, which were demanded by the Highways Agency to try to stop them from representing their residents effectively. There are also significant resident groups, both along the entire route of the expressway and, indeed, in Buckinghamshire. I am delighted to say that the No Expressway Group and the Buckinghamshire Expressway Action Group will be coming to Parliament on 26 February to ensure that their voices are heard on this matter. Throughout the general election campaign, and since my election to this House, I have received a significant number of representations from constituents on this matter, so it is very much on the minds of my constituents.

I mentioned earlier that my principal objection to the plan is the impact that it will have on people—the loss of their homes and their farms. I represent a largely agricultural economy. It is a rural constituency on which farming is so dependent, and we cannot keep concreting over those fields. Those businesses sustain our farmers and, indeed, grow and rear the food that we need and enjoy.

I do not want to dwell on this point, but the cumulative impact of building HS2, which was given the go-ahead this week, much to the disappointment of my constituents, and of building the expressway would bring abject misery to my constituents. Then there is the destruction of wildlife. The expressway will have a devastating impact on wildlife along the whole route. Mark Vallance of the Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust has commented that part of the route would destroy

“one of the most undisturbed and wildlife-rich areas of Buckinghamshire.”

Indeed, let me quote the words on the website of the Wildlife Trust, which are so elegant. It says that what would be destroyed by the expressway are

“stunning wildlife meadows, ancient woodland, hedgerows alive with birds and butterflies, and gentle undulating ridge and furrow fields that have survived since the Middle Ages.”

On the point of homes, I mentioned earlier that I am no opponent of development, but I very much agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley South that we should be looking to develop new homes on

brownfield sites, not on the green belt, not in the countryside and not on our farmers' fields. Aylesbury Vale District Council has already been very ambitious in terms of its house building and its local plan. We are talking about some 28,000 new homes, which is a very high number compared with many other district councils covering similar ground. I do feel that Buckinghamshire, particularly the Aylesbury Vale district area, has taken its fair share of new home building, and we should be looking, yes, to the remaining brownfield sites, but also to other places to take their fair share of the new homes. Along the whole arc corridor—the Oxford to Cambridge Arc—some 3,130 hectares of brownfield site have been identified that would be good for house building, and we should look at that first.

When my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Ben Everitt) intervened, he mentioned that the economic case is also not right for the expressway. It is projected to cost somewhere between £4 billion and £8 billion. That is an estimate at the start of the scheme, and we know what happens once these schemes start. Indeed, the business case is also very weak, with the benefit-cost ratio at the start of the scheme showing a return between £1.10 and £1.30 per pound spent. I put it to this House that that simply is not good enough.

During the election campaign, I was delighted when my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport visited Verney junction in my constituency to discuss this matter. He made a number of pledges and commitments that I want to put on record, as I would very much like to see the Government bring them forward as soon as possible. A priority review of the expressway was promised. He said that he did not think that the case for the expressway stacked up and that we should look at other schemes that could improve east-west travel both by road and by rail. He also talked about cycling through Buckinghamshire instead. In particular, we need to look at improvements to the A41 and the A421—two major A roads that pass through my constituency—to get them moving faster rather than building new roads and, where residents consent to it and where residents want it, we should build all-important bypasses. For example, the residents of the village of Wing in the east of my constituency are very keen to see money brought forward to relieve their village of heavy goods traffic and general traffic as people travel north-south, principally from Aylesbury to Leighton Buzzard and up to Milton Keynes.

I am delighted that the Government have signed off East West Rail. We must ensure that East West Rail happens on time and on budget, and before the final detail is signed off we must keep open the debate for the line to be electrified, rather than running with diesel trains.

In conclusion, the Oxford to Cambridge expressway is the wrong project for my constituency. I can genuinely say that it has virtually no public support in my constituency, or indeed those of other right hon. and hon. Members, so let us have the priority review, stop concreting over Buckinghamshire and look to other projects that can improve the lives of my constituents.

2.30 pm

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): Like colleagues across the House, I have been moved by many of the maiden speeches we have heard so far. My

[Jonathan Gullis]

hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West (Stuart Anderson) had me in tears when I watched his, and today we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson), whose touching words certainly hit home—I think he did his father extremely proud today.

I also want to say a big thank you to my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Siobhan Baillie). She and I began our political journey together back in February 2017, when we both hoped one day to become Members of Parliament. I am delighted to be on the green Benches with her today. I fully back her campaign for further education and encourage Members across the House to see what she does every Friday to promote that amazing cause, and I encourage them to copy her Twitter posts to ensure that they get out into their constituencies to celebrate what an alternative to university could look like for many people.

It is a pleasure to contribute to this debate. There is no end of matters that I could raise, although I think the news cycle might take over today. The good news for those on the Treasury Bench—I look forward to meeting the new Chancellor—is that I will limit myself to only one spending request: to improve transport in Stoke-on-Trent, Talke and Kidsgrove. The less good news, for the Treasury and the Department for Transport, is that they might find my long list of asks a bit burdensome.

Stoke-on-Trent has for decades missed out on the transport investment that other areas have seen. Together with my colleagues across north Staffordshire, I want to make sure that we do not lose out again. The Prime Minister has already boosted our confidence by agreeing that if HS2 is to go ahead at all, it must include the Handsacre link. That link is crucial to bringing HS2 services to Stoke-on-Trent, and the very thought of it has been attracting investment into the city. Now that it has been confirmed, HS2 will open up further opportunities for investment, but there will also be challenges in getting the transport system across north Staffordshire into a fit state to take full advantage of the increase in connectivity and profile that being a high-speed rail city will bring.

I confess that north Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent already enjoy very good strategic transport links to the rest of the UK: the M6, A500 and A50 serve the city; the rail journey to London is as little as 1 hour and 30 minutes; and there are four international airports within an hour's drive—and that is even before HS2 is delivered. Stoke-on-Trent is ideally located to take advantage of and contribute to national economic growth, but—and there is a big but—in order to maximise that contribution, we require major improvements to local infrastructure. We are the gatekeepers to the northern powerhouse, yet far too often Stoke-on-Trent is treated as the ugly duckling in the midlands engine.

Local transport connectivity in north Staffordshire is sadly very poor, especially at rush hour, with heavy dependency on the car. Many people struggle to get around the conurbation, which limits access to employment opportunities. Improved local public transport would support wider development in the area; unlock sites for housing and economic regeneration; and help reduce congestion and tackle air pollution.

Stoke-on-Trent has been confirmed as a recipient of investment from the transforming cities fund, but the exact scale of that investment is yet to be revealed, and I would not want the House to adjourn before I had stated the case for major investment in and around Stoke-on-Trent. The bid to the transforming cities fund is for Stoke station to become the key transport interchange for the whole north Staffordshire conurbation. The proposals are expected to reduce journey times and congestion, create new jobs and improve accessibility and connectivity. The focus is on securing a shift from private vehicles to public transport, with Stoke station as a main transport hub. That is the same model as other successful cities, but it has yet to be realised in Stoke-on-Trent because of the linear and polycentric nature of our city.

We also want to invest in the city's existing rail infrastructure and make better use of it. The north Staffordshire line would become the major transport corridor for movement within the city. That line, also known as the Crewe to Derby line, links three existing Stoke-on-Trent stations at Longton, Stoke and Longport, together with Kidsgrove in my constituency in the borough of Newcastle-under-Lyme.

The transforming cities fund bid includes much-needed improvements to our local stations, and we are ambitious about the potential for seamless public transport from rail to bus. I must add that I have had to write a very angry letter to Network Rail, which has wasted millions of pounds of public money by not making the Access for All upgrades at Kidsgrove station. My predecessor's predecessor had lobbied for that money, and it was given back in 2015. Network Rail's failure to deliver those important upgrades means that people with mobility needs, and young mothers and fathers with pushchairs and prams, are now unable to access the station's entirety, and that is a disgrace. I would like the Department for Transport to work with me to ensure that we hold Network Rail to account on such failure.

The pedestrian experience also needs attention, and I am excited about the possibilities for cycling, particularly in the context of the Prime Minister's statement earlier this week. There is plenty of capacity for increasing use at Longport station, and if we can improve the pedestrian and cycle journey from Longport, that could boost the local visitor economy substantially. Middleport Pottery, which is again shining on our TV screens as the home of "The Great Pottery Throw Down", should be a relatively short walk from Longport station, but there are various public spaces that need to be better connected in order to achieve the optimal route. Our ambitions for local rail go beyond enhancing the local survivors of the Beeching cuts. We want to see reversals too.

Once the transforming cities fund has been delivered, it will be even more evident that we need to deliver on the reopening of the Churnet line from Stoke to Leek. My right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley) has long campaigned for that, and she is joined by all three of Stoke-on-Trent's MPs. That would mean reopening a station at Milton in my constituency, and ideally one to serve Birches Head Academy on the boundary with Stoke-on-Trent Central. Milton is a truncation of "mill town", and just as it has sadly lost its mill, it has also lost its place on the railway map. I want to bring it back. Indeed, I would love to see Milton Junction return to the rail map so that local

services could also go up towards Biddulph. That would potentially mean restoring rail services to Ford Green, Smallthorne and Chell. That is a very long-term ambition, but I did not come into politics to think small.

An ambition for the Crewe to Derby line is to see the return of a station at Chatterley for Tunstall. That would serve both our historic, traditional coalfield communities and our up-to-the-minute Ceramics Valley enterprise zone and Tunstall Arrow. Sadly, it cannot be a straightforward restoration of the old Chatterley halt, because the line was moved westwards in the 1966 deviation to allow for electrification. But there is a big gap between Kidsgrove and Longport stations, and a new Chatterley for Tunstall station would fill it, catalysing further economic regeneration.

Talking of Kidsgrove, in a little over a decade the entries and exits at Kidsgrove station have boomed, from 50,000 to more like 250,000, and it is imperative that everyone should enjoy the success.

Finally, I want to talk about buses. This could be a speech in itself, but I will restrict myself to repeating the pleas already made in the House by many hon. Friends—including my hon. Friends the Members for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) and for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon)—for a super-bus scheme in our fine city. Bus use in the Potteries has declined by more than 10% in the last year alone, with over 1 million fewer bus passenger journeys in 2018-19 than in 2017-18. Bus passenger journeys are now 9.3 million, down from over 15 million recorded at the start of the decade. That is while traffic congestion has worsened, with consequential breaches of the World Health Organisation's pollution limits. New solutions are needed to make buses more attractive, so that they can viably compete with the comfort and cost-effectiveness of the car. We need more routes, better buses and bus shelters that display live information, such as those that are enjoyed in London.

Finally, the hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) talked about universal credit and the six-month time limit. As the secretary for the all-party parliamentary group on universal credit, I look forward to working with Members from across the entire House to ensure that we correct what truly is a problem in that system.

2.40 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow so many excellent maiden speeches.

Following the announcement on HS2, may I once again mention that if HS2 is to have value for my constituents in the Middlewich area, there is a pressing need to reopen Middlewich railway station to passengers? I have spoken about this issue many times since becoming an MP 10 years ago, and the proposal also has the continuing support of many MPs from around the Cheshire area. It has been the subject of a long-running and admirable campaign by Middlewich residents, first under the title of "Middlewich rail link campaign" and now with the name "Mid Cheshire rail link campaign". It was renamed in recent years to reflect that the proposal is more broadly supported by those further afield in Cheshire. I hope that my account will encourage new colleagues when it comes to transport issues and calls for support for new transport in their areas—persevere!

When I first heard of the Middlewich rail link campaign, I was invited to a meeting in the Boars Head pub in Middlewich. About six train enthusiasts were sat there—all

men, I have to say. They told me about their dream of reopening the station in Middlewich—I did think it was a dream. However, after a few years, because of their and others' determination to continue to campaign, there is now a real prospect that that dream may become a reality. The station is very much needed, as more house building in the region has increased pressure on the roads.

Let me tell the House a little bit of the history of the campaign. In March 2013, I was given a petition of thousands of local signatories calling for the reopening of the station. I was proud to be able to present that petition here, with the support of all the MPs from the surrounding area. The campaign then gathered further strength and, following lobbying to Cheshire East Council, an area was earmarked for the station in the local plan. Subsequently, Ministers—I hesitate to say that they were perhaps worn down by my calls in this place for support—responded by providing a Government-funded feasibility study, the "Mid Cheshire and Middlewich Rail Study Strategic Case Report", which reported in March 2019. This was—perhaps to the surprise of one or two bureaucrats, shall I say?—both positive and encouraging. I will briefly quote from the report as evidence. It just goes to show that sometimes local people do know what they are talking about, doesn't it? In somewhat bureaucratic writing—I have tried to pick out parts that are not quite so bureaucratic—the report says:

"The presence of major advanced manufacturing and life science clusters around Middlewich and the wider area means that it is imperative to improve connectivity between jobs, housing and leisure at both strategic and local level... There is overwhelming evidence to indicate that the transport network in Mid Cheshire is inadequate to serve both its current population and its economic ambition. A very low percentage rail mode share... coupled with numerous congestion hotspots... point to a transport system that will suppress growth in the near future, if not already doing so. Through national, regional and local transport strategies, there is a clear message that transport connectivity in general, and rail connectivity as the more sustainable option over road, should be invested in. As such there is a commitment nationally to continue to invest in the rail network. Large infrastructure projects such as HS2 are at the core of this commitment, but it is equally clear that locally and regionally, the strategic direction is for investment in rail to connect to and maximise the benefits of these nationally significant infrastructure projects. With their vicinity to Crewe, Mid Cheshire and Middlewich can demonstrate their alignment to this strategic direction at the highest level."

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Member is giving a great speech about how she has started the work of creating new rail links in her area. With the Beeching reversal fund, there is now an opportunity for many other people to do that, and to learn from her example. The £500 million that has been offered is enough for feasibility studies, but it probably is not enough for the level of ambition that we all have. Does she agree that initially we should follow the example of mid Cheshire, and release that money for large-scale feasibility studies in all constituencies that need new rail to reverse the Beeching cuts?

Fiona Bruce: That is absolutely right. If there is one key to this, I would say that it is to engage the commitment of the local community—it does make a difference.

I am pleased to say that a second study has been funded as a result of the one I mentioned. That second study will be a strategic outline business case, which I

[Fiona Bruce]

believe will report within the next few weeks. I am now asking—please—for an early meeting with the Secretary of State for Transport to discuss how we can translate into reality the long-held dream of the people of Middlewich for their own passenger railway station.

Middlewich is the largest town in Cheshire without a railway station, and it is double the size of other towns, with a population of some 13,600. Construction would not involve a whole new line, because the existing line is still used for freight. Middlewich is very much a growth town. It has an exciting future, with £50 million committed by the Government to the Middlewich eastern bypass. Reopening the station is backed by Cheshire East Council, Cheshire West and Chester Council, and the local enterprise partnership.

If we are thoroughly to address the issue of congestion in Middlewich, we also need to look into having a southern bypass. I hope that Cheshire East and Cheshire West will work collaboratively on this with alacrity, and that this Conservative Government, who are very generous regarding local transport projects, will give us the same generous support that they have for the Middlewich eastern bypass. When I have that discussion with the Secretary of State, I would appreciate it if we could also talk about a southern bypass.

Let me touch on one other aspect of Middlewich transport, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis): buses. I received an email just a few days ago from a constituent saying that we desperately need more buses—and affordable buses—as well as a train station, and that they need to be integrated so that users are considered in the timetabling. I do hope that Cheshire East Council will respond to the many calls I have had from constituents to make funding available for local buses. Campaigning residents have saved the No. 319 Goostrey to Holmes Chapel via Sandbach bus, but may I put in a plea on behalf of residents for the reinstatement of the Saturday service?

Let me now turn to a completely different subject that I am also raising for a second time in the House: the concerns of residents on the Loachbrook estate, Somerford, about outstanding works on their estate. This estate was started over five years ago. The developers closed their sales office and moved off site last autumn. However, there are outstanding works to drainage, lighting, pathways, roadworks, surfacing and landscaping, and items have been left on the site following completion of the development by Bovis Homes—now renamed as part of Vistry Group—following completion of the houses.

I say that I am re-raising this issue because I presented a petition from residents about it on 5 November. I was optimistic at that time that something would happen—that the developers would, as they had indicated to residents, complete the estate and tidy it up by the end of the year. Somerford parish council has also been pressing for action, as has ward councillor John Wray. But unfortunately the work has still not been completed. I have visited and seen that it is very unpleasant for these residents to be living, as some of them have for several years, with temporary ramps, bollards, temporary fencing that children

are moving, potentially dangerously, and other unfinished works. It feels to them, one said to me, like the developer has effectively moved on.

What is now particularly frustrating residents is that the local authority appears to be simply—this is a word that it has used—monitoring the situation. As I say, I pay credit to the work that John Wray has done, but otherwise the local authorities are simply now saying that there is a dispute between the contractor that installed the drains and sewers, and United Utilities, the water company, which is refusing to adopt them because it is unsatisfied with the materials used by the contractor. Therefore Bovis is not completing the roads and other works, and meanwhile the council is not enforcing completion of the highway works.

Residents, meanwhile, are caught in the middle of a Catch-22 situation, living on an unfinished site and feeling that their questions and concerns—this is really what adds insult to injury—are being ignored. Communications to Bovis have not been replied to for several months now. One resident recently wrote to me:

“It is most frustrating that no one seems to have the authority to take any action against the developer.”

Another said to me at a meeting I had with them last week, “No one from the authority wants to come and look at the site and they give the impression they cannot enforce their own planning permission.” Another wrote to me:

“Cheshire East...say it is out of their hands.”

Another asked me:

“Why have planning conditions in place if they are not enforced?”

I hope that my raising this yet again in this House prompts action now by all concerned. Perhaps, at the very least, officers from the council could meet residents and me onsite to clarify why enforcement action cannot be taken to resolve these issues. I ask Ministers to consider, since I know that this is not an isolated issue—I have seen colleagues nodding in the Chamber as I have been speaking—what can be done to ensure that builders expeditiously complete landscaping, roadworks, common areas and amenities on new estates, and that local authorities promptly enforce planning conditions, and to consider what sanctions should be imposed if this does not happen. The current situation for residents purchasing new homes in my constituency such as those I have described is completely unsatisfactory.

Finally, I turn to yet another issue that I am raising in the Chamber not for the first time, as I have done so for many years—Congleton War Memorial Hospital. I am pleased to say that we still have this wonderful facility in my constituency, providing excellent local facilities for residents. As one wrote to me recently, it is a valuable local asset. It offers X-rays, ultrasound scans and blood tests five mornings a week, on many occasions efficiently processing over 100 people. It has a geriatric ward and manages various consultants’ clinics five days a week. There is a minor injuries unit.

Recently the hospital has had its difficulties with staffing—I raised this in an Adjournment debate in March 2019—but Congleton War Memorial Hospital is still very much serving the people of Congleton. Bearing in mind that we have an NHS long-term plan, people want to see a Congleton War Memorial Hospital long-term plan. We do not want to feel that we are continually fighting to ensure that these services remain in our local community.

I recently wrote to the chief executive of East Cheshire NHS Trust, John Wilbraham, to whom I have spoken many times over the years and who always listens. He says that he understands

“the desire to maintain local services and the trust continues to have a strategy of providing care as close to home as possible where services meet the expected clinical standards”—

I am pleased that he has reconfirmed that—and that he is

“working with health and care partners as part of the 5 year plan to set out how services will be delivered across Cheshire East into the future.”

May I, on behalf of my constituents, impress on East Cheshire NHS Trust and its partners, and also bring to the attention of Ministers again, the importance of retaining Congleton War Memorial Hospital and community hospitals like it, which really do provide an invaluable service for local residents?

2.54 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who gave us a great tour of her constituency and the problems she has faced not just recently but, I suspect, for the past 10 years. For new and returning Members, the great beauty of these debates is that we, as Back-Bench MPs, can raise anything that we choose. To those who have made excellent maiden speeches today, I suggest booking a season ticket for these debates, because they will have the opportunity to raise issues on many occasions in the future.

Unfortunately, we have not heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), who gives a virtuoso performance at these debates, rattling through every single piece of correspondence he has received over the past three months. We gravely miss him, but I have no doubt that next time we have one of these debates, he will be back. He may be on his way to Downing Street—we never know.

On a serious note, before we rise for the short February recess, there are a few things that I wish to raise. I have often had the opportunity of initiating this debate, and I now have the pleasure of closing it for Back-Bench Members. I raised at business questions this morning the huge deficit in local authority pension funds. That is a real scandal, and it threatens the retirement and future of public sector workers who have worked so diligently for us.

That is not the only thing that local authorities have been engaged in. The National Audit Office has reported on the exposure involved when local authorities buy up commercial properties to get a rental stream, particularly in the retail sector. We know how problematic the retail sector is, how big a risk that is and the threat to the public purse. The Government will need to investigate that shortly.

One of the major issues that most people associate me with is homelessness. I piloted the Homelessness Reduction Bill through the House in 2017. The Act has only been in operation effectively for a year; the duty to refer has been in operation for just over a year. Many thousands of people up and down the country have been prevented from becoming homeless as a direct result of the biggest shake-up in homelessness legislation for more than 40 years. But we still have a big problem.

We see every day the signs of homelessness in this country, with people sleeping rough on our streets. I repeat: it is a national scandal that in this country, we still have people sleeping rough. I want the Government to repeal the Vagrancy Act 1824, which makes it a crime to not have anywhere to live. That cannot be right in a civilised society. People who are homeless need assistance, not to be arrested and taken to a police station. We need a revision of the law to combat aggressive begging, which we unfortunately see on our streets and our public transport system every day.

One key thing that the Government should do is provide more housing at affordable levels that people can rent and, if they so wish, buy. We built 220,000 units of housing last year, which was the highest number for all but one of the last 30 years, but the Government's target is 300,000 a year for five years. Unless local authorities build new council houses or properties, we will not get anywhere near the 300,000 units required to enable people to have a home of their own. We need to ensure that we enshrine within this the right to buy for those in council housing and prevent local authorities from using external bodies and housing companies that seek to provide housing but frustrate individuals who wish to exercise the right to buy.

We now need to learn the lessons from the Housing First pilots and roll them out across the country. When someone has been sleeping rough for any period of time, they need not just a secure roof over their head, but a network of support: they will probably need to be treated for mental health problems and certainly for physical health problems. They may need to be cured of alcohol, drug or substance abuse. It is no good just putting them in a home and hoping they will get on with it. They need that network of support. That is going to be key.

I next want to raise the long-term scandal of the victims of the Equitable Life scam. I was proud that the Conservative Government I supported when first elected to this House in 2010 made the commitment, which we are all encouraged to make, to provide justice for those robbed of their money. The Government set up a compensation scheme, but only provided £1.5 billion of the £4.1 billion that was accepted as being owed, meaning that the Government still owe £2.6 billion to the victims of the Equitable Life scandal.

As co-chair of the all-party group, I will continue to campaign for justice for those victims, until such time as we get the Government to provide the funding required. Many of the victims are now very old and vulnerable and desperately need the money. Many others are coming up to retirement age and will need to draw on their pensions, which have been severely downgraded as a result of the particular issues of that scam. The victims are receiving only 22.5% of their assessed loss and that affects nearly 1 million people across the UK, many of whom are nurses or people in our caring professions, who were encouraged by the Government and their employers to invest in these schemes, which then effectively were ceased. We clearly need to combat that.

Mr Deputy Speaker, you will be pleased to know that we have a number of new recruits for the all-party beer group. I was delighted to hear that in the debate, as I am sure you are. You will have to read *Hansard* to see the contributions made, in particular that by my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Sarah Atherton).

[Bob Blackman]

I want to raise a few local issues before we rise for the Adjournment. First, almost no speech by me in this debate would be complete without me raising the issue of Stanmore station. The do-nothing Mayor of London has come up with a grandiose scheme to build on the car park at Stanmore station, which, hon. Members may not be aware, is the terminus of the Jubilee line. It currently has 450 car parking spaces. The Mayor's aim is to reduce that number by 150 and build multi-storey, high-density flats all over the car park. This has given rise to a very focused local campaign against this monstrosity. The area is characterised by two-storey housing. The Mayor wants to build an 11-storey block of flats alongside the station, which would dwarf the whole area and prevent proper access to and from the station. I am at great pains to say that I want to see more housing provided, but not in this way, and certainly not by reducing the amount of car parking available.

This affects a number of constituencies around London because many people drive to Stanmore to leave their car there and get into London via public transport. I take the view that we want to encourage people to get out of their cars and use public transport, but this will in effect encourage people to drive into London and then leave their car on residential streets, or to drive further down the line and then use stations further into London, so it is a very foolish move in both regards. Over the next few weeks, I will be working with residents groups to combat this at Stanmore station.

Equally, the Mayor has a plan for Canons Park station, which is the next station along the route. He wants to build all over that car park as well, which I think is a retrograde step. There is clearly land alongside the Jubilee line that could be used for housing without having any impact whatever on the car parking provision available. I am looking forward to combating that. We have the London mayoral elections in May, and I am sure that all the residents around Stanmore, Canons Park and Rayners Lane, which is in another part of Harrow, will see a good reason why they should vote for the Conservative candidate in those elections, rather than for the current incumbent.

I also want to raise the issue of crime and the level of policing in Harrow. The tri-borough commander of the police has been very effective in ensuring that our number of police in Harrow is actually above the resource allocation formula, which is good news. The only bad news is that many of those are new graduates from the Hendon Police College and they will take time to come up to speed.

One of the things that has blighted my constituency for the last 18 months has been the rise in aggravated burglaries. This is true in a number of areas of London, particularly the outer-London areas. I am delighted to hear that Shaun Bailey has suggested that we need an anti-burglary squad to be a hit squad of the police to combat those involved in aggravated burglary, who act in gangs in a deliberate, targeted fashion against vulnerable people. This is bizarre form of burglary in which the burglars want people to be at home when they burgle their homes, so that they can beat them up and extract their goods, including their diaries, jewellery and money, and force them to open their safes. This is a particularly pernicious type of crime and it needs to be combated.

On the health service locally, the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas), my constituency neighbour, drew attention to the situation at Northwick Park Hospital. He is no longer in his place but, if he were, I would just remind him that, when he was re-elected in 2001, he committed to the people of Harrow that there would be a brand new hospital on the Northwick Park site. Nineteen years later, we are still waiting for it. Nevertheless, that was his promise. I am delighted by the fact that, after I was elected, I was able to assist in getting a new accident and emergency unit into Northwick Park Hospital. The reality is that the staff there do a brilliant job in very challenging circumstances.

The hon. Gentleman also raised the issue of walk-in centres, such as that at the Belmont health centre, which is in my constituency. I just want to make sure it is on the record that the key here is that there was a walk-in-and-wait service: people could walk in and wait—and wait and wait. Now, without saving a single penny, the CCG has implemented an appointments system, so someone makes an appointment and walks in, and they are seen very quickly after their appointment is due. That saves the health authority money, but actually there is no saving involved because it has trebled the number of appointments available and the service operates seven days a week, between 8 am and 8 pm, so people can see a GP irrespective of which GP they are registered with in Harrow. From that perspective, it is a much better service for the residents of Harrow, which I think is key.

Another issue I perennially raise in these debates is the Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital in Stanmore. Again, local people and the trust have battled for 30 years to get this wonderful hospital rebuilt. The first unit on site cost £80 million. It was promised by the last Labour Government but never delivered, and I am delighted that it has been delivered under a Conservative Government. The next phase of the redevelopment involves new car parking facilities, new accommodation for nurses to live in, and other staffing accommodation, but it is being held up by NHS bureaucracy. Given that the project has been signed off at all sorts of levels, it is an outrage that we have to battle forever to get the money to put spades in the ground on site, and get the accommodation that our nursing staff, and other medical staff, desperately need to provide that service.

The next phase will continue rebuilding more of the hospital, so that we get first-class conditions for the brilliant service that is provided on a national scale. Unfortunately, however, there often seems to be a serious problem in getting funding through national health service bureaucracy. Will the Minister take back to the Health Secretary—I understand he is unchanged, which is good news—the message that we must cure the elongated bureaucracy in the national health service? A business plan could be ready and signed off, but it seems to take forever for the bureaucracy to make it happen. That prevents us from delivering the first-rate health service that people in this country expect.

Some may say that MPs are going on holiday next week. I wish it were true. Right hon. and hon. Members across the House will be working hard in their constituencies, meeting residents and constituents about a wide range of issues, and taking up things that matter to them. I wish the House staff a week away from their work in this place, but the rest of us will be working diligently and very hard on behalf of our constituents.

3.12 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in your place, Mr Deputy Speaker. One thing that I most enjoyed about being a Whip in the previous Parliament was participating in the debate on matters to be raised before the Adjournment, which was always wide-ranging and an absolute nightmare to sum up. The 17 Back-Bench contributions that we have heard today have been fascinating and contributed to a diverse debate. The hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) is right to say that it is always a joy to witness the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), who, in one debate that I summed up, cantered through 26 topics. It may well be the case that he is on his way to Downing Street to be made Minister for the City of Southend, and if that is the case, we wish him well and it is sad not to see him here today. I am, however, hoping to replicate some of what he does by covering a lot of issues.

I thank the hon. Members for Harrow East, for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis), for Buckingham (Greg Smith), for Dudley South (Mike Wood), for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), for Newport East (Jessica Morden), for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West), for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) and for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) for their contributions. As is always the case after an election, the real pleasure is in listening to maiden speeches, the first of which came from the hon. Member for Bosworth (Dr Evans). His speech was incredibly fluid and he spoke with no notes, which in itself shows a real talent on his first outing in the House of Commons. He spoke immensely eloquently about his constituency, and I wish him all the very best as he seeks to serve his constituents.

I took particular interest in the speech by the hon. Member for Wrexham (Sarah Atherton), and it was fascinating to hear her speak about the mining industry, her time in the Army, and her commitment to beer. One thing people quickly learn in this place—I will come on to this slightly later—is about the cross-party nature of such groups. Last year I attended my first ever dinner with the all-party beer group. I confess that I am not a great fan of beer—some of my colleagues are—but it was amazing to see how collegiate and cross party people are in that respect. I wish the hon. Lady well.

The hon. Member for Guildford (Angela Richardson) is of course from New Zealand. This place is enriched by including people from different countries. Well, perhaps not from Scotland, but that is a constitutional point—*[Laughter.]* She spoke very eloquently and paid kind tribute to her predecessor, Anne Milton, who I had a lot of dealings with on the issue of apprenticeships.

One of the difficulties with maiden speeches is that Members cannot interrupt or intervene. So often in the maiden speech from the hon. Member for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew), who spoke with great passion about independence, I found myself agreeing and wanting to find out why only this far, and not in Scotland, are we to have the pleasure of independence. None the less, he spoke very eloquently too.

The most moving contribution was probably from the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson). I spoke to his Whip earlier today, who informed me of his personal situation at the weekend. He can rest

assured that my thoughts and prayers are with him and his family at what must be an incredibly difficult time. I was heartened by his comments about cross-party working. There is no doubt that in this Parliament, with a majority Conservative Government, we are going to get gubbed on absolutely every single vote. I accept that, but this Parliament, for as long as I have to be here, is all the stronger when we work cross-party.

This is a fitting opportunity to pay tribute to the former Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), who I consider to be not only a colleague but a good friend. I am very sad to see that she has left the Government. Hers is an example of someone who works on a cross-party basis. I know from the comments made by the hon. Gentleman that he will take that forward, too.

The final maiden speech we heard today was from the hon. Member for Stroud (Siobhan Baillie), who spoke passionately about her constituency. I absolutely agree with her on funding high streets. Having left the SNP Whips Office and moved into shadowing the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, I am aware that we will speak more about high streets in this Parliament. The nature of towns funds and whether they apply to cities is another matter, as is the issue of Barnett consequential. So I am very glad she referred to the issue of high streets.

I want to touch on a number of local issues. First, I pay tribute to a campaigning group in my constituency, Restore Glasgow, which is associated with the International Justice Mission. Since last year, I have been working with Restore Glasgow, as well as local authority colleagues, to explore different ways of ensuring greater regulation and licensing of nail bars and car washes, which we know, sadly, are often used for the purposes of human trafficking. More than 250 years since the end of the transatlantic slave trade, there are close to 41 million people still trapped in some form of slavery across the world today, yet nobody really knows the scale and how many victims or perpetrators of this crime there are on these islands in the UK.

The data that has been released is inconsistent. The Government believe there are about 13,000 victims of slavery in the UK, while the Global Slavery Index released a much higher estimate of 136,000 in 2018. One way or another, we must all do more to tackle the scourge of trafficking. I very much commend Restore Glasgow for their campaigning efforts to question consumer behaviour. More often than not, we might think that we are getting a bargain by getting our nails done—well, perhaps not in my case—or a car washed for £2 or £3, but we have to wonder who is really paying the price.

The internationalism and compassion shown by the people of Glasgow East does not just stop at human trafficking. Animal welfare is also close to our hearts. One of the issues that concerns a great many of us is trophy hunting imports. Put simply, trophy hunting is cruel and barbaric, and is helping to push some of the world's most endangered wildlife ever closer towards extinction. British trophy hunters have killed hundreds of endangered lions, hippos, leopards, rhinos, zebras and other animals in recent years, and brought their "trophies" back to the UK. I am very proud to support early-day motion 50, in the name of the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), which

[David Linden]

calls for a ban on the import of hunting trophies into the UK. That would be an important step to bringing an end to this terrible industry. Animals killed by trophy hunters often suffer slow, painful deaths and this practice has no place in a modern, civilised society. I very much stand ready to work on a cross-party basis with the Government to support any legislation on this issue.

Staying on an international theme, I wish to turn now to urgent support to protect our oceans. Overfishing and plastic pollution are gutting our oceans of life and destroying delicate ecosystems. We need to act urgently to protect them if we are to have any hope of tackling the climate and nature emergency. That is why I am standing with my constituents and supporting a bold global ocean treaty. Right now, only 1% of the world's oceans are protected. Scientists say that we need to protect at least 30% by 2030, through a network of ocean sanctuaries, placing huge areas of the ocean off-limits to human activity.

For the first time in history, a process is under way to make that possible—the global ocean treaty being negotiated at the UN—but to be frank, the talks are currently on a knife edge and could result in a weak treaty that is unable to properly protect marine life. That would be a disaster for our blue planet and could spell disaster for us too, as our survival and that of the oceans are so interlinked. To get that ambitious deal for our oceans and our climate needs, we need senior politicians in the negotiating room who can push for a strong treaty, so I implore the Prime Minister to send a senior Minister to New York in the next couple of months for the final round of the global ocean treaty negotiations, and to really take this opportunity to leave a better world for our future generations.

Our responsibilities to future generations also extend to child refugees and family reunion. When Lord Dubs' amendment came to the Commons from the other place last month during the passage of the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Act 2020, I was very proud to vote in favour of it, because child refugees with family members here in the UK should not be stuck in camps and car parks alone. By taking the step of removing legal protections to ensure that family reunion continues at the same standard as under current EU laws, I am afraid that the Government are sending a very dangerous signal. We know that when safe and legal routes are not accessible, children are more likely to make more dangerous journeys and to be pushed into the hands of people smugglers. If global Britain is to be anything more than a slogan, the Government really need to act with compassion on child refugee family reunion policy.

I turn to domestic policy and matters specifically impacting on my Glasgow East constituency. The big topic at the beginning of this week—if not today with the reshuffle—was money for rail infrastructure. I have questions about when HS2 would ever reach Scotland and whether there will be Barnett consequentials, but locally, I stand with a lot of residents of my constituency in campaigning for a train station in Parkhead. Parkhead is, of course, the home of the wonderful Forge shopping centre, Celtic Park—Scotland's largest football stadium, with a capacity of 64,000—and would tie in with the line that goes from Helensburgh Central right through the centre of Scotland over to Scotland's lesser city of

Edinburgh. I implore Ministers in the Department for Transport to work alongside me and see what support we can give to make sure that we get that train station in Parkhead, perhaps through money coming from here up to Scotland, alongside Network Rail.

In recent years, Glasgow's east end has been savaged by the removal of ATMs and bank-branch closures. Even in my short time in the House, we have lost local branches at the Royal Bank of Scotland in Stepps, Santander in Parkhead and Clydesdale in Shettleston, and that has an impact on ATMs. Indeed, new research from the consumer group, Which?, reveals that the amount paid by consumers to withdraw cash jumped by £29 million to £104 million last year. That has a particularly devastating impact on low-income communities such as those in the east end of Glasgow.

The loss of free access to cash is a crisis that impacts on businesses on the high street as well as older and vulnerable consumers who choose to use cash to budget, and the millions of us who use cash as their preferred payment method. To continue the theme of cross-party working, I was delighted to work on a cross-party basis with the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) to lobby the Treasury to commit to introducing legislation that protects access to cash and free withdrawals. I very much hope that the Government can make a positive announcement in next month's Budget, and if they can, they will certainly have my support.

In Shettleston, Tollcross and Parkhead, we are blessed with beautiful old sandstone tenement properties, which are a major part of Glasgow's skyline. However, the maintenance of those properties is vital to protecting the existing housing stock and ensuring that our rich architectural heritage is preserved for many more years to come. I know from speaking to local homeowners and housing associations that the prohibitive 20% VAT rate on housing renovation and repair work is a major disincentive to maintaining the properties. I want to see the Government refresh the economic modelling carried out by Experian that looked at the benefits of reducing the VAT rate for housing renovation and repair work. In the run-up to the 2015 election, the Cut the VAT Coalition produced an excellent paper, which the Treasury would do well to go back to, re-evaluate and consider seriously, particularly as we consider decarbonisation and how our domestic properties tie in to achieving net zero, in 2045 or 2050.

In Glasgow East, whisky is a significant part of our local economy and provider of jobs. I have three cooperages, a maturation warehouse and John Dewar's bottling hall in my constituency. When we think of whisky, it is not necessarily always about space, such as in Islay—it is still a massive provider of jobs even in urban Glasgow East. However, the 25% tariffs imposed on Scotch whisky by the United States are having a hugely negative effect on the jewel in the crown that is Scotland's food and drink sector. I was in the United States last week, and had the pleasure of meeting American colleagues to press the case for ending punitive tariffs on whisky. I was especially grateful to Congressmen Andy Barr and John Yarmuth—both from Kentucky—for the opportunity to focus on the impact of tariffs on bourbon as well as Scotch. We are absolutely united in our message to

London, Brussels and Washington that these tariffs must end in order to protect jobs on both sides of the Atlantic.

Sticking with an overseas theme, I want to turn now to the persecution of Christians, a subject that is close to my heart. I commend the Government on their commitment to promoting freedom of religion or belief, and commend in particular the work of the Prime Minister's special envoy, the hon. Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti). I think that we all want to see the recommendations in the Bishop of Truro's report implemented, and I am confident that the Government are making progress on that front. I met the special envoy in Washington last week to discuss the issue.

However, I remain deeply concerned about the persecution of Christians in two countries in particular—Nigeria and India. Open Doors reported at least 1,445 physical attacks and death threats against Christians in India over a year. This is the country with which Britain will soon seek a free trade agreement, and I seek reassurance from the Government that, in their rush to conclude that free trade agreement, human rights and freedom of religion or belief will not be overlooked when they are dealing with President Modi's Government in the coming months. Similarly, on the issue of Nigeria, let me again issue a plea to Foreign Office Ministers in particular to do everything they can to secure the release of Leah Sharibu, who has been held captive by Boko Haram for two years. I happen to share a birthday with Leah Sharibu. It was a privilege to stand with CSW colleagues to mark that day last year, but I very much hope that I will not be doing the same on 14 May this year, and that we will see Leah's release from captivity.

Let me end by raising an issue that is particularly close to my heart, as a father of two small children and as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on premature and sick babies. There are many things on which I disagree with the Government, but my record in the House shows that I am always willing to work on a cross-party basis whenever that is possible. I was genuinely delighted—I say this in all sincerity—to see in the Queen's Speech a commitment to introduce an employment Bill providing for neonatal care leave. That certainly did not exist when my four-year-old and one-year-old children were born. It is ridiculous that mothers and fathers are having to return to work when their children are struggling for life in neonatal units, and I hope the Government will put that right.

May I gently seek clarity about how the neonatal care leave provision will be framed? I know that the Minister will have a million things to discuss when he sums up the debate, but it would be hugely appreciated if he could find out from those in the Box when the Bill will be published. I hope very much that when the Bill is published it will reflect the pledge in the SNP's manifesto to provide a week of paid leave for every week that a baby is in neonatal care.

I will wrap it up there, but I hope that the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) would be proud of my "cantering around". I thank you for your forbearance, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I particularly thank the staff of the House, who have put in an enormous amount of work since the election, looking after not just new but returning Members. I wish all Members a very productive, peaceful and restful recess

as we return to our constituencies, and I look forward to seeing all colleagues when we come back in a couple of weeks' time.

3.28 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden). Let me also say to the House that I will not take as long as that! I do, however, want to acknowledge all those who have spoken, before focusing on the excellent speeches made by new Members.

I thank the hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti), my hon. Friends the Members for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas), for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) and for Newport East (Jessica Morden), the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), and the hon. Members for Dudley South (Mike Wood), for Buckingham (Greg Smith) and for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis). I also thank the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), and I agree with her about Bovis. I would be happy to talk to her about that. I thank the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), and of course I have to make the bid on behalf of the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess): please can Southend become a city? We miss him.

I want to start with the hon. Member for Bosworth (Dr Evans). I do not know why he is here, rather than being a GP. From the way in which he has presented himself today, I am sure he must be an excellent GP. He made an excellent speech, and we are lucky to have his talents here as well. I am pleased to see that he is following David Tredinnick and carrying on the tradition of being a member of the Health Select Committee. I also served on that Committee for five years during one of the most difficult times, when the Health and Social Care Act 2012 was being introduced. It is interesting that Tuesday was the International Day of Women and Girls in Science, so the fact that Ada Lovelace was taught in his constituency is excellent. A final word of warning to the hon. Gentleman: do not build any car parks in your constituency until you have let the archaeologists at it.

The hon. Member for Wrexham (Sarah Atherton)—amazing! The Labour candidate in Wrexham was also female, so in any event Wrexham would have been blessed with its first woman MP. I am delighted to hear that the hon. Lady served in the Army. That is an important voice that we need in the Chamber, not only for those who are currently serving but for those who have left the services, because they too need looking after. I know that she will ensure—whether it is in the St David's day debate or a Welsh affairs debate—that the grant to the Welsh Government will not be cut by this Government.

The hon. Member for Guildford (Angela Richardson) was right about Anne Milton. She was a wise counsel to all of us, and it was lovely when we used to bump into her in the Members' Lobby, because she always had a word of advice for all of us. We miss her wise counsel. She was a great servant to her party and she will be missed, but I am sure she will be a good source of information for the hon. Member. It is great to see that the hon. Member has already focused on the programme of work she wants to do here and that she wants to

[Valerie Vaz]

tackle homelessness. I am sure she will do that in her constituency, and perhaps she will work on a cross-party basis with all other Members so that we can tackle this terrible scourge in what is one of the richest countries in the world. The hon. Member has made a fantastic journey and I love the idea that her parents were watching from New Zealand, which is where women first got the vote. We can also celebrate the fact that it has a woman Prime Minister.

The hon. Member for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew) also made his maiden speech today. I was going to say that Keith Simpson was a towering figure in more senses than one, but I think the hon. Member has already been more successful than all his other predecessors, because he has managed to get something done about the A47. Norfolk is a fantastic place, and I hope that he is going to focus, as he said, on those wonderful country traditions such as the making of baskets using reeds, which is such a sustainable way of working. I agree with him about the accountability of quangos. That goes to the heart of the democratic deficit that we face. He, too, is a welcome voice here.

The hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson)—wonderful! I hope he has a good set of walking shoes, because we would all like to join him on his wonderful walks. He was right to remember those who have been affected by the floods; we must not forget them. It is terrible: some of them were without water, and some of them without anything. They were having to do the same thing over and over again. I know he will be a good voice for getting flood defences for his constituency. I do not know whether he is aware that Rory Stewart and lots of other hon. Members have had days on which they invite all hon. Members to the Jubilee Room. However, given that tourism is so important for his constituency, I think that Cumbria day should be held in his constituency so that we can all go up there. I think he is a great fit for his constituency. I also want to thank him for his beautiful tribute to his father. That was really difficult, but I just want to say that his father lives on in him and that he will hear his voice always.

The hon. Member for Stroud (Siobhan Baillie)—how wonderful! Neil Carmichael was a good friend, but so was David Drew, so we are kind of torn. Neil was very good at working on a cross-party basis. David was probably one of the most relaxed Members I have ever met. Nothing seemed to bother him. He had been a Minister, but he was absolutely wonderful. The hon. Lady has fantastic experience as a councillor and as a lawyer, and I know she will bring that experience to the House. This sounds familiar to me. She said that further education is important, and she will carry on Neil's tradition in that respect. I liked her final line and the fact that she said she is going to get things done. I am sure she will. She has the energy and focus to do so.

Finally, Mr Deputy Speaker, I wish you, all the House staff, our staff, and every single Member a good short break. Please do take a break, because this is quite a relentless place, and it has been that way since the election. I wish everyone a happy and peaceful time.

3.35 pm

Stuart Andrew (Pudsey) (Con): If I the House will indulge me for a moment, I just want to say that I was supposed to be at Harrogate Army Foundation College

today. I held a young person's fair a couple of months ago, and the son of a couple of friends came along, and I am proud to say that Lance Corporal Lewis Horrocks is passing out today. Unfortunately, I was unable to be there to share that experience but, just like his parents Jim and Clare, I am incredibly proud of him today.

There has been a little bit of news going on in the background during this debate. I am sure that many of my right hon. and hon. Friends have been waiting eagerly by their phones for that reshuffle call—

David Linden: He never calls, he never writes.

Stuart Andrew: Well, I want to ensure that people do not have that impression of me, so I will just leave my phone on the Dispatch Box. [Laughter.]

This fantastic debate has demonstrated—several colleagues have mentioned this—the real positives of this Parliament. Members of Parliament from across the House have spoken passionately about their constituencies, the issues that they care about and the desire to get something done to make our whole country—indeed, our whole world—a better place. Perhaps the public should be watching debates such as this a bit more than, dare I say, Prime Minister's questions. We have had some excellent contributions, so I will go through them and address the questions.

My hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) talked passionately about the plans for an arena. As a Member of Parliament for the area, I know that the fantastic Leeds arena has made a huge difference, so I hope that Bristol will get on with that planning permission. He mentioned transport, which will be a recurring theme throughout my response, because all sorts of bids were made, including his eloquent proposal for a park and ride scheme. Of course, the Government are committed to the £100 billion infrastructure fund, which has probably already been spent this afternoon—[Laughter.] But I encourage everybody to ensure that they continue to make suggestions, and I will certainly pass them on.

I was particularly pleased that my hon. Friend talked about local education, which is important if we are going to give our young people the best future. I know how important the aerospace industry is to his constituency, and when I was serving in the Ministry of Defence, I was pleased to visit a factory in his area and see the opportunities being offered to young people through apprenticeships. As he says, social mobility is an incredibly important thing, and we are all responsible for delivering it.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) on his upcoming university fair, which I am sure will be a huge success—I may have to steal the idea for my constituency. He talked about local health services in his constituency, quite rightly praising many of the people who work within them. I am proud of the fact that the Government have put it into law that we will be investing £33.9 billion in the national health service, which will provide us with real opportunities to make the necessary investments. I will ensure that the issues he talked about, particularly the Mount Vernon cancer centre, and his requests are put in front of Health Ministers.

The first of the many fantastic maiden speeches was by my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (Dr Evans). The trouble with listening to maiden speeches is that I cringe on realising how awfully rubbish and embarrassing mine was. He said he would not speak for very long, and I was once told that the art of good communication is brevity—I have always tried to keep to that. He rightly highlighted the historic nature of his constituency and its royal connections, and the fact that his constituency is at the very heart of England.

My hon. Friend talked about his work as a GP. In fact, his whole family seem to be GPs, and we should say thank you to him for his service as a GP and to his entire family for their dedication to our national health service. As others have said, we are lucky to have his expertise in Parliament.

The hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) raised an important and sensitive issue that is of particular concern to many people, particularly vulnerable women who are perhaps in difficult circumstances. She is absolutely right that we can talk about these issues in a calm and effective manner. She asked me to raise some specific points with the Home Office and the Home Secretary, and I am happy to do so.

The next maiden speech was by my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Sarah Atherton), and the first thing I have to say is, “Llongyfarchiadau a chroeso i San Steffan.” That means, “Congratulations and welcome to Westminster.” I have a personal interest, because I like to think that I sowed the seeds by standing as a parliamentary candidate in Wrexham in 1997. My result was spectacularly awful. I lost, and the Conservative party lost pretty much every seat in that election.

I am delighted that my hon. Friend has become not just the first Conservative but the first woman to be elected for Wrexham. It is a constituency I know well, and I love that she says she has now been forgiven by her family for being a Tory—I went through a similar experience. She is another Member who previously worked in public service in our armed forces and as a nurse. Too often we do not celebrate the work people did before becoming a Member of Parliament, and the contribution they can therefore make to our debates will only enrich how we go on from here. I love that she is a brewster. If she ever wants me to have a taste, I am happy to have a go.

The hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) talked about the opportunities of HS2, and she is right that we must look at it from every angle. It is not just about things like connectivity between the north and south; it is about releasing capacity on other lines. It is also about the opportunities it may present for industries like steel and for train companies such as the one in her constituency.

I know full well the issue of spending across borders. I served in the Wales Office, and I well remember our many debates and discussions about that. I am pleased that we are spending £48 billion on rail across the country, which is a huge investment, and now we have the opportunity of £5 billion for buses, too. There are real opportunities here.

The hon. Lady raised the issue of terminal illnesses and benefits, and I will happily raise that with Ministers in the Department for Work and Pensions.

A number of Members are concerned about IR35. As my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House said earlier, it is important that people know what taxes they have to pay, but we need to ensure the review reports quickly. I hope there may be further announcements in the Budget on 11 March.

The next maiden speech we heard was made by my hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Angela Richardson). I was glad that she paid such a nice tribute to her predecessor, Anne Milton, who, as Deputy Chief Whip, changed the focus from just delivering votes to the welfare of Members of the House. She contributed a tremendous amount with that, and my hon. Friend was right to point that out.

My hon. Friend talked about cricket greens and spending time during the election in good pubs—I did a little of that myself. She also talked about the great charities in her area. I was glad that she also raised the issue of homelessness and rough sleeping, as I am proud that our Government are determined to try to eradicate rough sleeping by the end of this Parliament. As the right hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) just said, it is fantastic that my hon. Friend’s parents are watching this debate in New Zealand. I have no idea what time it is there, but they have probably switched off now that I am speaking.

The hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) talked about the important issue of charity lotteries. Prior to working in the House, I was the head of fundraising for a couple of children’s hospices and set up a charity lottery to help with that. Such lotteries are an incredibly valuable, reliable and regular source of income, and it is right that we look at this issue. I am pleased to tell her that the order to increase lottery sales and prize limits was laid on 20 January. The reforms will allow charities to raise more money for good causes, and the legislation includes a pro-rated arrangement for the new annual sales limit to enable operators to benefit as soon as possible. The Gambling Commission will be monitoring the impact of the changes to see whether any more work needs to be done. I thank her for raising that important issue.

My hon. Friend the Member for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew) then gave his maiden speech, in which he described his constituency fantastically. He also paid tribute to his predecessor, Keith Simpson, whom I always recall walking around the corridors of Parliament with a book under his arm—he was a great Member of this House. I love the fact that my hon. Friend has taken on the tradition of his seat: campaigning to dual the A47. The tradition started in 1983, so let us hope that in 2020 he will be the one who is able to deliver that. I am sure he will be meeting my right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary on many occasions to bring that forward.

I also want to pay tribute to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is one of the most diligent Members of this House. I recall that when I was a Parliamentary Private Secretary in the Department for Transport, I found myself sitting with some confusion on my face when he walked into a Westminster Hall debate on the east-west Oxford to Cambridge railway. I wondered how on earth he was going to get Northern Ireland into that debate, but he did so with great skill—I say to all my new colleagues that he is the man to learn from. He talked about invasive species, the importance of our ecosystems and protecting our natural environment,

[*Stuart Andrew*]

and he was right to raise all those issues. The Environment Bill will be debated on 26 February, and I am sure he will take that opportunity to make such points to Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Ministers after the recess.

We then came on to the maiden speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson). It must be daunting to realise that one's predecessors include a former Home Secretary and a former Chief Whip, so I am sure that he has a great future ahead of him. I was particularly intrigued that he offered his most recent predecessor the welcome news that he can bring his sleeping bag and come to say with him—I am sure he will take that up. My hon. Friend talked about Cumbria and the important issues of agriculture and tourism. More importantly, as a proud Unionist, he talked about the importance of a border seat and working across that border to deliver for both areas, because when we work together and are united, we can deliver a great many things.

I was intrigued by my hon. Friend's background as a vet and his story about anal glands and an amorous dog. When I go home, I usually get a brilliant welcome—not really from my partner, but from my dog. I am afraid that this week I am not going to get such a welcome, because he went to the vets on Monday to have—how can I put it?—his bits done, so am probably not going to be very popular.

I was glad that my hon. Friend talked about things such as mental health, and I pay tribute to the very moving way in which he spoke about his father. One thing I have noticed about this place is that when you talk about something very personal, it is sometimes very hard not to lose your composure. It is quite hard at times and your voice does tremble, but my hon. Friend spoke with absolute clarity. His father has clearly trained many people in the health profession, and I know for a fact that he would be very proud of the way in which my hon. Friend delivered that part of his speech. I think I am right that my hon. Friend's family were up in the Gallery, and they were clearly moved, too—I congratulate him.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood) talked about green-belt development, which gives me an opportunity to talk about my constituency a little, because we all face these issues. He was absolutely right about the need for us to look at cross-constituency and boundary issues, and at the impacts that planning applications may have on one area when something is built in another. Exactly the same thing is going on in my area. My hon. Friend is right that we should build on brownfield first; after all, that is what green-belt policy is about: trying to regenerate brownfield areas. He also spoke about infrastructure—no doubt that is another bid going into the Department for Transport. He asked three specific questions about the consideration of residents' views, mitigation and the combined authority fund, and I will certainly make sure that I raise those points clearly.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Siobhan Baillie) spoke with great optimism. She talked about battery-powered aeroplanes—let us hope we can get to that point soon, because it would be hugely helpful. I love the fact that, as the right hon. Member for Walsall

South mentioned, my hon. Friend said that she is here to get things done. Every Minister is probably quaking in their boots because, as she said, regardless of what happens in the reshuffle, she will be meeting them. I was particularly pleased to hear her talk about further education and the fact that university is not always the answer for everyone. I did not go to university myself, and at the time I was made to feel like a bit of a failure, frankly. When I go around the country or my constituency, I see many young people developing great skills through apprenticeships, and they then have a real passion that takes them on to a successful career.

My hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Greg Smith) talked about the Oxford-Cambridge expressway, and we have heard his concerns loud and clear. I know his local residents are worried, but they have a great advocate in my hon. Friend as their local Member of Parliament. When they come here on 26 February, they will do so knowing that their concerns have been expressed. My understanding is that the Secretary of State is reviewing the situation. He has heard what has been said and an announcement will come shortly.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) talked about transport and wanting his fair share for his city. It is wonderful that we have so many Conservative MPs bidding for all this transport funding in seats that we have not held for many a year. I know that my hon. Friend has been sending angry letters to Network Rail, so it had better get answering him quickly. He wants to put in a Beeching bid and talked about buses, so there will obviously be a long list of applications for Stoke-on-Trent.

My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) talked about the reopening of Middlewich station. She is absolutely right. Sometimes, when these ideas start off, we might think that they are probably implausible and are never going to happen, but if we are a bit like a terrier and just keep going at it, it is amazing what can be delivered. I will certainly ensure that she gets a chance to meet the Secretary of State as soon as possible. She also talked about outstanding issues on one of her estates, and I had a similar issue in my own constituency. It is not fair on those people who bought a property in good faith and expected to live in a decent environment. I hope that, if Bovis is listening to this debate, it will have the decency at least to reply to her letter and to address the issues facing her constituency. I will also ensure that Health Ministers are aware of the importance of Congleton War Memorial Hospital.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) talked about the local authority pension funding gap. He will probably be aware that, as soon as we get back, we have Housing, Communities and Local Government questions, so I am sure that he will take the opportunity to ask his question.

I want to praise my hon. Friend for the work that he did on homelessness, because his was one of the great private Members' Bills that went through this House, and he worked hard to ensure that that happened. He is right that there are still many complex issues that need to be addressed, not least the issues of drug and alcohol abuse. We cannot just find people a place in which to live; we have to ensure that they have the ways and means and the life capabilities to be able to sustain their new life. He listed a load of other issues, but I will not go into them all. In fact, I was looking on my app at the

Jubilee line, because I could not keep up with all the different stations that he was mentioning. The idea of building on a car park that services public transport seems absolutely ludicrous to me. We did exactly that in my own constituency, and now we regret it. As more and more people use the trains, we cannot then find the places for them to park.

I just wanted to add at the end my thanks to the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), who spoke about some very important international issues. I know that human trafficking and trophy hunting are very important issues for many Members. I am acutely aware of the importance of the global ocean treaty and the summit in New York, and the issue about child refugees. May I please implore everybody to understand that we have not changed our policy? Child refugees remain an important priority for this Government, and we will make sure that we will continue to stick to that.

The hon. Gentleman asked me about the employment Bill. I am afraid that I cannot give him an exact date yet, but I will take up the matter with the Leader of the House, and as soon as I have an answer, I will come back to him.

The right hon. Member for Walsall South finished off the debate by putting in a plea for Southend-on-Sea to be made a city. I do not have the power to do that. If I did, my phone would never ring—[*Interruption.*] The right hon. Lady has just stolen my final line, which was that the only thing that I can see at the moment is a missed call from my mother.

May I conclude by thanking you, Mr Deputy Speaker, the other Deputy Speakers and Mr Speaker, and by saying that I have noticed a considerable difference in tone and atmosphere in this Chamber, which I think is appreciated by everybody in the House? It is only now that I realise how awful those past 18 months were. The way in which, as a team, you have all helped to ensure that the Executive are rightly held to account, but have done so efficiently and ensured that everybody is treated with respect, has not gone unnoticed. I also wish to thank all the other staff—the catering staff, the parliamentary security staff who keep us safe, and all the Clerks who give us the advice that we need to do our jobs properly. I thank you all very much.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Mr Andrew, I suspect that your mother was calling to ask, “Has Boris rung yet?” I am sorry, Mrs Andrew, but he hasn’t—not yet.

Before putting the Question, I want to wish everybody a very peaceful and happy recess. I think that Valerie Vaz was absolutely right—this place can be relentless at times, so it will be good to have a rest during this short recess. I thank all those who work in the House, in whatever capacity that happens to be. I come in very early in the mornings and the cleaners are here before me, and when I am leaving they are here then. I thank those who keep us safe. It is at this time that I reflect on the ultimate sacrifice that PC Keith Palmer made to keep us safe.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered matters to be raised before the forthcoming adjournment.

Coventry IKEA Store Closure

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

4.1 pm

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): I am very pleased to have secured my first Adjournment debate, and on a topic of real importance to my constituency. The Tuesday before last, IKEA announced that it will be closing its flagship store in Coventry this summer, putting 352 jobs at risk. The store is in the city centre, at the northernmost point of my constituency. The announcement came out of the blue for many, including its workers.

Coventrians have been in touch with me to express their shock and sadness at the announcement. Over 3,300 people have signed an online petition calling for the store to stay open. People have expressed their “devastation” at its loss, seeing it as “an iconic part” of the city’s landscape. It has been part of the city’s scene since 2007, when it became IKEA’s first city centre shop. It is indeed distinctive; its blue and grey walls, standing seven floors tall, can be seen from a distance. Since it opened, it has become a major site in the city’s shopping ecosystem, attracting people from across the region to the heart of Coventry. Its closure will be felt hard by the city—mostly, of course, by the workers and their families, who risk their livelihoods being devastated, but also by the many people who enjoyed spending time in its café, the small businesses that benefited from the people it attracted to the city, and the many students who relied upon it to fit out their university rooms. A friend even told me how sorely she would miss its meatballs.

The closure speaks to two much broader trends that have significance for Coventry and beyond. The first is the rise and fall of industry and the effects of what we now see in Coventry and across the midlands and the north: deindustrialisation. Where we now have low-paid and insecure retail jobs, there was once strongly unionised, relatively well-paid and stable employment.

Industry has always come and gone in Coventry. As with capitalism generally, it uses, exploits and discards working people as it pleases. This was true with the textile industry in the 17th century, which began with the labour of Huguenot refugees and at its height employed 25,000 people in the city, only later to crash and leave workers ruined. It was also true of the manufacturing of cycles and clocks, which in the late 19th and early 20th century became the backbone of the city’s industry. By the mid-20th century it was the motor industry that was booming, this time on the back of Irish migrants, and it provided the city’s working class with work.

By the 1970s, Jaguar, Standard-Triumph and Alvis all had manufacturing plants in what was then dubbed “Britain’s Detroit”. With it there came good, unionised jobs and Coventry enjoyed relative prosperity. However, as had happened to the industries before it, at the whims of bosses in search of cheaper labour, much of the motor industry moved abroad, again leaving the city’s working class abandoned. Unemployment exceeded 20%, and by the early 1990s discontent triggered riots across the city. This abandonment was felt so

[Zarah Sultana]

much that it is even said that the city's very own The Specials based their classic "Ghost Town" on the sense of loss felt in the city.

The city has never fully recovered from deindustrialisation because today there are not the mass, well-paid, highly-skilled and secure employment opportunities for kids growing up in Coventry. This is clearly shown by the fact that where the IKEA store stands today there once stood the site of a General Electric Company factory.

Taiwo Owatemi (Coventry North West) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that we are in urgent need of a clear strategy to maintain and grow our city centres? The UK must remain a place of thriving town centres, with security and well-paid jobs, and places such as Coventry must be at the centre of this work.

Zarah Sultana: I thank my hon. Friend for making a really important point. I will be coming to the decline of the high streets and regional investment in a moment.

The General Electric Company factory was a six-storey building, employing thousands of people in relatively decent and unionised work. With deindustrialisation, Coventry has seen secure and well-paid jobs replaced by insecure and poorly-paid work. This is the first story that the loss of the IKEA store speaks to. The second is the decline of the British high street.

Coventry city centre, like all our city centres, is more than a place to shop. It is the beating heart of the city—a place that should provide community, culture and character. But in the last decade, the retail sector has been increasingly hard hit and empty shops are becoming commonplace. As one Coventrian said at the news of the store's closure, the city risks becoming a ghost town again.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): As someone who has bought numerous furniture items from IKEA and spent frustrating hours putting them together, I understand the IKEA furniture concept. Does the hon. Lady agree that the potential loss of 352 jobs is horrific, and that there must be an onus on a chain store as large as IKEA to go the extra mile by placing members of staff in other stores or ensuring that they are trained for new jobs? It is not enough to just up sticks with a "too bad, too sad" attitude; that just will not be accepted.

Zarah Sultana: Absolutely. The priority has to be every single member of staff whose job is at risk. IKEA should prioritise their needs, and ensure that they are redeployed to other stores or offered skills and training.

The words of The Specials risk becoming true once more. But there is a broader trend; there are now roughly 25,000 empty retail spaces around the country, which is a vacancy rate in excess of 10%. Last year, 57,000 retail jobs were lost, and a further 10,000 were lost last month alone. The market is only too happy to put workers on the scrapheap the moment that the profit motive demands, and there is a real danger that these IKEA workers will be discarded too, but they must not be forced into unemployment with all the strain and pain that it brings.

I know how grim unemployment can be. I know what it feels like. I know the sense of shame for people who stand in the queue at the jobcentre. I know the loss of confidence they feel, the impact it has on their self-esteem

and the fear they feel that they may lose their skills. I have been there. For the sake of these workers—and workers across Coventry and the country who are at risk of losing their jobs, are stuck in insecure work or are already out of work—I tell the Minister that it is his responsibility to ensure that this does not happen. It is his responsibility to protect workers from unemployment and to ensure that the training, reskilling and job opportunities exist to give everyone the chance to have decent, well-paid and secure work. We cannot have a Government who oversee the opening up of food banks and the closing down of good workplaces.

The Prime Minister likes to talk about "levelling up" the country. Well, I hope I am forgiven for not believing a man whose party drove the deindustrialisation that now blights the midlands and the north; whose party slashed the funding of public services that working people rely on, cutting more in the midlands and the north than in the wealthy shires; and whose party continues to prioritise the City of London, which dominates the economy, and concentrate spending on the capital and the south-east. After all, in his own words, nobody "stuck up for the bankers" more than he did.

If the Prime Minister were to follow up on his promise to invest in the region, here is what he would do for workers in Coventry—here is what he would do to ensure that the 352 workers at the IKEA store would not have to fear unemployment. It means reversing decades of deindustrialisation and instead investing in new green industries to kick-start the green industrial revolution, including manufacturing electrical vehicles to bring back the motor industry to the west midlands, but now reducing emissions and improving air quality. It means investing in Coventry's public transport, opening up new rail lines and bringing them into public ownership to make travel free and green. It means reversing cuts to local government, whereby councils have lost 60p to every £1, so that Coventry City Council can support the local community as it wants to. It means rejuvenating Coventry city centre and high streets across the country by giving local councils the power to open empty retail spaces to start-ups, co-operative businesses and local community projects. It means not pretending that you are not to blame for the collapse in bus services, when Conservative Governments have cut £645 million in real terms from buses, and instead putting real money into our bus services and letting under-25s travel for free. That is how we can rejuvenate Coventry city centre and high streets across the country.

Coventry is the city of culture 2021; it is a city rich in culture and industrial history. But the closure of IKEA will be the latest episode in what happens when Governments do not invest in all regions, allow deindustrialisation to go unchecked and let our high streets empty. That must not continue. I give my solidarity to the workers at IKEA at what is a difficult time for them and clearly state that I am here to fight for them and for all workers.

4.12 pm

The Minister for Business, Energy and Clean Growth (Kwasi Kwarteng): It is very good and pleasing to see you back in your rightful place, Mr Deputy Speaker. I concur with remarks that have suggested that the tone in this Chamber has significantly improved since the last election.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana) on securing this important debate. She has shown in her brief time in this House a real concern for her constituents that is very much noted and very impressive, particularly in the context of this sad news from IKEA.

I have no doubt that the announcement from IKEA is of great concern to employees, their families and the wider community in Coventry. I am sure that the House will be sympathetic to all those whose livelihoods have been affected, or are likely to be affected, by this announcement. I understand that IKEA is currently in consultation with its staff, and it would not be appropriate for me today to make any assumptions about the possible outcome of those conversations and that consultation. IKEA has made it very clear that its ambition is to retain as many workers as possible. I can assure the hon. Lady that the Government will work closely with IKEA to ensure that all affected employees are provided with the required support to move to their next employment quickly or to be reassigned within the company.

The retail sector, as the hon. Lady observed, has been going through a period of unprecedented change. Companies across our economy need to merge, expand and sometimes contract and reorganise in the light of quickly changing economic and commercial circumstances.

It is important to understand why IKEA proposes to close its Coventry store. The business has stated that the reason for announcing this closure is that, when it opened the shop in 2007, it was testing a new format to meet its customers' changing needs and expectations.

Taiwo Owatemi: From the meeting I attended with IKEA alongside my two colleagues in Coventry, I understand that the Coventry IKEA store was a pilot store. There was no other city-centre IKEA like it in the UK. Infrastructure was built around this project. Does the Minister agree that pilot stores should face more scrutiny before they are built or large units such as IKEA stores are purchased?

Kwasi Kwarteng: That comment makes sense after the event; I have no doubt about that. Like the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), I have shopped in IKEA, but, I am sure, with considerably less success in putting together the items of furniture I bought. I remember that at the time, it was hailed as a significant step. People welcomed the employment opportunity and the opportunity to shop in the centre of Coventry. It now transpires that it has not worked out as people anticipated. The hon. Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi) is right; there needs to be a measure of scrutiny, but I would be reluctant to introduce legislation that would prevent other companies from innovating and opening pilot stores in the way that IKEA did in 2007.

The store attracted significantly less footfall than IKEA originally forecast. It was built over seven floors, and there were issues with how easy it was to shop from the top and then go down to where the payments were made. The company found it very challenging, and the operating costs were high. When the company conducted a full review last year, it felt that the only option it had, or the easiest and most profitable in terms of the entire company and its employees, was to review the operation of the store. The company felt that the bespoke nature

of the store design and the high costs involved meant that it had to reconfigure the unit, and sadly, it has decided to close the store. I understand that it looked at other options aside from store closure, and it maintains that this is an exceptional case.

I welcome IKEA's recent news that it is investing £170 million in the acquisition of Kings Mall shopping centre, which demonstrates the fine balance between investing in new facilities and making difficult decisions about existing ones. IKEA has confirmed that it remains committed to this country and to its ambitious growth plans, and it will continue to invest in stores and provide jobs, employment and economic opportunities to its staff. It has not turned its back yet on the city-centre format, and it is also looking at digital capabilities.

I now turn to what the Government are doing to support retailers. We are all aware of the difficulties in the sector. People rightly talk about business rates. My Department is conducting a review of business rates, and my colleagues at the Treasury are committed to a fundamental review of that tax. It is vital to provide the right tax environment for businesses to invest and grow. The Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst), co-chairs the industry-led Retail Sector Council with Richard Pennycook, chairman of the British Retail Consortium. The council's objectives are driven by industry and by consumer needs. It wants to make positive change, increase productivity and ensure that the sector remains robust and sustainable.

The hon. Member for Coventry South mentioned the need to create new forms of employment in areas that have suffered from deindustrialisation. As a Government and as a society, we have to think about new forms of industry and job creation. My Department is at the centre of that. We are driving innovation in green jobs. She will know about the strides we have made in offshore wind, which I know is not necessarily directly associated with Coventry. The fact remains that through environmental innovation, our environmental concerns and the green agenda, we are looking to create hundreds of thousands more jobs in that sector across this country than exist today. The statistic I remember is that we have 460,000 jobs in the green economy today, and by 2030 we hope to have 2 million, which is a four times increase in the number of jobs. This is a hopeful subject not only for constituents up and down the land but for the UK economy and the fight against climate change.

In concluding my remarks, I would like to speak generally about the high street. Coventry has a great high street, as many of our towns and cities do. As constituency MPs, we all appreciate how important the high street is, what a centre it is and how it forms the heart of many of our communities. People care about high streets. They are hubs for local people, job creators and nurturers of businesses of all shapes and sizes. I fully understand the devastating impact that the closure of IKEA in the centre of Coventry and the loss—the potential loss, because those people have not lost their jobs yet—of 352 jobs. We all understand the massive and depressing effect that that can have on the high street.

People up and down the land rightly feel very passionate and concerned about their local high street. We in the Government also recognise that this is a problem, and

[*Kwasi Kwarteng*]

we share the passion and concern. That is exactly why, in July 2019, the Prime Minister announced a £3.6 billion towns fund to re-energise local economies. This included an accelerated £1 billion for the future high streets fund, which is going to support and is already supporting local areas in England to renew and reshape town centres and high streets in a way that not only improves the experience but drives growth and a future economic path. I acknowledge the fact that Coventry city centre was among the first 14 places announced as taking part in the high streets taskforce pilot. This Government feel that the high street is at the centre of our national life, and we are absolutely committed to maintaining its strength.

I hope that these schemes demonstrate our commitment to communities across the country, especially Coventry and the wider midlands. The Government will not just stand by and watch valuable retail industry fade away. Nobody in this Government fails to recognise that retail is absolutely vital to our economy and our various communities. The Government are committed to working with industry to address the key issues of concern and to drive positive change and innovation. Retailers remain a crucial part of our regional economies.

Taiwo Owatemi: Will the Minister set out how the Government are encouraging more innovation in the retail industry? It is no secret that shopping behaviours have changed, so the industry must change too. The

Government must lead the way in helping small and medium-sized businesses to adapt and survive these changes.

Kwasi Kwarteng: This is absolutely at the centre of the strategy. The hon. Lady will know that we have many schemes in BEIS, such as local hubs, and we also encourage people to work with their local enterprise partnerships. As I have stated, we have already announced a £3.6 billion towns fund. There are opportunities, and perhaps she would like to meet me and officials in my Department to discuss how we can drive some of these issues further and how we can tap into or unlock some of those resources. There are those schemes, and there is an absolute commitment on the part of this Government to make sure that our retailers do not fade away.

In conclusion, I know that in the immediate aftermath of that announcement there is little the Government can do to soften its immediate blow, but I am convinced there is a way through this. I believe that IKEA's commitment to this country means that it will bend over backwards to ensure that as many people as possible can be redeployed and found other employment. If that is not the case, the Government are willing and eager to engage with representatives, and Members of Parliament from across the House, to consider ways to provide security, employment, and a better future for our citizens across the country.

Question put and agreed to.

4.24 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 13 February 2020

[PHILIP DAVIES *in the Chair*]

Apprenticeships: SMEs

1.30 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered apprenticeships in small and medium-sized enterprises.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies.

Apprenticeships should be the perfect vehicle for meeting the challenges of social mobility, bridging the skills gap and raising productivity. With the most recent Office for National Statistics data showing that productivity is 30% higher in France and 35% higher in Germany, our widening productivity gap cannot be ignored if we are to compete successfully and obtain the supposedly easy post-Brexit trade deals promised by the Government. Having run my own small start-up construction business in Scotland, I know full well the importance of small and medium-sized enterprises investing in their people. Those that fail to do so stagnate and start to go backwards.

In previous years, employer spending on training in the UK had fallen and was low compared with other advanced economies, so there was a clear need to take action to move more employers towards investing more in the skills of their workforce. It was also vital to improve progression in apprenticeships. Only 4% of our 25-year-olds hold a level 4 or level 5 technical qualification as their highest qualification, compared with 20% in Germany, where apprenticeships are taken up by many more young people and are viewed as a high-status option for school leavers. Sadly, the Government's rushed implementation of the apprenticeship levy resulted not in an increase in apprenticeships and opportunities for the most disadvantaged, as was hoped and very much needed, but in the exact opposite. That is devastating, especially considering the huge impact that apprenticeships can have on young people's lives.

Just last week, I met brilliant apprentices working in my constituency. I know that their input is hugely appreciated by the many businesses in Slough. Slough is a huge business hub, with the largest singly owned trading estate in the whole of Europe and more corporate headquarters than Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland put together, so we know a fair bit about businesses and the importance of apprenticeships. Unfortunately, far from turbo-charging our businesses and helping them further, the levy has left many of them hobbled and unable to fill vacancies, address their skills shortages or meet opportunities for expansion.

Since the introduction of the levy, apprenticeship starts in large employers—those with 250 or more employees—have fallen by 9%, but the impact on small and medium-sized enterprises has been disastrous. Apprenticeship starts have fallen by 34% in small businesses and 42% in medium-sized enterprises. Even in my constituency, despite the excellent Slough Academy, which supports growth in high-demand areas such as social care and planning in the council, overall apprenticeship starts have not

reached the level they were at before 2017-18. That reflects the trend across the country. It is estimated that between 30,000 and 40,000 SME apprenticeship vacancies remain unfilled, and 75,000 apprenticeships in SMEs could be lost by the end of the year. That is 75,000 people who will be denied the opportunity to work, train and gain the confidence that comes with successfully completing qualifications.

The failure of the levy for SMEs is compounded by the fact that those “disappeared” apprenticeships were most likely to have been taken up by young people who were starting with much lower qualifications—the very group we might imagine that a revamped apprenticeship scheme should help the most. The latest Government data show that the proportion of apprenticeship starts at level 2 fell from 63% in 2011-12 to a mere 36% in 2018-19, and the proportion of people aged under 19 on an apprenticeship has fallen to a mere 25%. In the context of participation in the apprenticeship system being at its lowest level since 2010-11, with 72,400 fewer people participating in 2018-19 than in 2017-18, those figures further underline the inadequacies of the Government's implementation of the levy. The largest reductions have been in the north-west and the north-east—areas that are in desperate need of job opportunities and economic growth.

What is behind the decline? Under the levy in England, employers are required to pay 0.5% of their payroll above £3 million per year into a so-called ring-fenced digital account to be spent on apprenticeships. That is topped up by a 10% public contribution. If levy funds are not used within two years, they expire. The system was based on the expectation that many employers would not spend all their levy funds. Those unspent funds were intended to cover most of the costs of apprenticeships for the SMEs that do not pay the levy. At the time, the Government estimated that around 50% would remain unspent and so available to non-levy payers.

Some levy payers found ways—some might say predictably—to increase their spending. Indeed, the Sutton Trust warned in November 2017 that an estimated two thirds of businesses' apprenticeship schemes merely converted existing employees and certified existing skills, and that the levy may encourage more of that so-called conversion and rebadging as a way for large employers to reclaim their money. That looks to be what has happened.

A recent Ofsted report on employees on an Institute of Leadership and Management course stated:

“Most apprentices and their line managers do not know that they are on an apprenticeship. Too many apprentices do not develop the...knowledge, skills and behaviours needed to progress in their careers...Most apprentices do not develop substantial new knowledge and skills or build on what they already know... They just complete their management qualification.”

That is a testament to what has gone wrong. That case and others led Ofsted chief inspector Amanda Spielman to declare:

“We have seen examples where existing graduate schemes are in essence being rebadged as apprenticeships. This might meet the rules of the levy policy, but it falls well short of its spirit.”

That is why, last year, the National Audit Office expressed its concern that the use of the levy for new high-level apprenticeships was really

“public money...being used to pay for training that already existed in other forms.”

[*Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhési*]

Even where higher-level qualifications are appropriate and well designed, they are expensive, so the money the Government expected to be available for SMEs to fund apprenticeships simply is not there—to the tune of around £1 billion, according to best estimates.

With the introduction of the levy came the development of new apprenticeship standards to replace existing frameworks. Those standards were designed by employer groups and are intended to establish more robustly the skills and competencies that an apprentice is expected to achieve. Again, however, the Government underestimated the cost of implementation, which has simply added to the financial pressures SMEs face in funding their apprenticeships. That has prompted calls for a proper review of what is and what is not an apprenticeship, and how the different kinds of in-work training are best targeted and delivered.

Given the reports by Ofsted, the National Audit Office and others, such a review is certainly required. Many stakeholders make the case for a more flexible approach, such as a skills levy that allows employers to invest in other forms of high-quality training. Such an approach would need extra funding from widening the levy to cover more employers, from raising contribution rates or from Government. However, the burning issue is that there is a crisis in apprenticeships for SMEs that is depriving those who most need either a solid start to their working life or a helping hand to get up and out.

As I said, disadvantaged people of all ages are disproportionately clustered at the lower levels of apprenticeships and are significantly more likely to be studying for level 2 or level 3 than for higher or degree-level apprenticeships. The levy has led not only to a dramatic fall in level 2 and level 3 apprenticeship provision, but to people from deprived communities being squeezed out of higher-level apprenticeships. In 2015-16, before the introduction of the levy, the most deprived 20% of the population accounted for 21.9% of apprenticeship starts at level 4 or higher, but by 2018-19 the figure had dropped to a mere 16.4%. That is why the Social Mobility Commission warned that

“a two-tier system...based on apprentices’ backgrounds” may be emerging.

Almost one in five young people does not achieve five GCSEs at grades 4 to 9—A* to C in old money—or the equivalent in alternative qualifications. They will naturally face greater challenges moving from level 1 to level 2, but maths and English provision in apprenticeships—functional skills—is funded at only half the rate that would apply to any other learner. Employers want to be able to deliver and provide young people with the opportunity to succeed, but the current funding arrangements make that extremely difficult. The Minister must respond to that funding deficit, and it must be met. The Government need to acknowledge the extra challenges that those young people face, and the extra provision that they need from their employers and training providers, by increasing financial support for level 1 and 2 apprenticeships.

If we truly wish to close the skills gap and raise the floor of our nation’s skills, we must go further. There have been calls from all sides to increase the flexibility of the levy to stimulate more high-quality and accessible

apprenticeships. One such change would be to allow employers to spend a portion of their levy funds on pre-apprenticeship programmes and other initiatives such as outreach programmes, with the aim of widening access to apprenticeships in under-represented groups. Further, the entitlement to attain skills at level 3 should be as accessible through the apprenticeship system as it is for young people taking college courses. The Trades Union Congress has suggested introducing a new right to progress for apprentices who have completed a level 2 apprenticeship, which would entitle them to study for a level 3 apprenticeship and trigger the necessary funding.

The lack of proper funding for some apprenticeships is, as I said, having a disastrous effect on entire sectors of our economy, such as the care sector. Many care homes are SMEs. The sector is typically low margin and low wage, and it relies on apprenticeships for the development of new and existing staff. The funding for adult care worker level 2 and level 3 apprenticeships is simply not enough to provide a quality apprenticeship programme and is leading to an over-reliance on untrained staff. It is forcing some providers out of business altogether.

I am led to believe that a monthly online apprenticeship reserve funding system is being trialled for SMEs. It has been likened to someone trying to buy a ticket for a concert, sitting at a computer, hitting refresh and hoping that this time they will get lucky. That is no way to run a programme. On top of that, the name of the apprentice is required before funding is reserved, so if an employer wants to hire an apprentice, they must do so, or at least make an offer, before funding has even been secured. That makes it easier to grant apprenticeships to existing employees instead of hiring in, as we should be looking to do. It is another barrier to those who are seeking a fresh start.

The unanimous view of SMEs is that the levy, as currently constituted, is failing—and that is to put it mildly. It is failing them, and it is failing their current and future employees. It is failing tens of thousands of the people who most need help and, by extension, the communities in which they live. The Government must listen to the broad coalition of voices—including Labour, businesses and training providers—calling for a guarantee of Government funding for SME apprenticeships, independent of the levy, through the provision of a funded pot for SMEs. I very much look forward to hearing the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), further explain the excellent work that she and her team have undertaken in that respect. We need the Government to step up to the plate. The level of funding needs to be guaranteed to give certainty to SMEs and training providers alike, so that both parties can provide the apprenticeships that are needed and plan effectively for the future.

Education can provide equality of opportunity for everyone, at every stage of life, if there is an accessible progression pathway for everyone. It is vital that the opportunity presented by the reform of apprenticeships is used to create such a pathway. The current system prevents young people from starting their career journey, because the system fails to provide the support they need. Such a lack of support is denying SMEs opportunities to recruit the apprentices they require to help to address the productivity gap.

National Apprenticeship Week has just ended. I hope the Minister used it to listen carefully to those in the sector who have been lobbying the likes of my hon. Friend and me, and I hope that the Minister will take that advice on board to improve the system that the Government created. In this post-Brexit world, our country cannot afford to get this wrong.

1.47 pm

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): It is always a privilege to serve under your stewardship, Mr Davies. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) for raising this crucial debate. It is particularly important to me, as a former engineering apprentice who came through this process.

I left school with CSEs, and I walked into the careers office one day and they said, "What do you want to do?" I was not sure whether I wanted to stay on or do something else. My dad worked for BSA in Birmingham, where they made motorcycles and firearms. It was one of the biggest motorcycle manufacturers in the world at the time, but unfortunately only a few are now made, in Meriden—not as many are manufactured in the United Kingdom as we would like. I explained what my dad did as a capstan setter operator—that is probably a foreign language to most people in the Chamber, but he operated a repetitive component-manufacturing machine. They said, "Oh, right. Do you want to go into an engineering apprenticeship scheme?" and I said yes, so they offered a year of off-the-job full-time training at Garretts Green Technical College, a local college that no longer exists. Within six months of starting, we were offered interviews, and I was privileged to be offered an apprenticeship at Delta Metals, Delta Tubes as it was then, which unfortunately no longer exists, either. I made my way through various phases of that and ended up at Birmingham Polytechnic, which also no longer exists in that form and is now Birmingham City University. I learned a huge amount about engineering and afterwards I was able to set up a small manufacturing and engineering company with my friend Mr Olley, who is a great friend to this day. That allowed us to move forward. As my hon. Friend the Member for Slough said, it allowed me to move forward as an individual, perhaps above the position that I had been in, and to grow up, both physically and in terms of my skills. It was a huge opportunity.

I concur with my hon. Friend the Member for Slough about what the Government are doing at the moment with the levy, and about the onerous conditions the levy puts on the employer, as it stands. Employers are under a huge amount of pressure to try to conform to something that they cannot. They find it very difficult to come to terms with some factors, as eloquently explained by my hon. Friend.

If we are going to look at upgrading more people, particularly post Brexit, we need a far greater understanding of the engineering and manufacturing sector. Of course, the services sector is important, but we cannot rely on it alone given the downturns we have had in overall GDP when the financial sector collapsed. Germany does not suffer as much because it has a huge engineering and manufacturing sector, which acts as a boost and a steady hand. Now, with our independent status, we need to have more of that independence ourselves, to be able to move forward.

I will say a couple of things about a success story in my constituency, Mr Davies. The Engineering Employers' Federation has a training school for engineers that takes on young people, both with and without qualifications, and provides apprenticeships that take them to the highest level. The engineering college was set up almost seven years ago by EEF using a levy from its members, above the apprenticeship levy, to provide the capital costs. I am happy to show the shadow Minister and the Minister around, should they wish to visit; a number of Ministers and others have already done so.

The initiative is a tribute to engineering and manufacturing. It started with about 300 apprentices; there are now four times that number. The majority of the commitment has come from local employers in the sector, who have put in a huge amount of the capital costs. The college still cannot get capital costs from the Government. As one would imagine, training in engineering requires practical lessons so people can operate the different machinery and equipment. Those involved have done a superb job putting the college together. I encourage the Minister to look at how we support engineering and manufacturing to move forward with the right sort of apprenticeships.

Our technical colleges used to do that, but there are now very few of them. There is only one real college, South and City College, Birmingham, that does any real manufacturing, engineering and building construction training at all. We are at a loss to get new engineers to come forward and to develop an understanding of the practices needed for people grow their skills. Two or three people from different disciplines in engineering can set up a company to create something, just as I did with my friend Mike Olley. That makes the growth; it is what makes the country grow.

We have not had that type of training for too long—since the 1980s, when Delta Metals was closed down and bought up by a company for its order book. I am not being parochial about this at all, but all our equipment was bought up. At that time, there were three manufacturers of copper tubes: IMI, Wednesbury Tube and Delta Tubes. We were sold because we were the most advanced. All of our equipment was taken to China and installed there. We were years ahead of Wednesbury Tube, which is now owned by a Swiss company. IMI still just about exists. We lost our capacity, but then there are complaints about being flooded with foreign goods. If we do not train our own people and if we do not have the capacity in engineering and manufacturing, that is what happens. We lose that market.

Following the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Slough, I am pleading for us to have that capacity. We want to move our people forward, and for our country to have a strong base in engineering and manufacturing in the economy. That is important because we are now independent and moving forward on our own. The shadow Minister has done some great work in this job; I commend her for the interest she has taken. I am sure she will continue to do that, particularly in engineering and manufacturing, which is a subject close to my heart. I again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Slough for raising this issue and for his great work.

1.55 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I thank the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) for

[Alan Brown]

bringing forward the debate. Westminster Hall may not be as busy as he would like; I am sure that is not because it is Thursday and the day the House rises. It is probably because there was a debate earlier in the week about the apprenticeship levy. Just like buses, we get two debates in one week, following National Apprenticeship Week.

The hon. Member for Slough set out the issues around the apprenticeship levy, and the challenges for small and medium enterprises, very well. I was interested to hear him say that he had his own start-up construction company, so maybe I need to have a chat with him about his experiences at some point. I was concerned to hear the numbers that he gave, including 30,000 to 40,000 current vacancies and the prediction that 75,000 places will disappear, going forward. We need to hear what the UK Government will do to rectify that.

We also heard about what was described as a downward trend in the number of apprentices since the apprenticeship levy came in. That is not replicated in Scotland, where there has been an increase in the number of apprenticeships created year on year for eight years; I will come back to that.

A big concern was raised—again, I want to hear what the Minister says about it—about what is happening with unspent levies, and the fact that there is manipulation of people's classification within their work environment, so that companies can draw down the levy money without creating the net benefit and additional positive outcomes, which are key when accessing money from the levies. We need to hear more about the governance of that.

I was struck by the opening remarks by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr Mahmood), who said that he did not know what he wanted to do when he left school. I was like that myself at one point. We have taken very different career paths, but I do not know what it says about the calibre of politicians, Mr Davies, when there are two of us here who did not know what we were going to do, but have somehow ended up in this place.

The hon. Gentleman highlighted a good success story with the training offered by EEF. It is fantastic that it has managed to get together, and provide, the capital funding for the college, and that the number of apprentices has increased from 300 to 1,200. That shows what can be done when employers work together and are not seen as being in competition with one another. I hope that that collaborative approach can be replicated elsewhere. The UK Government have not provided the capital funding, which is something the Minister needs to consider. Interestingly, in his closing remarks the hon. Gentleman spoke about the negative effects of globalisation, with the UK suffering by losing skills because they, and machinery, are going elsewhere and the UK market is being flooded.

I am sure we all agree that the principle of apprenticeships is a good thing. From one perspective, in recent years there has been a change in attitude. For a while the prevailing attitude was that young people went either into further education or on to the scrapheap. Clearly, further education is not for everybody. We need to retain our manufacturing base, and in terms of that, and in terms of the construction industry, apprenticeships are clearly a fantastic route into the workplace. They get

people trained in the work, provide suitable qualifications and increase productivity, which is the right way to do it.

As the hon. Member for Slough said, apprenticeships should not be used to plug temporary employment gaps. They should only be used when an apprenticeship can lead to a full-time position, and apprenticeships should be matched to skills shortages. That was not always the case in the construction industry. My dad used to work for a plumbing company, so this is not a new thing; at the time it would often happen that somebody would serve their apprenticeship and once that came to an end, they were basically paid off and had to try and find a job elsewhere. Sure, they had a qualification, which was good, but they did not have the relevant work experience, which made finding a job more difficult.

We need to ensure that any apprenticeships that are created and funded lead to positive destinations. I know that the business outlook can change, so there might not be the same opportunity for somebody once they are qualified at the end of the apprenticeship; but, that being the case, no company should be able to continue to replace apprentices if it is not keeping the original ones on in permanent positions.

We have heard that since the introduction of the apprenticeship levy there has been a drop in the number of apprenticeships in England. One third of businesses reportedly view the apprenticeship levy primarily as a tax, without the actual training benefits. If that is the perception out there in the real world, it is not a good one. The British Retail Consortium has said that the levy is failing retailers, and the hospitality trade has voiced similar concerns for its sector.

It appears that the apprenticeship levy is a clumsy tool and is not doing everything that it should, or bringing in the support that was heralded. The Library briefing notes that the Centre for Vocational Education Research report confirms that the drop in apprenticeships is due to the levy and the funding arrangements. The research identifies the cost, complexity and inflexibility of the levy as the key issues. Indeed, the British Chambers of Commerce has reported that,

“for SMEs in particular, the new rules have added to the barriers, complexity and cost of recruiting and training staff”.

While the UK Government had a laudable target of 3 million new apprenticeships by 2020, in June 2019 they had to admit that they would miss that target. It would be good to hear from the Minister what the UK Government are doing to rectify that situation.

As I mentioned earlier, Scotland is making excellent progress to ensure that our young people have the skills they need to exploit current and future opportunities. That is despite the fact that, in introducing the apprenticeship levy, the UK Government stepped on a devolved responsibility; companies and large organisations in Scotland pay the levy, but the actual training aspect is devolved and falls within the remit of the Scottish Government, who have to work with employers to mitigate that unwelcome tax.

In so doing, the Scottish Government have had discussions with key stakeholders and have established a national retraining partnership, with the aim of helping workers and businesses to prepare for future changes in their markets by enabling the workforce to upskill and

retrain where necessary. This ambitious commitment to skills builds on a number of initiatives already in place to boost employment and create positive pathways for young people. That has meant extending the £10 million flexible workforce development fund to continue to support investment in skills and training. Employers are encouraged to link with colleges to learn more about the opportunities available to them. That happens with my local college, Ayrshire College, which tailors its courses to suit the needs of local employers, helping to fill that skills gap and ensuring that people going through college courses achieve the qualification that best suits them so that they can continue successfully in the workforce.

All that work is paying dividends: the Scottish Government have now exceeded their apprenticeship target every year for eight years in a row; there are clear lessons there for the UK Government. Skills Development Scotland statistics show that the Government's commitment to increasing apprenticeships to 30,000 by 2020 is on course to be met as well. In Scotland, apprenticeships currently on offer include 900 graduate opportunities, up from 270 in the previous year, and that figure will rise to 1,300.

Some 93% of Scotland's young people now go on to positive destinations—the highest percentage of anywhere in the UK. That is the most important thing: access to apprenticeships, training or whatever else is about a positive end destination. We must ensure that small and medium-sized enterprises are able to gain access to that and provide those positive destinations.

We also need to consider how Government procurement should be used to enhance the development of apprenticeships. Companies building new schools in my local authority area are providing new apprenticeships through the contractual arrangements. That is a good thing: we are getting new schools, which will enhance the education of young people, while some of our local young people are getting the necessary apprenticeships out of it, which will hopefully lead to lifelong careers in the construction industry.

The UK Government also need to look at that idea when it comes to the contracts for difference auctions in the energy market. I have long argued that the bid process should have a quality assessment aspect that incentivises the use of local supply chains, which obviously includes the use of small and medium-sized enterprises. That quality assessment could go further and incentivise local supply chain and job creation, namely apprenticeships, in these smaller companies.

That is a process that is doable. Sometimes the Government argue that it cannot be done, because of the European procurement rules, but that is nonsense. As long as there is a transparent system for quality assessment, it falls within European procurement rules—and of course we are going to hear about the Brexit dividend, so maybe that is something that UK Government could do quite quickly, now that they say Brexit is done.

We, as energy bill payers, are funding the CfD mechanism; while price is important, it seems ridiculous that at the moment the decision is down to price alone when, with a very small increase in what we pay, we could create apprenticeships, create a sustainable local supply chain and grow skills. We heard earlier about a skills drain; if we did that, we would attract and grow those skills and be able to export them worldwide. I call on the Minister

to take cognisance of that and have discussions with other members of our Government. I look forward to hearing what the shadow Minister and Minister have to say.

2.6 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) for securing this debate. I must say it is also a pleasure to see the Minister still there in her place opposite me, to continue our discussions from Tuesday.

I will start by commenting on my hon. Friend's speech. He started with an interesting point about the differences between Germany and England in the status of apprentices and how they are viewed. I saw that when the Education Committee went to Germany, and I was struck by how fantastic the system is there. Of course, there are structural differences that mean we cannot replicate it here in this country, but I think we can all agree that we need to keep selling the idea of apprenticeships, talking them up and explaining what a good thing they are for our country.

My hon. Friend made a very good point about the falling apprenticeship numbers in small businesses. Out of all the figures that he mentioned, the one that struck me was the figure of 34% in small businesses. Small businesses have been hit even harder than medium-sized businesses by the apprenticeship levy. He spoke passionately about apprenticeships in Slough; in fact, I was at the event with him where he talked to some of his fantastic apprentices from Slough, and I was really impressed by their passion and dedication to their training.

My hon. Friend was right to highlight the falling numbers of level 2 and level 3 apprenticeships. Very few people know at 16, or even at 18, what they want to do when they move on in life, so we need to start where people are at. If people are not ready to start at level 3—if they have not been able to achieve as successfully as we would all like them to in school—they need that level 2 start to enable them to make progress and to fulfil their ambition and achieve social mobility. I am sure that we all agree with that.

My hon. Friend is also right to point out that a question was raised in the debate on Tuesday about the levy for businesses—I am in favour of that levy—and whether the Government expected all businesses to use it. There seem to be conflicting evidence and statements about that, and I would be interested to hear the Minister's thoughts. Are businesses expected to use all of the levy themselves, or was the intention behind the design that a certain amount of the levy would be kept and used by SMEs? There seems to be a lack of clarity over whether it is a tax that larger businesses contribute to, which can be distributed to small businesses, or whether it is just a system to allow individual businesses to get the money back for themselves.

I am particularly pleased that my hon. Friend raised the question of maths and English and the extra support that is needed. This might not be the right debate in which to talk about that, but I hope that the Department will take it seriously, because we have created a system where the insistence on having people resit their qualification in their first year, even when they are on a two-year

[Emma Hardy]

course, is causing many people to fail. We have to explore ways to enable everybody to succeed. I would like the Department to go away and think about why it insists that people on a two-year level 2 course should resit at the end of their first year. Why not give them that extra year to practise and develop their skills before they have to sit their exam? Can we not be a little bit more open-minded and creative in coming up with solutions to enable everyone to achieve the maths and English qualifications that we all agree they need?

I really enjoyed the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr Mahmood)—he has gone, but I will let him know. It was nice to hear him talk about how his father's interest in engineering got him involved, and how he was not sure what he wanted to do. It was a heart-warming speech. I look forward to visiting his constituency and seeing the examples he gave. He is quite right: we need to invest in engineering and manufacturing skills, and support the making of British goods here in Britain. It has been a source of frustration to me for a long time that we continue to import more and more when we could grow our own, and develop and make things in this country, giving people high-skilled jobs and helping to grow our economy. I hope the Minister will comment on how the apprenticeship levy can do that.

I do not usually comment on the remarks of Scottish National party spokespeople, but I really liked the interesting point that the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) made about the retention of apprentices, which I had not considered before. If we fund apprenticeships, as a Government or through the levy, should we not expect businesses that have had access to those public funds to retain the apprentices? That is an interesting idea to explore, and I look forward to the Minister's comments on that.

I think we all agree about the importance of apprenticeships, not only for the productivity of our country but for individuals and social mobility. We all agree that SMEs are really valuable to our economy. In fact, during the debate on Tuesday, one Member pointed out that in Northern Ireland, where their constituency is, there are few large, levy-paying businesses, so it is nearly all SMEs. I have not yet had the chance to crunch the data on this, so it will be interesting to see whether the Department has analysed the areas of the country where there are fewer levy-paying businesses, and looked at whether we have therefore created coldspots and areas in which people lack opportunities to access apprenticeships.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): One industry prevalent in small business is hair and beauty. Routes into hair and beauty and other apprenticeships include the level 3 qualification, which the Government just cut thousands of, and T-levels. T-Levels will be the major route into higher-level apprenticeships, but they are not yet ready, and in the hair and beauty industry they will not be ready for years. The pathway to these apprenticeships needs to be solid, small businesses need to know what is happening and the funding needs to come through. Otherwise, we will see an even further drop in apprenticeships, on top of the challenges of the apprenticeship levy.

Emma Hardy: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct. I have questioned the whole concept of T-levels before. If they are a solution to a problem, what problem were they trying to solve? I have not quite been able to figure that out yet. They almost seem to be trying to ram themselves into a system where they might not necessarily be needed or, indeed, wanted. He makes an important point: if we take away existing qualifications before establishing the T-level, we will leave a gap. What will happen to the people who want to access those qualifications during the gap? Perhaps we might debate T-levels after recess and dig into the question in a lot more detail.

My hon. Friend the Member for Slough mentioned the fall in SME apprenticeships, which has come about as a direct result of the levy. There has been a fall of 23% overall, with a fall of 171,000 in SME apprenticeships. That is down an estimated 49% since the levy was introduced, and it is a huge fall. Particularly concerning to me, as I mentioned on Tuesday, is the quite shocking 20% fall in 16-to-18 apprenticeships. From the reports I have seen, SMEs receive only half as much apprenticeship funding compared with April 2017, when the levy was introduced. Traditionally, SMEs have been the largest recruiters of young apprentices, and they have generally been the recruiters of apprentices at a starter level. It will impact on our ability to grow our own talent if we cut off opportunities for young people and cut off the lower levels that we need.

On Tuesday, the Minister said:

“The apprenticeship levy is helping businesses large and small to access the high-quality training that they need.”—[*Official Report*, 11 February 2020; Vol. 671, c. 258WH.]

I have to say that the Minister may be a little bit mistaken, because I am not sure that the apprenticeship levy is helping small businesses to access the high-quality training that they need. As I just said, I do not think that they can actually access all the funding that they need.

In Tuesday's debate, the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) pointed out that 300 potential SME apprenticeships have been lost at Staffordshire University because of the current funding system. Not only are the apprenticeships not helping people at the beginning of their career, at level 2 and 3, but they are not helping those at university and at the other end of their career, at level 6 and above.

As mentioned, the Centre for Vocational Education Research report says that the fall in apprenticeships is because of the introduction of the levy. The report says:

“For smaller enterprises which are less likely to be directly impacted by the Levy, the strong decline in starts may be linked to a combination of adapting to the new funding system, the constraints on the pool of funding actually available for apprenticeship training, and the ongoing switch”.

It is because we do not have the funding needed to actually move them forward.

The Minister also spoke on Tuesday of the award-winning digital service, saying that it would

“support employers to manage their funds and choose the training they need from a register of approved providers”,

and pointed out that that would benefit smaller employers by

“moving away from the previous procured contract system to give SMEs more choice than ever”.—[*Official Report*, 11 February 2020; Vol. 671, c. 258-59WH.]

With the greatest respect to the Minister, as my hon. Friend the Member for Slough pointed out, putting SMEs on the digital platform will put them in a similar position to someone who is trying to buy concert tickets, and who has to jump on as early possible and press the buy button before someone else gets there. Even increasing the numbers by 15,000 will not be enough to cover the 49% decrease that we have already seen. Giving people more access to a system that does not have enough money just means that they have greater access to having no money; it does not solve the problem. If the Government are to put them on the digital system, they need to fund the digital system to enable it to work.

The levy money is, indeed, running out. There is not enough money, which is why, as has been confirmed by the Minister with responsibility for skills, the National Audit Office, the permanent secretary at the Department for Education and, more recently, the new CEO of the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education—IFATE; there are too many acronyms in this job—apprenticeships in SMEs will not go back to pre-levy numbers. That is why I keep pushing this. There is a joined-up message from businesses, the Labour party, the Confederation of British Industry, the Federation of Small Businesses—from everybody—that the Government have to put in £1.5 billion in funding for SMEs. The digital solution that has been mentioned will not suffice.

The Minister may have seen a letter in the *Financial Times* that highlights the point I was making. Surprisingly in education, because it does not always happen, lots of people agree and are saying the same thing:

“The chief executive of the employer-led Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education also believes that the apprenticeship levy needs to be topped up with additional Government funding to address the shortage of funds available for apprenticeships offered by smaller businesses. Her comments follow similar concerns expressed by Ofsted’s chief inspector that the levy is not working in a way which would satisfy the Government’s ‘levelling up’ agenda across the UK regions.”

The letter was signed by Mike Cherry of the Federation of Small Businesses; Mark Dawe of the Association of Employment and Learning Providers; David Hughes of the Association of Colleges; Doctor Sue Pember CBE from Hoxley; and more. These people all say the same thing: the Government need to put money into the SME budget to enable SMEs to offer apprenticeships.

The Minister said on Tuesday that she is

“keeping the apprentice system and levy under constant review to understand how it works for employers of all sizes, and most importantly how it can deliver for our economy and for social mobility.”—[*Official Report*, 11 February 2020; Vol. 671, c. 258WH.]

Will she dig into that a little bit more and explain what review has been undertaken, its timescale, who is included in it, when we should start to see its outcomes and whether we should expect it to have occurred before the 11 March Budget? Will we see anything in the Budget to address the ongoing crisis in SMEs?

I point out a good example of local SME support in Manchester, which used a grant of £3,000 for non-levy paying SMEs in the region that have not employed an apprentice in the past two years. Creative solutions are starting to come out, and I hope that the DFE will explore this and find ways to offer such support.

I shall keep my request quite simple. In a nutshell, what we—in business, in the Labour party and in this unity of voice—would like to see is the Government

committing to a ring-fenced and guaranteed non-levy budget of at least £1.5 billion and separate, segregated funding approaches between levy and non-levy paying employers. I am not saying that that will solve all the problems overnight, but it will alleviate the most immediate concerns and it will open up access for young people and people wanting to start at lower levels who want to work in SMEs.

This will be the last minute of my speech, because I have been talking for quite a long time. And now for something completely different, as they say. I want to mention the Back a Bid campaign: we are looking for the UK to host the 2027 WorldSkills championships. It is like an Olympics for skills whereby we have Team GB going abroad to compete and show the talents and skills that there are in this country. I hope that the UK will look at being one of the hosts for that. I hope that the Minister will press the new Chancellor of the Exchequer hard to enable the funding for a Government feasibility study to come through, to show how we can stand on the world stage as Global Britain and show off the skills and talents in our country by hosting the championships here in the UK and showing what brilliant, talented people we have. I hope that by 2027 many of those brilliant, talented people with great skills will be coming from SMEs.

2.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Michelle Donelan): I congratulate the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) on securing the debate. I warmly welcome his keen interest in apprenticeships and am particularly grateful for his work to celebrate local apprenticeships last week, which, as he pointed out, was National Apprenticeship Week. I believe that he visited a number of his constituents, including those completing apprenticeships in companies such as KFC. As he kindly highlighted, last week was a fantastic opportunity to bring the whole apprenticeship community together and shine a spotlight on how amazing apprenticeships are for social mobility, for our economy and for moving people forward.

It is fantastic that more than 8,000 people in Slough alone have started an apprenticeship since 2010, and that is over a range of areas, ages and sectors within Slough’s community. The hon. Gentleman may also be aware of a Slough-based company called Resource Productions, an SME that does an excellent job working in the film industry, with clients such as Disney and Pixar. Dominique Unsworth is its CEO and also a Government SME apprenticeship ambassador. Her work is vital in order to connect more SMEs with apprenticeships. She has recognised just how important it is to employ apprentices and spread that message. I am pleased to note that, at Ms Unsworth’s request, the National Apprenticeship Service is hosting an event with Slough Aspire on 31 March. If I am still in post, I shall try to come along, and I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will also attend.

As was pointed out, this is the second debate on apprenticeships this week. The first focused on the effectiveness of the apprenticeship levy. We should not forget that the apprenticeship levy funds apprenticeships for employers of all sizes, including SMEs that do not pay the levy. The Government recognise the need to ensure that our programme delivers for employers of all

[Michelle Donelan]

sizes—I know that that point was laboured by the hon. Gentleman and by other hon. Members. For that reason, we are making changes to benefit small employers, so that they can get the most out of apprenticeships. In fact, last month, we began to transition small employers that do not pay the levy on to the digital programme, which was mentioned. I will promise to meet the hon. Member for Slough so that we can look at the portal together to address some of the issues that he raised.

We are providing additional funding that will allow up to 15,000 more starts in the first three months of this year with smaller employers. That marks the start of the transition of smaller employers to using the apprenticeship service, allowing us time to listen to their feedback and time for smaller employers to become more familiar with our approach. We have already seen them take advantage of that in relation to early years education, pharmacy work and so on. The change will give employers a real choice of high-quality training provision and the opportunity to become more engaged in the process, as not having that has been one of the criticisms to date. Smaller employers will have access to a larger pool of training providers to deliver training that meets their needs and supports growth in their sector. To ensure that the transition is as simple and easy as possible for employers, we have worked with SMEs to test the service and have engaged with a range of employers and providers, acting on their feedback and instigating improvements.

We recognise that SMEs provide many people with their first step on to the career ladder, and we want to ensure that neither younger people nor smaller employers are denied the opportunity to participate in apprenticeship schemes. That is precisely why we provide £1,000 to both employers and training providers if they take on somebody aged 16 to 18. We know that younger people can face additional challenges in starting and applying for apprenticeship schemes. Social mobility is something that I am particularly focused on ensuring that we do better on, as is driving up the number of young apprentices on schemes, which the hon. Gentleman mentioned. We also pay 100% of the cost of training for the smallest employers—those with fewer than 50 employees—for that age group. Last month, we extended the use of levy transfers to cover the full cost of training for 16 to 18-year-olds and for receiving employers with fewer than 50 employees, helping more small employers to support apprenticeship starts.

We are proud to have launched, in January, the third phase of our Fire It Up campaign, which is aimed at changing the way people think about apprenticeships by demonstrating that they are an aspirational choice for anyone with passion and energy, and that they can enable them to go so very far.

We are ensuring that the message of apprenticeships is being heard in schools. That was touched on in the debate earlier this week. The National Apprenticeship Service has developed Amazing Apprenticeships—a website and resource portal for schools and teachers. Meanwhile, our Apprenticeship Support and Knowledge project is ensuring that teachers can promote apprenticeships to their students and have information available.

Just like the hon. Gentleman, we want more people to be able to benefit from the positive changes that we have made to apprenticeships, and across sectors—a

point raised by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr Mahmood). I want to let him know that 200 of the 510 standards are for construction, engineering and manufacturing, and they have been designed in conjunction with businesses. That pool is growing all the time.

Mr Khalid Mahmood: I appreciate what the Minister has said, but the central question is this. When these apprenticeship training schools or colleges are set up, the capital support that they need for the equipment is more important. Will she look at that?

Michelle Donelan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comment. IfATE does evaluate the cost of putting on each apprenticeship scheme, and I regularly meet its representatives. In fact, I met them this week. I know that it is their priority for this year to look at the budgets that they set per standard.

The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) mentioned the question of money, and whether we had originally anticipated that all businesses would use all of the fund. We do not and did not anticipate that all businesses that paid the levy would need or want to use all the money; but we have put them in the driving seat to ensure that it works for them and their individual business model. We have been pleased to see the number of businesses that have transferred some of their unspent money to support smaller businesses within their supply chain.

The apprenticeship levy means that more money is available than ever—a big point to labour. This year we have increased available investment in apprenticeships to more than £2.5 billion—double what was spent in 2010-11 in cash terms. Our reforms mean that apprentices starting apprenticeships today benefit from apprenticeships that are of higher quality. Apprentices now receive substantial and sustained training, with their apprenticeships lasting a minimum of 12 months and featuring 20% off-the-job training and an assessment at the end.

We are pleased that the new apprenticeship standards across all levels are being designed and driven with industry, because they have to work for the employers. In fact, starts on standards represented more than 63% of all starts reported in 2018-19, showing that employers are already making the switch.

Quality is key. Today we have talked a lot about quantity and access, but we did not labour the point about quality. That is a priority of the Government, and has to be a priority for the businesses that the apprentices feed.

Alan Brown: On quality, will the Minister address the point about ensuring that when companies take on apprentices, there is a long-term future for them? What are the Government doing to ensure that there is not a continual churn of apprentices, as companies may use them to fill short-term labour gaps?

Michelle Donelan: Of course, an apprenticeship is a job. We want to ensure it stands out on any CV as a gold standard, lasting that apprentice throughout their career, whichever employer they go to in the future. Longevity within companies is important. I am happy to meet the

hon. Gentleman to discuss how we can better foster the retention of apprentices. Our data to date is extremely promising.

To ensure that apprentices receive a high-quality training, we have strengthened the register of apprenticeship training providers. Any provider that receives an inadequate Ofsted assessment for apprenticeships will be removed altogether from the register. We realise that we must go further to ensure that these opportunities are accessible to people from all backgrounds, whether they are starting a job or progressing in their career.

Small and medium-sized enterprises, most of which do not pay the apprenticeship levy, are integral to our economy, as was mentioned. The hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) mentioned Government procurement. That is an essential issue. In the December 2019 Conservative party manifesto, we committed to a significant number of apprenticeships in every big infrastructure project that this Government undertake. In the next year, thousands of smaller employers will transition to the apprenticeship service, giving them more control over their apprenticeship needs.

We are listening to the concerns of businesses, including SMEs, about the apprenticeship levy, and we are committed to ensuring that the apprenticeship programme continues to provide opportunities for people of all backgrounds, fulfil the needs of employers of all sizes and deliver for the economy more broadly. I thank the hon. Member for Slough for highlighting apprenticeships in this debate and encouraging further focus on SMEs as we continue to improve the apprenticeship system. I assure him that we will continue to listen to all stakeholders, including SMEs, to ensure that the apprenticeship system works for everyone.

2.31 pm

Mr Dhesi: It has been a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies, and to engage in this important debate. I am particularly thankful to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr Mahmood). My experience running an SME pales into insignificance compared with his considerable experience, not only as an apprentice, but in the engineering industry. Therefore, the Minister and the Department should listen to his points, which he made with great passion, to inform effective changes accordingly.

I also thank the Scottish National party spokesman. He passionately explained the long-term future for apprentices and highlighted the problem of a competitive

gap appearing, not only between us and our European and global partners, but between England and Scotland, because of the different routes we have taken.

I thank the shadow Minister. I know she is passionate about this subject and has been since long before she came to this place, given her background in education. She spoke about the need to ring-fence the sizeable £1.5 billion budget and the request to host the WorldSkills championship. The Minister did not respond to that last point, but I hope we can give the shadow Minister some good news soon.

I thank the Minister for her kind words and compliments about not only my Slough constituency, but the work of Resource Productions and my good friend Dominique Unsworth, whom I know is an excellent ambassador. The Minister also highlighted the plethora of apprentices in Slough. As I explained earlier, the explanation is that Slough is a huge business hub. It is the most productive town or city per capita in the entire country. I could wax lyrical about my constituency all day, but I can see you are yawning, Mr Davies, so I shall move swiftly on. I look forward to joining the Minister on 31 March. I thank her for her interest. I also look forward to meeting her, as she kindly suggested, and I hope the shadow Minister will accompany me to that meeting, so that we may look further into improving the current digital offer for apprentices and SMEs.

Overall, I am disappointed that, despite the disastrous figures we face, the Government are not looking to make a sea change in their approach to apprenticeships. I hope the Minister, with due consultation with others, will remove those restrictions infringing upon SMEs' operations and introduce the necessary flexibility and funding. If we do not do that, we shall fail to address not only social mobility, but the huge productivity gap, and we shall let down that broad coalition of voices from industry, business, apprentices and political parties. It is important for the Minister to consider that; not to do so would be to let down not only those businesses but, more importantly, those young people, and thereby our country.

I thank you, again, Mr Davies, for chairing this debate, and I thank all hon. Members for their incredible contributions.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered apprenticeships in small and medium-sized enterprises.

2.36 pm

Sitting suspended.

Office Block Conversions: Essex

3 pm

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered permitted development rights for office block conversions in Essex.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I wish to talk about a pressing and ongoing issue in my constituency of Harlow that can be described only as ghetto building, human warehousing and social cleansing, under the expanded permitted development rights legislation.

Let me be clear: I believe in more housing. We face a crisis in this country, with 1.2 million people on the waiting list for social housing, and more than 682,000 people living in overcrowded accommodation. Yet studies by the University of Sheffield show that 94% of land in the UK is not built on. Housing consultant Colin Wiles even suggested that English golf courses occupy more land than homes.

I am pleased that the Government are accelerating our house building programme, with 1.3 million homes delivered since 2010. My constituency of Harlow is set to benefit from 16,500 new homes by 2033 from the Harlow and Gilston garden town alone. I agree in principle with the motivation behind expanded permitted development rights legislation, to make it easier for new housing to be built, and when the legislation came to the House of Commons, no party opposed it. I have even seen how permitted development rights can be a success. Edinburgh House, formerly home to Pearson publishers, has been converted by Land Charter Homes into quality apartments that are close to the station, with good transport links.

However, as the BBC “Panorama” documentary detailed last week, permitted development rights have been an unmitigated disaster for our town. The reasons for that are threefold. First, Harlow has become a prime location for such developments, with 12 former office block conversions, including Terminus House, Templefields and Redstone House. Harlow’s proximity to London and comparatively lower property prices make it a preferred location for developers; but, of course, the legislation does not require the builds to comply with local planning regulations. As such, around 1,100 units have been created in Harlow—a town of around 40,000 homes—none of which has been tested against the requirements of the local plan.

Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, the creation en masse of new, relatively inexpensive accommodation in Harlow has made such properties an attractive option for councils outside Harlow looking to house individuals who have presented as homeless in their area. That has allowed predominantly London councils to socially cleanse their boroughs and to place vulnerable individuals, often with additional needs, into those converted properties as temporary accommodation. A freedom of information request that I made in July 2019 found that 32 Labour councils have made out-of-area placements.

In Harlow, we have had an influx, receiving placements from Barking and Dagenham, Enfield and Harrow, to name just a few. The placing authority does not have to notify Harlow Council, or offer any additional funding to cope with the increased demand on local services. The situation has been exacerbated by the fact that

Harlow Council did not take up the full capacity of Terminus House when it was initially offered by Caridon Property to house Harlow residents in need of accommodation. We might well ask whether Harlow Council, had it accepted that offer, could have worked with landlords to ensure that the housing was of good quality. However, Caridon offered the remaining units to other authorities for rental, causing that increase in placements of individuals from other areas.

Thirdly, the impact of the influx on Harlow has been catastrophic. The rabbit-hutch housing developments have been a hive of criminal activity and drug abuse, placing huge pressures on our local police, A&E and social services. The “Panorama” investigation found that Essex police have been called to one site—Templefields—nearly 600 times in three years, and of course Harlow taxpayers bear the brunt of all such problems.

Our local schools are under immense pressure. One primary school, Tany’s Dell, looks after pupils from 20 families currently living in nearby temporary accommodation at Templefields House. The teachers have described issues relating to safeguarding, poor attendance, anxiety and even exhaustion from the 30-minute walk to school, undertaken by children some of whom are as young as just three years old. There are no buses or any proper public transport links around that building.

I believe passionately that it is my duty in Parliament to address social injustice. I am not blaming the individuals and families, who are taken away from their usual support networks of friends and family.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): My right hon. Friend has always been a champion of social justice and, not for the first time, does this House a great service in bringing to our attention matters that are of both local import and national consequence. Does he agree that the report recently published by the commission that the Government tasked with looking at building beautiful places is highly pertinent to the debate? If we build homes in which people want to live, in places that they can feel proud of, social solidarity will be the result. I hope that the Government will shortly respond to those recommendations.

Robert Halfon: I thank my right hon. Friend. He is right: beauty is everything in building. When I initially saw the legislation on converting office blocks, I thought that it would be a good idea. I never imagined that loopholes in the legislation would allow the building of literal ghettos—of tiny rooms, as I will describe later—without any thought to beauty, aesthetics or the local environment for the poor residents who have to live in such places.

Often such properties are developed in areas never intended for residential dwelling. They are placed in isolated employment areas of the town with poor public transport routes, as I have just highlighted, making it difficult for residents to integrate socially and economically into the community. That is why it is so important that councils play at least some role in determining where such conversions take place. Individuals arrive, unfamiliar with social and counselling services and schools, and can feel unsupported in the new area. I am not against those vulnerable families—we have a duty to help every vulnerable family—but I have a duty to my constituents,

and when families who have nothing to do with Harlow are brought to the town, they are separated from their own networks and support.

If families are not deemed vulnerable at the time of placement, it is easy for their new difficult living situation to affect that. Regularly in my constituency surgeries, and when I am out and about across our town of Harlow, I meet families living in such ghettos and hear moving stories. One lady, a recovering drug addict, was placed on a corridor where other residents were taking drugs right in front of her. That lady was sent from another borough. She had no links to Harlow, and was trying to get her life back on track, doing everything possible to get off drugs. She was a single parent, living in a room hardly bigger than the table behind me, and was now surrounded by drug dealers and people taking crack and other kinds of drugs. I ask the Minister how we can expect that lady, and so many others like her, to get their lives back on track living in such an unhealthy, unpalatable and unacceptable environment.

Ongoing support following placement is necessary if families are to thrive in their new area. Does the Minister not agree that in order to provide support, councils must first be notified of their placement and be given the funding to provide the care that vulnerable families need through local services? Permitted development rights were never meant to be about building ghettos. Nor were they about living space, and letting councils ship people off like cattle to the east of England and to Harlow.

I made this clear at the beginning of my speech: I know we need more housing, and I recognise that permitted development rights have made an important contribution in some parts of the country, but there have to be rules, particularly about quality, and councils must have some say in how the office blocks are converted. As one resident told me, the buildings were built for paper, not people, which sums it up exactly. If we truly want to help people, homes must be quality, safe spaces, not tiny box rooms where a single parent and a little baby live in a space where one can barely put one's arms out without touching the walls and where the so-called kitchen is a yard away from the bed. They should not be housed in the same corridor as drug users and violent individuals.

In January, the Secretary of State confirmed to me in the Chamber that the review into permitted development rights

“will be taking forward any reforms necessary”.

He recognised that,

“All properties built in this country need to be safe.”—[*Official Report*, 20 January 2020; Vol. 670, c. 34.]

BBC's “Panorama” documented cases where councils house individuals, couples and families in single rooms. Kitchens and toilets are metres apart. That is not a proper living environment. Shelter estimates that poor housing costs the NHS £1.4 billion a year. I ask the Minister again: in the Department's review into permitted development rights, will he look beyond the numbers and consider the quality of housing being built? Will he work with colleagues to reform the legislation and make it a requirement in law that all properties, for temporary accommodation or not, meet minimum national space standards?

According to the House of Commons Library, local authorities have had powers to restrict permitted development rights under an article 4 direction at least since the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 1995. Changes made in 2010 mean it is now for local planning authorities

“to confirm all Article 4 directions”,

making it easier for councils to invoke restrictions on permitted development rights. In Harlow, the council should have acted earlier. Only in March last year did it seek an article 4 direction in certain areas of the town.

The issue has been ongoing for years, but there is another factor. The Library confirmed to me that,

“residential premises created from office conversions under permitted development which add to an authority's council tax base... count for the purpose of the New Homes Bonus payments”

received by local councils. So is there therefore very little financial incentive to take action to restrict the developments? That is particularly the case in Harlow, where the new homes bonus created a grant back to the council worth more than £1 million in 2018-19. With more than half of the new properties last year being office conversions, Harlow Council should do more to use the money to help individuals and provide security around the town.

Furthermore, sections 76 to 93 of the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 grant powers to the council to seek a closure order for a property on the grounds of either disorderly, offensive or criminal behaviour; serious nuisance to the public; or disorder near the premises. To be fair, the order is not a permanent solution. It lasts only six months, and other local authority closure powers are substantially limited in their scope, for example, to deal with environmental concerns.

Councils need stronger powers to take meaningful action against permitted development right conversions where they create issues for our town. Having said that, councils should do more to use the powers that are available to them. I believe ghettos such as Terminus House and Templefields should be closed down once and for all. Will the Minister ensure that the review provides stronger solutions to allow councils to deal with the issues that permitted development rights have created and that exist now?

The current state of permitted development rights raises numerous issues. First, councils take advantage of cheap converted office blocks to ship people off to the east, where they believe there is living space. Individuals with additional needs, who require support from their local authority, are being dumped in shoddy, rabbit-hutch housing, with the receiving authority having to pick up the pieces. There is no sense of a duty of care for the individuals. There is no notification and no extra funding granted to the receiving authority to provide resources, and certain parts of the country are disproportionately affected. In areas such as Harlow, the pressure on the taxpayer, local services and schools is enormous.

Vulnerable individuals are housed together in isolated areas, away from their support networks, creating a breeding ground for criminal and antisocial behaviour. Those trying to get their lives back on track must do battle with an unhealthy living environment every day. I urge the Minister and the Secretary of State to spend

[Robert Halfon]

30 minutes watching the BBC's "Panorama" programme, which makes an unanswerable case for the need for affordable and more quality housing.

The permitted development rights legislation has been disastrous in certain circumstances. The people of Harlow have been let down by councils and by flaws in the legislation that seems to support quantity over quality housing. They have been let down by the planning guidelines, which should give more powers to stop unsuitable accommodation in certain areas, and they have been let down by the fact that when the vulnerable families come through, there is no extra support or funding. I urge the Government and the Minister to take urgent action. In the 21st century—in 2020—we must put a stop to London boroughs' social cleansing and the building of ghettos. We must put a stop to it all. We must give local authorities stronger powers to shut down human warehouses and ensure our councils have a real say on office block conversions.

3.17 pm

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) on securing such an important debate. As in his constituency, permitted development rights have allowed the creation of poor quality homes in my constituency of Luton South in Bedfordshire—it is also, technically, in the east.

We have a severe housing crisis. Millions of people live in unaffordable, insecure or unsuitable homes. We have young people struggling to get on the housing ladder, renters stuck in unfit flats and families stuck on council house waiting lists. The Government are failing to get to grips with the symptoms of the crisis. They have not built enough council homes or homes that are actually affordable for local people. In the past decade in Luton, the council house waiting list has grown by 106%, but the overall number of council houses has reduced by 6% as a result of right to buy.

Some might see the converting of redundant office buildings to residential buildings as an attractive way to begin addressing the demand for housing. In some cases, it might make sense to regenerate vacant office space. However, the Government have completely misjudged the situation by incentivising the conversions through permitted development rights. Doing so has removed local authority oversight and simply provided developers with the opportunity to bypass thorough planning processes.

As PDR schemes are not bound by section 106 obligations, they are not required to meet quality guidelines, contribute to the provision of education or community benefits, or convert a certain percentage of flats into affordable homes. The Local Government Association estimates that in the past three years more than 10,000 affordable homes have been lost as a result of the rules. Research by the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors shows that although the quality of office-to-residential schemes ranged from high to extremely poor, overall PDR schemes were "significantly worse" than homes that had been through the full planning process. Only 30% of homes built under the rules meet minimum space standards.

PDR schemes are amplifying the housing crisis and undermining the processes that ensure that people live in safe and suitable homes. Many local authorities are struggling to find temporary accommodation to meet their housing obligations and so are pushed into using converted office blocks to house vulnerable people and families with children. That is the only option that many authorities have, but the Government must recognise that it is an unsafe practice, because many who are living in temporary accommodation come from a variety of sensitive circumstances. To be frank, vulnerable people with a variety of complex needs are being homed in tiny flats that do not meet quality regulations and lack the necessary amenities. That is a recipe for disaster; it damages mental wellbeing and is conducive to antisocial behaviour. The right hon. Member for Harlow put that point so well.

It seems to me that the Government have been asleep at the wheel. They stressed the importance of the "right homes in the right places"

in their 2017 housing White Paper, but in Luton the wrong homes are being created in the wrong places. For example, a number of PDR converted office buildings, such as Unity House, house families with children and are within an air quality management area along our four-lane inner ring road. That is allowed to happen only because PDR schemes bypass planning permission air quality regulations.

Another unwanted side effect of PDR is the harm that converted buildings do in relation to the regeneration and re-planning of town centres. Often the buildings that are converted are historic post-war developments with limited townscape and visual appeal that would have been strategic sites for redevelopment. In Luton we face that challenge in managing the town centre properly, given the spate of conversions in key locations, so when the Government proudly profess that 42,000 homes have been built as a result of the schemes, we have to question whether they understand that they are allowing the creation of poor provision.

Our constituents should not have to live like this. Local authorities are only working within the parameters set by the Government, and they have limited powers to act—usually once issues have arisen. Luton Council has had to implement an article 4 direction to remove the rights in certain areas. However, unfortunately for many of my constituents, the terrible housing has already been created.

We can never allow the desperate need for housing to be met at the expense of the quality of housing. We all deserve a home that supports our health and wellbeing, where we have enough space to live and where we feel safe. The Government must end the housing crisis by building homes that are safe, affordable and fuel-efficient and, crucially, that meet building regulations. I invite the Minister, again, to Luton South to see for himself.

Sir Graham Brady (in the Chair): I have been quite generous about the scope of the debate, given that there is plenty of time available. Before I call the shadow Minister to respond, I ask her to try to relate her remarks to Essex in particular—and the Minister likewise.

3.22 pm

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I will stick to the subject. I congratulate the right hon. Member

for Harlow (Robert Halfon) on securing the debate. It is timely, given the “Panorama” programme that we saw a couple of weeks ago. I hope that if he has not already done so, the Minister will watch it. It was very powerful. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins) on her contribution pointing out some of the problems with permitted development, not least of which is air quality. That had not yet been discussed, and it was interesting.

Permitted development is a symptom of the way the housing system has broken. The principle, as the right hon. Member for Harlow said, of making it easier to build housing, is clear, but the consequences since its introduction are obvious. It has not increased affordable housing, which is what we would hope for. The ad hoc nature of the development can be seen in Harlow, Luton and Croydon, and in Croydon it has meant overdevelopment of office space. There is now a gap, because businesses that want to come into the area cannot, as everything has been converted through permitted development. Also, a lot of quite unsavoury people are making quite a lot of money. That was obvious in the “Panorama” programme about permitted development in Harlow.

I think that permitted development was introduced to allow developers to bypass the normal planning process. It gets people off the hook in spatial terms, and with respect to the need for windows in flats, and it makes it possible for unsanitary, unsafe and unpleasant conditions to develop. Plenty of people have written about the issues and brought them to our attention, and many of the examples used are from the right hon. Gentleman’s constituency. Vicky Spratt has done a lot of work on the matter in the *i* newspaper, and has raised cases, including one in my constituency, where leaseholders have bought such properties through Help to Buy. So it is not only the planning situation that has made what we are talking about possible; the Government are also funding it through Help to Buy.

The Shelter report that came out of the “Panorama” programme was helpful and showed the scale of the problem. *Inside Housing* has been good at highlighting the issue, and has talked about the warehousing of poverty by the housing system—something that the right hon. Gentleman referred to. A good piece of work was done by Tom Copley in City Hall in London showing that only 0.4% of the new homes built under permitted development in London are affordable. More than half of the permitted development homes in London are smaller than the minimum space standard that one would hope to see.

Last year 12,000 homes were created under permitted development, and there were 5,000 in London. There were more than 600 in my borough of Croydon, but I will not talk too much about that. The Grenfell Tower fire showed how flawed the building regime system is. Permitted development is one part of the system that has created the problems described so well by the right hon. Member for Harlow. In total, 54,000 new housing units have been created by conversion from offices since 2016. However, in research by the Local Government Association it is estimated that more than 10,000 affordable homes would have been created under the normal planning process, but have been lost, because they were not created under permitted development. That is why Labour has committed to scrapping permitted development—not

because we do not think offices should ever be converted to residential use, or because we do not want more homes to be built, but because we see the consequences of permitted development, which are grave.

The Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors found that permitted development has

“allowed extremely poor-quality housing to be developed”,

with only 30% of homes built through permitted development meeting national space standards. As the right hon. Member for Harlow pointed out, in recent weeks Shelter and “Panorama” have exposed the impact of a kind of slum housing on vulnerable people who are placed in his constituency and elsewhere. The investigation revealed how different elements of the housing crisis are layered together to create a truly awful situation. Councils that already suffer the impact of record low investment in social housing under the present Government simply do not have the supply of genuinely affordable council housing. There are more than 1 million people on council waiting lists, and multiple failures in the private rented sector—whether it is the growing number of no-fault evictions, spiralling rents or poor quality accommodation—mean that more and more people are left with nowhere to go but temporary accommodation. Councils are left to try to find somewhere to house them.

Shelter’s investigation revealed that 90% of the £1.1 billion spent by councils on temporary accommodation went to private landlords and letting agents. The research revealed how investors were purchasing office blocks, which they would then convert to temporary accommodation without local authority planning permission, before charging them out back to councils at huge expense, despite the sub-par standards. In one case that was highlighted by Shelter, a temporary accommodation provider bought a permitted development block for £8 million and leased it to the council for £1 million a year for three years, before selling it to the same council for £13 million, making a 50% profit, plus millions in rent.

I will not talk in much detail about Croydon, because we are mostly discussing Essex, but it is the epicentre: it has more permitted development units than any other part of the country. I have dealt with many cases of substandard accommodation, including Delta Point, Canterbury House and Green Dragon House. Those have been converted, and there have been all kinds of issues. One instance speaks to the point made by the right hon. Gentleman about the buildings being built for paper, not people: we had a block with a boiler system that was intended for people using the office space in the day. It was nowhere near good enough for the hundreds of people living in the block, so it failed and people went weeks without water and heating. We had to step in to try to solve that problem.

Those of us here today—we are quality, rather than quantity—are saying that the system is flawed. The Secretary of State has accepted that it is flawed. The Royal Institute of British Architects has called for an end to the scandal of families living in homes that are smaller than budget hotel rooms. I hope the Secretary of State is having some second thoughts. The consultation was originally introduced to look at expanding permitted development, but he has made remarks in the Chamber and elsewhere that suggest he understands that there are problems that need to be fixed. The nature of retail and office space is changing, and traditional high streets

[Sarah Jones]

are changing, but converting everything into residential at great speed with no quality is not the way to help our high streets.

From our perspective, permitted development as it stands is better off scrapped, but if we are not going to go that far, I have some questions for the Minister. Does he accept that this is a significant problem, which is affecting a lot of people? If so, what does he propose to do about it? When can we expect the result of the consultation, and how does he see permitted development fitting into the solution to the huge problems of the housing crisis, examples of which we have heard about today from Harlow, Luton and Croydon?

3.31 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Luke Hall): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) for calling this debate. It is an issue that he is extremely passionate about; he has raised it in the House many times. He is a champion on this issue, regularly lobbying Ministers to ensure that he gets his point across. He has done so again, extremely powerfully, today. I thank him for his contribution.

The hon. Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins) made a powerful speech. She has invited me to come to her constituency twice in the last week. I spent part of my youth growing up there, and it would be a pleasure to come back to speak to her and to see the issues at first hand.

I take on board some of the points raised by the shadow spokesperson, the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones). The homelessness advice and support team have not heard some of the specific issues that she has raised about developments in her constituency, so I will ensure that that information is taken away, and that the team gets in touch with her local authority following the debate.

Nobody here today is in any doubt that the root of the issue is the need for new homes. We want housing for all those who aspire to have a home, whether a home of their own or a home to rent. A key part of achieving our ambition is to reduce homelessness, end rough sleeping and give people the homes that they need. Building the homes that this country needs, closing the opportunity gap and helping millions of young people into homes is something we want to focus on.

Together, we have delivered more than 1.5 million new homes since 2010. Of those, more than 465,000 are affordable homes, which includes 325,000 homes for affordable rent and 140,000 for social rent. We delivered 240,000 additional homes in the past year, which was the highest number in any year but one in more than 30 years. To build on that success, we have committed to deliver 300,000 new homes every year by the mid-2020s, which we will do by committing at least £44 billion of funding over five years.

We are reviewing the affordable homes programme, providing more than £9 billion up to March 2022, which will deliver a quarter of a million new affordable homes of a wide range of tenures, including shared ownership and social rent. The Government are also

lifting the housing borrowing cap for councils, so that local authorities can deliver a new generation of council housing. In addition, to help people to buy homes where they already live, last week we launched a consultation on First Homes. These are discounted homes for local people and key workers, and the policy has the potential to save them tens of thousands of pounds and help them take their first steps on the property ladder.

To support the delivery of new housing, there is a duty on local planning authorities to have in place local plans, which need to allocate sufficient land in our towns and villages for new homes, and to have policies that encourage appropriate development. Some 302 local planning authorities have an adopted local plan—89% of all local authorities—and 145 have plans adopted within the past five years. In the coming months, we shall set out an ambitious planning White Paper, which will continue the simplification of the planning system for the public and for small builders and make more land available for housing.

This debate links to the issue of homelessness, including in Harlow. Some important points have been made about homeless households and the impact that poor housing quality has on families, individuals and the community. We need to address that, whether in Harlow or any other town in our country. In 2020, it is unacceptable that anybody should have to sleep rough, especially at a time when we are enduring sub-zero temperatures. That is why we have brought forward our manifesto commitment to end rough sleeping by the end of this Parliament, rather than 2027. We want people to feel safe and secure in their own home.

On temporary accommodation, we always want to see homeless individuals and families moved into settled accommodation as soon as possible and on a permanent basis. The action that we are taking to increase the delivery of housing supports that. However, we do of course recognise the important role that temporary accommodation can play in the meantime, in ensuring that no family is without a roof over their head. We understand that there has been an increase in the number of households in TA in recent years. Although the overall numbers have been rising, the number of households with children has remained relatively stable since the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017—a groundbreaking piece of legislation. The increase in TA numbers since the Act took effect has been almost entirely driven by single households receiving help that was previously unavailable to them.

For the first time, the Act requires local authorities and public servants and the third sector to work together to actively prevent and relieve homelessness for people who are at risk, irrespective of whether they are a family or a single person. That means that more single people, who might otherwise have been on the streets, are getting the help that they need.

To help local authorities deliver their new duties under the HRA, we have created a specialist team of homelessness advice and support team advisers with expertise in the sector, to challenge and support local authorities in tackling the issue in their area. At the same time as supporting councils to deliver a transformation in their local homelessness services, the team has helped local authorities to deliver a 39% reduction in the number of families housed in B&B accommodation for longer than six weeks.

I absolutely acknowledge that my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow has raised particular developments in his constituency. However, we recognise the importance of providing self-contained homes for families in need, and permitted development rights can play a role in enabling that. It is easy to dismiss the value of a person having a house and home to call their own—I know my right hon. Friend is not doing so—and we think that permitted development rights play an important role in the system.

My right hon. Friend raised the issue of people being moved by councils from other local authority areas, in his case from London, and placed in his constituency. We are clear that, as far as possible, local authorities should avoid placing households outside their borough. However, in some areas where there is a limited supply of suitable accommodation, it has been necessary to place households outside their local area. It should always be a last resort—I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend on that point. Where it does happen, the council should place the household as near as possible to their home local authority. The local authority also has a legal duty to notify the receiving local authority of any households that are placed in its area.

It is important to stress that households have the right to appeal against the decision made by the local authority, if they feel that the TA that they have been placed in is not suitable. Collaboration between local authorities is paramount, which is why we welcome the initiative taken by the Local Government Association to bring together local authorities from London and around the country to try to address concerns about unsuitable out-of-area placements, including the use of blocks converted under permitted development rights. That will also help to deal with the concern that councils may be unaware of placements that are taking place in their area.

We completely recognise the particular challenges that London boroughs face in securing suitable temporary accommodation. To tackle those challenges, we have invested £37.8 million into a partnership of local authorities across London, which has set up Capital Letters, a not-for-profit company limited by guarantee that enables councils to pool their procurement activity in order to access an improved supply of good-quality accommodation to prevent and relieve homelessness. Capital Letters will reduce the use of expensive nightly paid temporary accommodation and ensure that properties are allocated more locally than they currently are.

Robert Halfon: I realise that the Minister has stepped in because the previous Housing Minister, to whom I pay tribute for her championing of blue-collar Conservatism, has sadly left her post. However, I say to the Minister that this is not a last resort for the councils around London that are dumping their people in my constituency. It is a first resort; it is the easy option. It means they do not have to pay for those people, and there are no strictures that say they must notify Harlow Council. The Minister may not be able to answer this question today, but I want to know what specifically is going to be done in my constituency to stop these things happening, and to ensure that permitted development rights are only allowed for five-star-quality accommodation, not for the kinds of things that I have described in my

speech, and which the hon. Members for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins) and for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) have reported to be happening in their constituencies.

Luke Hall: My right hon. Friend is completely right to raise the challenges that his local authority faces, and I know that the Secretary of State has visited that local authority to discuss the significant impact that it has been dealing with. The best thing may be for the new Housing Minister, upon appointment, to write to my right hon. Friend to update him about the Government's plans and the work we are doing. If he wants to meet me to discuss this issue further, I am happy to meet him, but I am sure that the new Housing Minister will be able to give him some satisfaction.

National permitted development rights for the change of use to residential continue to play an important part in the planning system and make an important contribution to housing delivery. Those rights are delivering additional, much-needed homes that may not have been delivered otherwise, and have attracted new developers into the market. As has been mentioned, in the four years to March 2019, some 54,000 homes to buy or rent have been delivered through those rights, which allow a change of use from office to residential. We are clear that permitted development rights are a worthwhile way of making better use of existing buildings and preventing them from lying dormant and unused, which helps reduce the need to build on greenfield sites. Those rights also provide flexibility for property owners and offer a simplified approach to securing planning agreements. Where there are local issues that residents feel strongly about, planning authorities can of course consult with the community about whether to remove a permitted development right.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow mentioned good-quality homes being created through permitted development rights in his constituency, and I am glad that he did so. We do not want local authorities to be in a hurry to remove rights; they should take the time to ensure that they are getting those decisions right. Harlow has already removed the permitted development right for the change of use from office to residential in parts of that borough, and rights have been removed from buildings in the area around the developments described by my right hon. Friend. The Government expect that all homes should be of good quality, including those used for TA, and should meet building regulations—of course, the majority of developers ensure that they do so.

Robert Halfon: I realise that my hon. Friend stepped in at the last minute, and I do not want to make things difficult, given that he did not know that he would be responding to today's debate. However, in my view, these places need to be closed down immediately, and as I highlighted in my remarks, there are some powers to do so. Could not the Government work with the local council to bring in special powers to close down these unsuitable buildings, which are causing misery for the people in them and the people of Harlow? We need action on this issue. I realise that my hon. Friend may not be able to properly answer me today, but could someone—whether he or the Housing Minister—contact me to say whether it would be possible to take emergency action?

Luke Hall: I am absolutely happy to ensure that that is one of the issues that the new Minister contacts my right hon. Friend about. Of course we recognise the issues that have been highlighted, which is why, last year, we announced that we would undertake a review of the quality standards of homes delivered through permitted development rights. Further announcements on that will be made in due course, and I shall ensure that my right hon. Friend is alerted and aware as soon as we are able to provide him with some certainty. However, I will be explicit about Government policy: an ongoing supply of new homes delivered through permitted development is important if we are to hit our ambitious housing targets while driving down rents and offering affordable homes to help people on to the property ladder.

These debates are vital. Some concerning cases have been raised by my right hon. Friend, which is why the Government are taking the action that we are. He has been a passionate advocate for change in this area; his points have been made loud and clear, and I will ensure that the Secretary of State is aware of the issues he has raised. I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have contributed to this afternoon's important debate, including my right hon. Friend, and look forward to visiting the constituency of the hon. Member for Luton South.

3.45 pm

Robert Halfon: I thank the Labour Members present, the hon. Members for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins) and for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones). There is a lot of unity on this issue across all parties in the House, and

the Minister has done a very good job of standing in at the last minute to respond to this debate. However, I urge him to make sure that the Department does everything possible to deal with this problem, because it is ruining towns and places for the people and families who live in them, including the people of Harlow.

The crucial point is about planning and the quality of housing that is allowed to be built, because these landlords would not be able to do what they are doing if there were strict rules about the size of the housing. Permitted development rights were not meant to be about temporary accommodation; they were meant to be about affordable housing, which is why I supported them. Although there was no vote in the House of Commons at the time—those rights were backed by all parties—I never would have supported them if I had known then what has happened over the past few years. We need the review of quality standards to have real teeth and substance, so that this situation is changed forthwith, and the existing buildings in Harlow need to be closed down, because they should not be allowed in this day and age. The Government, working with local councils, should take action to close those buildings down and make sure the residents in them have other accommodation to go to. We need to stop this once and for all.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered permitted development rights for office block conversions in Essex.

3.47 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 13 February 2020

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Maternity Services: East Kent

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ms Nadine Dorries): I made a statement on 28 January about concerns regarding maternity services in East Kent Hospitals University NHS Foundation Trust. I explained that I had sought reports from both the health service investigation branch and the Care Quality Commission and asked them to report back in 14 days. I have now received those reports and an update from NHS Improvement and NHS England and would like to make a statement.

The most important thing when having a baby is that you expect to receive the safest possible care. When things go wrong that lead to harm, it is devastating for all concerned. Therefore, I would like to express my deepest and heartfelt sympathies for the patients and families of those affected.

System response

The key partners within the health system continue to work with the trust to identify the problems in maternity services and to ensure that swift remedial and appropriate action is taken. We all want and need to know that the care delivered is of the highest standard we would wish for ourselves and for our families.

Diagnosis (HSIB and CQC)

The healthcare safety investigation branch has conducted a number of maternity investigations at the trust as part of its national maternity investigation programme. It has started 25 maternity investigations at the trust since July 2018, of which 16 have been completed. These have identified a number of safety concerns, including the availability of skilled staff, particularly out of hours, access to neonatal resuscitation equipment, the speed with which patient concerns are escalated up to senior clinicians and obstetricians, along with failings in leadership and governance.

As requested, the Care Quality Commission carried out an unannounced inspection of East Kent Hospitals University NHS Foundation Trust's maternity service between 22 January 2020 and 5 February 2020. The Care Quality Commission inspected the maternity provision at William Harvey Hospital, Ashford and the Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother Hospital, Margate. These two sites provide the acute inpatient care and the vast majority of the trust's maternity service.

The Care Quality Commission has written to the trust with an overview of its findings and the full inspection report will be published in due course. The CQC received additional information from the trust on Tuesday, following its request for further assurance on triage and day care and medical staffing. The CQC is considering this information and is in regular contact with the trust leadership to gain assurance of the required actions. The Care Quality Commission will continue to engage with the trust on all these issues and consider whether any further action is necessary.

It is important that everyone is aware that, the CQC is in regular contact with the trust and will continue to be so for the foreseeable future.

Robust actions in hand

From the findings provided to me it is clear that the challenges at East Kent point to a range of issues including having the right staff with the right skills in the right place, effective multidisciplinary working, clear collaborative working between midwives and doctors, good communication and effective leadership support. But it would be wrong to speculate that there is one single cause.

NHS England and Improvement are working very closely with the trust, and they have taken some immediate actions.

First, the regional medical director and regional chief nurse are providing support to the trust. The medical director will address concerns surrounding appropriate senior medical oversight.

Secondly, the regional chief nurse is providing support to the director of nursing and head of midwifery to prioritise and focus their local maternity improvement plans to address identified safety concerns. They will also review the effectiveness of clinical governance and executive leadership support, and this will include ensuring the trust is taking the learning from all historical cases and disseminating that learning throughout the trust.

England's excellent chief midwifery officer, Jacqueline Dunkley-Bent, has sent an independent clinical support team into the trust to provide assurance that all measures possible are being taken. This expert team includes a director of midwifery services from a CQC-rated outstanding trust, two consultant obstetricians and consultant paediatrician and neonatologist. She has placed the very best at the heart of the trust, on the wards, at the bedside of patients with fresh eyes to oversee the care delivered.

The independent team is working with trust staff to deliver immediate improvements to care and to put in place robust and comprehensive processes to support improvement in standards over the long term. This input will also support East Kent to meet the 10 essential safety actions set by NHS Resolution's maternity incentive scheme.

Along with the 14 day reports, I can offer further reassurance that Jacqueline Dunkley-Bent personally visited the trust two weeks ago to assess changes being put in place and that improvements are moving at pace.

Jenny Hughes, chief midwife for the south-east region, is also working with the trust directly.

NHS England and NHS Improvement regional and national teams will continue to work with the trust, with families where appropriate and with the intensive support team.

The trust's board is taking the issues seriously and is working closely with NHS England and Improvement. The trust has already implemented a number of actions to improve safety. It has created and filled several specialist midwife posts. Safety huddles, where safety issues are regularly and frequently discussed, have been embedded on both sites to anticipate problems before they occur, and multi-disciplinary teams work collaboratively and effectively within these huddles. A protocol to ensure that CTGs—records of contractions and foetal heart rate—are subject to a "fresh eyes" check by another member of staff is working well.

The trust has also developed its approach to working with families in the sad case of a death, to ensure that it always provides a point of contact and that it includes and involves families in its investigations of these incidents, from the moment a serious incident occurs.

Sympathies and assurance

A dedicated quality surveillance meeting with the trust, Care Quality Commission and key health system partners is scheduled for 21 February 2020 to consider the trust's actions to date and any further interventions required. I have asked for regular frequent updates plus a further update after this meeting.

We will never be complacent, and I can confirm to the House that I have had assurance from the Care Quality Commission that they are content that the trust is taking the issues identified seriously and has a genuine desire to make the necessary improvements. The Care Quality Commission also notes that the trust has a number of mitigations in place, including accepting NHS Improvement's offer of maternity safety support, and the Care Quality Commission will be closely monitoring how the trust responds to the issues that it needs to address and I expect to be regularly updated.

It is critical that we continue to strive to make maternity care the safest it can be and to ensure that we build a learning culture in the NHS as set out in the NHS patient safety strategy. This requires leadership at all levels. This is why I have sought and had assurance from each part of the health and care system that they will continue to work with clinical and executive teams at East Kent Hospitals to make improvements to maternity and neonatal services across all sites operated by the trust.

Once more, I would like to express my deepest sympathies for the patients and families of those affected.

[HCWS114]

HOME DEPARTMENT

75th Anniversary of Victory in Europe Day: Licensing Hours

The Minister for Crime, Policing and the Fire Service (Kit Malthouse): Section 172 of the Licensing Act 2003 allows the Secretary of State for the Home Department to make a licensing hours order ("order") relaxing opening hours for licensed premises (any premises with a premises licence or a club premises certificate) in England and Wales to mark an occasion of "exceptional international, national or local significance".

The Government have consulted on a proposal to make such an order to relax licensing hours in England and Wales to mark the 75th anniversary of Victory in

Europe (VE) Day. The order, which was laid before the House yesterday, will extend licensed opening hours from 11pm on Friday 8 May 2020 to 1am the following morning on Saturday 9 May 2020, and from 11pm on Saturday 9 May 2020 to 1am the following morning on Sunday 10 May 2020, for premises licensed for the sale of alcohol for consumption on the premises and for premises licensed for the provision of regulated entertainment.

An impact assessment has been prepared and will be published alongside the order on legislation.gov.uk.

[HCWS115]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Automatic Enrolment Thresholds

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): Automatic enrolment into workplace pensions (AE) has been a great success to date with over 10 million people having been automatically enrolled and more than 1.6 million employers meeting their duties. Over 2019-20, working people will save an estimated extra £18.8 billion into workplace pensions as a result of these reforms.

The main focus of this year's annual review of the AE earnings trigger and qualifying earnings band (the AE thresholds) is to ensure the continued stability of the policy while learning from the April 2019 AE contribution rate increase. We also want to ensure that our approach continues to enable individuals, for whom it makes economic sense, to save towards their pensions while also ensuring affordability for employers and the Government. The review has concluded that the earnings trigger will remain at £10,000 and both the lower and upper earnings limits will continue to be aligned to the national insurance contribution thresholds.

I intend to lay an order before Parliament following the February recess which will serve to amend the Pensions Act 2008 so that, for 2020-21:

- the lower limit of the qualifying earnings band will be £6,240;
- the automatic enrolment earnings trigger will be maintained at £10,000;
- the upper limit of the qualifying earnings band will remain at £50,000.

The analysis supporting the proposed revised AE thresholds will be published in due course. A copy of this will be placed in the Library of the House and will be available on the www.gov.uk website, following publication.

[HCWS116]

Ministerial Correction

Thursday 13 February 2020

TREASURY

EU Single Market Access: Manufacturing and the Economy

The following is an extract from Treasury Questions on 11 February 2020.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): Three years ago, at my first shadow Treasury questions from this Dispatch Box, I asked the Government about their plan to continue market access for financial services to EU countries after Brexit. Since that time, the Government's ambitions have faded from the wide-ranging access-all-areas free trade deal that we were promised, to a basic agreement barely covering goods. The Chancellor has announced this morning that he is asking for enhanced equivalence for financial services, which the EU has already ruled out and which does not even exist in sectors such as insurance. This is our largest export sector, so how is it that we are still waiting for a credible plan after three years?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman needs to get his facts right. The EU has not ruled out equivalence. Indeed, it agreed in the political declaration to work at speed on an equivalence decision by the end of July this year, and that is welcome. We are working very carefully and closely with the EU on having a broad agreement that will mean that our financial services continue to thrive—not only for our benefit, but for its benefit.

[Official Report, 11 February 2020, Vol. 671, c. 690.]

Letter of correction from the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the right hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid):

An error has been identified in my response I gave to the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds).

The correct response should have been:

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman needs to get his facts right. The EU has not ruled out equivalence. Indeed, it agreed in the political declaration to work at speed on an equivalence decision by the end of **June** this year, and that is welcome. We are working very carefully and closely with the EU on having a broad agreement that will mean that our financial services continue to thrive—not only for our benefit, but for its benefit.

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MINISTERIAL CORRECTION

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