

Monday
24 February 2020

Volume 672
No. 28



HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Monday 24 February 2020

HER MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

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(FORMED BY THE RT HON. BORIS JOHNSON, MP, DECEMBER 2019)

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OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-EIGHTH PARLIAMENT OF THE
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 17 DECEMBER 2019]

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

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 672

FOURTH VOLUME OF SESSION 2019-2021

House of Commons

Monday 24 February 2020

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: Before questions, I am sure the whole House will wish to welcome Tricia Hillas—she is in the Under-Gallery—as the new Speaker's Chaplain. Her appointment follows Rose Hudson-Wilkin's elevation to be the Bishop of Dover. Most recently, Tricia was Canon Pastor at St Paul's Cathedral. All hon. Members and others in the parliamentary community look forward to welcoming Tricia, and to the pastoral care and spiritual support she will give us. Welcome, and please enjoy!

Oral Answers to Questions

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

New Homes: Carbon Emissions and Energy Efficiency

1. **Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): What steps he is taking to (a) reduce carbon emissions and (b) improve energy efficiency in new homes. [900861]

The Minister for Housing (Christopher Pincher): Welcome back, Mr Speaker, and welcome particularly to our new Chaplain.

Homes account for about a fifth of emissions. Driving these down and improving energy efficiency are crucial to fulfilling our commitments to net zero carbon by 2050. We have committed to introducing a future homes standard by 2025, and we will respond shortly to the 3,000 or so responses to our consultation—it closed on 7 February—which proposes carbon emissions at least 75% lower from 2025.

Andrew Selous: British architects such as Bill Dunster are building competitively priced, zero energy bill homes today that not only emit no carbon emissions, but are massively helpful to poorer families, so what will the Government do to push our oligopolistic and rather luddite house builders to start building the houses of tomorrow, not of yesterday?

Christopher Pincher: I am obliged to my hon. Friend for his question, and I appreciate his desire to get the affordable homes of the future built today. Our recent consultation proposes a new householder affordability rating to measure a building's efficiency and ensure it is affordable to heat. I am conscious that Mr Dunster has an opportunity at the Victoria & Albert Museum at the moment. I am very happy to visit his ZEDfactory in Watford, because I agree with my hon. Friend that we do need new, innovative small and medium-sized enterprises in the marketplace to drive variety in our housing market to improve the absorption rate.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I welcome the Minister to his position. Of course, when it comes to decarbonisation of homes, we also need to look at pre-existing homes. In Glasgow, we have thousands of tenement properties with a prohibitive 20% VAT rate for repairs and renovations, which makes it very difficult for housing associations to carry out those repairs and help decarbonisation. In the run-up to the Budget, will the Minister join me in calling on the Treasury to make sure that it cuts the VAT and allows the opportunity not just for fiscal stimulus, but to look after the pre-existing housing stock?

Christopher Pincher: I am obliged to the hon. Gentleman, and I congratulate him on his attempt to guide the Chancellor in his forthcoming Budget. We certainly need to make sure that proper remediation takes place in existing housing, and that is something I and my colleagues are looking at.

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his appointment to this absolutely crucial role. Does he agree that one of the best ways to prevent carbon emissions is to make sure that the ancient woodland we have in this country is protected when new homes are allocated? Would he support the Save Tiddesley Wood campaign outside Pershore, which wants to make sure that new homes are not built too close to it?

Christopher Pincher: We have a manifesto commitment to more tree-lined streets. I would point my hon. Friend to the new Environment Bill, which will be coming forward. However, she is quite right: we do need to have green spaces and to maintain our ancient woodland. We all want to live in a nice and beautiful environment, and that is certainly something a Conservative party in government will hope to achieve.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): The Government's future homes standard would prevent councils from setting higher energy efficiency standards than national building regulations demand, while also watering down the impact of building regulations by allowing homes to pass the standard if their carbon emissions are reduced by general decarbonisation of the national grid, which will mean that homes can still be poorly insulated and meet the new standard. In what way does the Secretary of State think this is remotely fit for purpose as a response to the climate emergency? Will he rethink these proposals to equip our councils to go further and faster in reducing carbon emissions and to ensure that new homes will not have to be retrofitted in the future?

Christopher Pincher: I think that a target of reducing emissions by 75% from 2025 is ambitious. It is very clear that the more stringent targets we are setting mean that it may not be necessary for councils to set different local standards. We have had a consultation, which closed on 7 February. More than 3,000 submissions were made to the consultation from big builders to think-tanks to local authorities, and we shall certainly be listening to that and taking it into account.

Housing Supply

2. **Laura Trott** (Sevenoaks) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase the supply of housing to meet demand. [900862]

21. **James Grundy** (Leigh) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase the supply of housing to meet demand. [900883]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (**Robert Jenrick**): We have delivered over 1.5 million new homes since 2010 and last year saw the highest level of delivery in over 30 years, but I am determined that we go further by reforming the planning system and investing in infrastructure and new affordable homes to deliver 1 million homes over this Parliament.

Laura Trott: I thank my right hon. Friend for his answer. Can he reassure the House that this very welcome house building will not come at the expense of green belt, especially in Sevenoaks?

Robert Jenrick: We recognise how highly many people value their local green belt, including no doubt my hon. Friend's constituents in Sevenoaks, but meeting these legitimate aspirations must not mean that the acute housing needs of communities go unmet or the dream of the next generation to get a place of their own goes unfulfilled. Local communities wishing to preserve the green belt sustainably must therefore meet local housing needs in other ways: through gentle density, through reimagining town centres and through aggressively redeveloping brownfield land. I intend to encourage each of those.

James Grundy: Does my right hon. Friend share my concerns regarding Greater Manchester Mayor Andy Burnham's Greater Manchester spatial framework, which seems to threaten a number of green belt sites in my constituency of Leigh, while simultaneously not making these sites available for delivery since the landowners have made it clear they are not available for development?

Robert Jenrick: Due to my quasi-judicial role in the planning system, I cannot comment on the merits of the plan itself. I can say, however, that a number of hon. Members, including my hon. Friend, have made me aware of their concerns; even, I think, the shadow Secretary of State is campaigning against the plan. These matters will be looked at by a planning inspector should the plan reach submission.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): Flats have a crucial role to play in meeting housing demand, especially for first-time buyers. In London, the price gap between a flat and a house is more than £160,000, but the entire market for high-rise flats has ground to a halt, because the Secretary of State has repeatedly failed to publish flammable cladding tests and mortgage lenders have taken fright. Up to 600,000 people are now in unsellable properties, and *The Sunday Times* put the number much higher at 3 million private flats now exposed. So after promising the results repeatedly since last summer will the Secretary of State tell us when he will publish the test results and how he will fix this problem that sits squarely at his door?

Robert Jenrick: Like the hon. Lady, I am committed to tackling this issue. We want to bring about the largest change in building safety standards that this country has known in a generation, and we are doing that in many different ways. We have done it through banning ACM, the most dangerous cladding on buildings. We have done it through launching a new building safety regulator; there was no building safety regulator in this country, and successive Governments had failed to do that. I will be publishing the results of the Building Research Establishment's studies. The reason for the delay is that we want to ensure that the right studies are done and as much work is done as possible. We will be guided by the experts and by expert evidence. I will not publish results until experts tell us that they are ready to do so, and I expect that will be in a few weeks' time.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I am sure that the Secretary of State will agree that it is not just about the number of homes, but is also about the quality of those homes. Indeed, he has established the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission, which recently produced its report, "Living with beauty." One of its key recommendations was for substantial reforms to the permitted development right regime, so that in future all homes would have to have minimum space standards, would have to conform to the design guidelines laid down by the local authority and also pay a betterment levy, as laid down by the authority. Is the Secretary of State going to accept those recommendations?

Robert Jenrick: I was absolutely delighted by the findings of the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission. It is an important piece of work and, as I said at the launch of the report, we intend to accept the majority of the findings. I will be responding to that in due course. We must put the question of permitted development rights in context; PDRs have brought forward tens of thousands of homes that would not otherwise exist in this country, and that freedom is an important one that we intend to build on in the planning system. There have been a very small number of abuses where we have seen, frankly, unacceptable standards, including homes being built without any windows. I want to take action against those, because I want everybody to live in good-quality, safe accommodation.

Rough Sleeping

3. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): What steps he is taking to deliver the Government's commitment to end rough sleeping by the end of the 2019 Parliament. [900864]

5. **Caroline Ansell** (Eastbourne) (Con): What steps he is taking to deliver the Government's commitment to end rough sleeping by the end of the 2019 Parliament. [900866]

14. **Nickie Aiken** (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): What steps he is taking to deliver the Government's commitment to end rough sleeping by the end of the 2019 Parliament. [900875]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Robert Jenrick): The Government are acting to deliver on our ambitious manifesto commitment to be the first G20 country to eliminate rough sleeping. We recently committed an extra £112 million to the rough sleeping initiative. The funding is a 30% increase on the previous year. It will provide up to 6,000 beds and 2,500 staff across the country.

Bob Blackman: I commend my right hon. Friend for the action he is taking, but clearly the best way to reduce rough sleeping is to prevent it happening in the first place. The review of my Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 is due at the end of this financial year and local authorities need to know how much funding they will have in successive years to deliver that Act. When he reviews the Act, will he ensure that local authorities, in combating homelessness, abide not only by the letter but the spirit of the law?

Robert Jenrick: I would like to take this opportunity to thank and pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his invaluable work on the Homelessness Reduction Act. Since the Act was implemented, over 130,000 households have had their homelessness successfully prevented or relieved. We will be reviewing the implementation of the Act, including resourcing and how it is working in practice. Local authorities will now receive an additional £63 million in the next financial year through the homelessness reduction grant to carry out these duties. In the comprehensive spending review, which will set the multi-year spending review for local government, we will certainly take it very seriously.

Caroline Ansell: In Eastbourne, we will make very good use of our share of the £1.5 million from the Government to address this issue locally. Our winter night shelter, which is orchestrated by local churches and powered by volunteers and the generous support of local businesses such as Iron Maidens, will close its doors in a matter of days. Will my right hon. Friend meet me and other partners to look at what it would mean to seek to establish a shelter all year round?

Robert Jenrick: May I take this opportunity, like my hon. Friend, to pay tribute to all those involved in rough sleeping initiatives across the country? I visited many over the course of my six or seven months in this job and I have never failed to be incredibly impressed by their commitment and passion. I am sure that that is the case with the one in her constituency and I will, of course, happily meet her. The rough sleeping initiative, which the Government have pioneered, is working. Last year we saw the first fall in homelessness for many years, albeit a modest fall of 2%. I want to take that forward and I believe passionately that this is one of the great social ills that we can and will tackle as a Government.

Nickie Aiken: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the excellent work undertaken by organisations such as The Passage in my constituency is vital if we are to meet our manifesto commitment to end rough sleeping by the end of this Parliament?

Robert Jenrick: I thank my hon. Friend who, in her former role as leader of Westminster Council, played a critical role in taking forward these issues. I join her in praising the staff of The Passage, which is a phenomenal organisation. I have seen some of its work in practice. There are many great organisations in her constituency. I visited King George's Hostel in Victoria just two weeks ago and was incredibly impressed by its staff. The approach I will be taking as Secretary of State will be to bring together for the first time health with housing, because homelessness is not just a housing crisis but a crisis of addiction and mental health. By bringing them together in a co-ordinated fashion for the first time, I genuinely believe we will be able to tackle this issue.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): Nearly three years ago, a terrible explosion in New Ferry in my constituency left many buildings derelict. Local residents tell me that we now have people sleeping rough in derelict buildings, which is why I wrote to the Secretary of State on 28 January asking if he would meet me to discuss the situation in New Ferry and the fact that the Government need to help us. Please, will he meet me?

Robert Jenrick: I will be happy to meet the hon. Lady.

22. [900884] **Lilian Greenwood** (Nottingham South) (Lab): Today, it has been reported that the problem of rough sleepers seeking shelter in bins has surged in the last five years, and according to the Health and Safety Executive, at least seven people have been killed after being accidentally tipped into bin lorries. The waste company, Biffa, recorded 109 near misses in the six months up to December. It is shocking that anyone should be so desperate that they would seek refuge in a bin. What is the Secretary of State doing to prevent these shocking statistics?

Robert Jenrick: I would be very happy to hear more about the specific cases that the hon. Lady raises. We have a strategy; we are investing more than ever before—we spent 30% more than we did in the previous financial year—and the initiatives that we are funding are working. I am pleased to say that we are seeing the first falls in rough sleeping for many years, but we are not complacent. We believe that this is an important challenge and it is one that the Prime Minister and I are committed to. We hope that when the statistics for the November count are published on Thursday, we will see a further fall and a further move in the right direction on this issue.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): In Chesterfield, we have one-bedroom flats available, yet we also have people sleeping rough on the streets. The reason is that the benefits they receive do not cover the rent that they would have to pay for a one-bedroom council flat, so they are unable to take them up. I agree entirely with what the Secretary of State says about the value of hostels, but we could do away with the need for a lot of those if we had a welfare policy that supported people to live in the houses that already exist.

Robert Jenrick: The hon. Gentleman is right that this is a multifaceted issue. We have ended the freeze on the local housing allowance, so that will rise in the next financial year with the consumer prices index. That will help to make it more affordable for individuals on the lowest incomes to get into homes in the private rented sector, but we will bring together all parts of Government with renewed vigour—whether that is the Department for Work and Pensions, the Home Office or the Department of Health and Social Care—to ensure that we tackle this issue as never before.

Local Growth: Great Grimsby

4. **Lia Nici** (Great Grimsby) (Con): What steps he is taking to encourage local growth in Great Grimsby. [900865]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mr Simon Clarke): Great Grimsby is the Government's pilot town deal. We are already investing over £40 million across Government to deliver local priorities. We will provide further significant investment through the £3.6 billion towns fund and we have already delivered funding to help to develop local plans for Great Grimsby's future prosperity and growth.

Lia Nici: Will the Minister let me know what the Government are doing to address the number of vacant commercial properties on our high streets, including in constituencies such as mine?

Mr Clarke: We have introduced a number of measures to address the number of empty shops on high streets, including our Open Doors pilot project, which matches landlords of empty properties with community groups, and a proposed private register for empty commercial properties. We are also cutting the business rates bills of small retailers by 50% from this April for properties with a rateable value of below £51,000. That is an increase from the one third that we have delivered in the current financial year.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): Today, the *Manchester Evening News* reports on the findings of the Marmot review, which are truly shocking. It says that life expectancy has fallen for women and stalled for men, the likes of which we have not witnessed for 120 years in England. The richest men now live nine and a half years longer than the poorest and the equivalent figure for women is 7.7 years. The north needs not just a rebalancing of capital, but an investment in human capital. How can any levelling up address the austerity-led crisis so that the poorest do not see a decade stolen from their lives?

Mr Clarke: The hon. Gentleman raises a really important point. Clearly, the process of levelling up is not restricted to that of economic infrastructure; it is also absolutely about making sure that the life chances of individuals are realised to the full. That means, for example, making sure that our skills policy works, and the Government are committed to delivering a new national skills fund—we will announce more about that as part of the Budget process. It also means that it is really important that we get the process of skills devolution right, and we are keen to make sure that we work with strong local mayoral leaders to make sure that they deliver those budgets in a way that makes a real difference. This is clearly a long-term challenge. We need to make sure that we get the right devolution models in place so that such things as the towns fund and the future high streets fund are complemented by comparable work on life chances.

Local Government Finance Settlement

6. **Mark Garnier** (Wyre Forest) (Con): What steps he has taken to ensure that local authorities receive adequate funding in the local government finance settlement for 2020-21. [900867]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Luke Hall): This afternoon, we will debate and vote on the final local government finance settlement for 2020-21. The settlement is a huge investment in the sector, with a £1.5 billion boost for social care and the biggest year-on-year increase in spending power for a decade.

Mark Garnier: I am grateful to the Minister for detailing the amount by which he is increasing funding for local government spending, but Wyre Forest District Council has seen a 2.7% drop in funding, which is very disappointing. That is largely due to the fall-off in the new homes bonus. The council is doing its best to grant planning, but the problem is that developers are land banking. What can my hon. Friend do to help district councils that are doing their best to deliver new homes but are facing increasing land banking by developers? If his answer did not include anything to do with compulsory purchase, that would be terrific.

Luke Hall: My hon. Friend is right that Wyre Forest's core funding has gone up in line with inflation this year—an extra £46,000—but its funding has decreased due to the fall in new homes bonus payments, which are time limited and based on local home-building performance. It is worth noting that Worcestershire County Council will gain an extra £26.1 million this coming financial year and that across the country we see a 4.4% real-terms increase in core spending power, but we have committed to reviewing the new homes business and I look forward to working with him as we take that forward.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I welcome the Minister back to his place on the Government Front Bench. He is boasting that in the coming funding settlement he is offering a 4.4% boost for local authorities next year. Any budget growth is welcome, after a decade of decline, but he fails to tell the House that more than half of his figure is predicated entirely on every council in England increasing council tax and the social care levy by the maximum amount. Why does he feel the need to hide behind inflated council tax increases to present his good news to the House?

Luke Hall: I am glad that the hon. Member welcomes the increase in core spending power for councils around the country. I hope he will vote for it this evening to make sure that councils have the funding they need. This is a huge investment of £1.5 billion in social care. The Government are protecting council tax payers from excessive increases, as stated in our manifesto, and we will make sure that the 4.4% real-terms spending increase—£2.9 billion—goes straight to the frontline of local authorities.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): Of all my discussions in my constituency, it is the funding for the local council that is of real concern to me. There is not sufficient funding coming through to help Shropshire Council deal with the huge increases in adult social care costs. In addition, Shrewsbury is flooded today, and the council is grappling with that situation as well. We need more money for our local councils.

Luke Hall: I was pleased to meet my hon. Friend and his local authority recently to discuss the important points he raises. He will of course know of the increased investment in his local authority to deal with social care, but he raises some serious points, and I look forward to ongoing discussions with him about how we tackle these issues in the weeks ahead.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I call Barry Sheerman.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Oh, thank you, Mr Speaker. You took me by surprise.

Can I ask the Government Front-Bench team to wake up a bit? [*Laughter.*] I had rehearsed that line; I had to use it. I want them to wake up. Yes, local authorities have been starved of resources, and of course we all want money for local authorities, but we also want this Front-Bench team and this Government to put in place real incentives for a sustainable housing policy and for how our towns can grow and meet all the needs of our communities. We need sustainability—get on with it!

Luke Hall: I hope the hon. Gentleman will contribute to the consultation on the new homes bonus when it comes out. There is a real-terms increase in core spending power. If he wants more money for local authorities, it is time he put his money where his mouth is and voted for the settlement this evening.

Local Growth: Lincoln

7. **Karl McCartney** (Lincoln) (Con): What steps he is taking to encourage local growth in Lincoln. [900868]

The Minister for Housing (Christopher Pincher): The Government are investing £155 million through the Greater Lincolnshire local enterprise partnership's growth deals. That includes £13 million for the Lincoln transport hub and £5 million for Lincoln medical school. Businesses are also supported by a local Lincoln growth hub. Additionally, Lincoln is set to benefit from the Government's towns fund, which will provide up to £25 million of funding to support a thriving local economy in my hon. Friend's beautiful city.

Karl McCartney: How significant and successful does the Minister foresee towns fund project bids of a transport type being in my constituency in enhancing the attractiveness of the city and benefiting all by putting residents first as well as those who work, set up businesses, study in and visit our lovely city and its environs?

Christopher Pincher: I am obliged to my hon. Friend for his question, because strengthening transport connectivity is a principal focus for the towns fund and some £173,000 of capacity funding has been made available to his town deal board in Lincoln. Throughout the development of their investment plans, town boards should consider a range of interventions and commit investment to the priorities that drive growth and prosperity for their towns, and that, of course, includes transport.

Local Growth: Clacton

9. **Giles Watling** (Clacton) (Con): What steps he is taking to encourage local growth in Clacton. [900870]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mr Simon Clarke): The Government are committed to giving communities across the United Kingdom, including Clacton, real power and investment to drive growth and unleash their full potential. I am pleased that Clacton has progressed to the business case development stage of the £1 billion future high streets fund and will be bidding for capital funding shortly. The South East local enterprise partnership, which covers Clacton, has received £590 million through the local growth fund to drive regional development.

Giles Watling: I thank my hon. Friend for his answer, but I recently asked Cabinet Office Ministers not to overlook coastal communities in the south as we seek to level up between the north and the south. Levelling up is a laudable aim, but we should not overlook places such as Clacton, which, as is well known, has pockets of extreme deprivation. We need real and lasting support there. Can my hon. Friend assure me that the Government's support for local growth in my area will be the norm rather than a passing fad?

Mr Clarke: I can certainly provide that reassurance. I have vivid memories of the Clacton by-election, when I first met my hon. Friend: I get all the best days out!

The Government are committed to levelling up all regions of our country. I speak as a proud north-easterner, but I am very conscious that deprivation is not limited to the north or to the midlands. It is clearly found in pockets throughout the country. I can absolutely reassure my hon. Friend that wherever those characteristics exist, we will be there to act.

Housing Developments: Education and Health Infrastructure

10. **Rob Butler** (Aylesbury) (Con): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to ensure that local authorities include education and health infrastructure in housing developments. [900871]

The Minister for Housing (Christopher Pincher): I know how important it is to local communities for new development to be supported by infrastructure. In our manifesto we committed ourselves to delivering key infrastructure, including health and education, ahead of developments. The new single housing infrastructure fund will also help to provide the upfront infrastructure that is needed to support the new homes to which my hon. Friend has referred.

Rob Butler: Aylesbury has seen considerable housing growth in recent years, but many of my constituents have been unable to get their children into the schools that are closest to them, even on new-build estates, because of a lack of places. Indeed, their children may attend different schools in places that are very far apart. What can my right hon. Friend do to ensure that infrastructure such as schools and doctors' surgeries is in place before the new residents move into their homes?

Christopher Pincher: My hon. Friend has made a good point. Of course, health and education providers should already be engaging with local planning authorities about infrastructure requirements in the areas in which they should be delivered. The implementation of our manifesto commitment—I have already mentioned the single housing infrastructure fund—will build on that approach, and will ensure that we can deliver the health and education infrastructure that is needed to support house building. I spoke to my right hon. Friend the Education Secretary just as a few days ago about the £2 billion or so that is available to the Department for Education to spend on school improvements, and I shall of course be keeping in touch with him.

Taiwo Owatemi (Coventry North West) (Lab): Since the election in December, I have received countless emails and letters about our green belt in Coventry. In any upcoming review of the green belt, how will the Government ensure that local authorities can both deliver the homes that people need and protect our green spaces? Just this morning, Conservative West Midlands Mayor Andy Street called for more funding to clean up brownfield sites so that new homes could be built. It is important for members of the next generation to have the opportunity to grow up in a healthy environment

where they can play, explore, and learn about the natural areas in their communities, while also having homes that they can afford.

Christopher Pincher: We are working with the Mayor of the West Midlands to ensure that the right homes are built in the right places, through, for instance, a brownfield strategy. Of course the hon. Lady is right—we want green spaces that people can enjoy—but we also want homes that people can live in, and she cannot have it both ways. We want to build homes that people can afford to rent or to buy so that they have a stake in the country and a right to aspire to homes that they can enjoy and pass on to their families, and that is what this Government will deliver.

Affordable Housing: South-west

11. **Scott Mann** (North Cornwall) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to provide affordable housing in the south-west. [900872]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Robert Jenrick): This Government are committed to increasing the supply of affordable housing with our £9 billion affordable homes programme from 2016 to 2022, and we have committed in our manifesto to bringing forward a successor, which we hope will be bigger and better. We have delivered almost 52,000 new affordable homes in the south-west since 2010.

Scott Mann: My constituents are particularly excited about this Department's agenda, and they are pleased about the Government's commitment to delivering more local affordable housing. How will my right hon. Friend ensure not only that we are building homes for the future but that they are of a high quality and high standard?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As well as enabling people to get on to the housing ladder, it is important to ensure that the new homes we build are of good quality. It is unacceptable that new houses have in many cases been built to a shoddy standard and that some house builders have displayed poor service when house buyers find that they have problems with their new home. That is why I am today announcing a statutory independent new homes ombudsman to protect homebuyers from these rogue developers. Poor-quality builders will now have to pay compensation for shoddy workmanship, and house builders must join the new ombudsman scheme, so all house buyers will see swift action to resolve the issues that they encounter and builders must put quality first if they wish to continue to be part of the Government's Help to Buy scheme.

Local Growth: Burnley

12. **Antony Higginbotham** (Burnley) (Con): What steps he is taking to encourage local growth in Burnley. [900873]

The Minister for Housing (Christopher Pincher): Across the north-west we are investing £1.5 billion through the local growth fund. In Burnley, we are investing £1.7 million at Vision Park to help advanced manufacturing and engineering companies, £1.3 million for the Centenary

Way bridge work and £8 million for infrastructure development delivering new houses, jobs and private sector investment.

Antony Higginbotham: I think the Minister for his answer. New housing developments are vital, and an important part of ensuring that we have the housing stock that we need. Will he tell me what steps he is taking to ensure that housing developments have local support and contribute to thriving communities?

Christopher Pincher: My hon. Friend is clearly a doughty defender of his constituents and their right to ensure that the homes built around them are approved by them. The Government have made it absolutely clear that new developments should be well designed in a way that reflects local preferences, and supported by the right infrastructure at the right time. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has said, we welcome the report from the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission in this respect, and we will be responding to it in due course.

Local Authority Spending: Value for Money

15. **Gordon Henderson** (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Con): What steps he is taking to assess the value for money of local authority spending. [900876]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Luke Hall): It is up to individual local authorities to secure value for money in their spending decisions and to set a balanced budget. They have a legal duty to deliver continuous improvement and to combine that with economy, efficiency and effectiveness. Local auditors scrutinise their accounts, and my Department has ensured that all council spending over £500 is published so that local voters and anyone else can check that their council is spending its money wisely.

Gordon Henderson: I welcome the Minister's comments. With regard to value for money, will he investigate the circumstances in which Swale Borough Council's cabinet recently gave £1 million to a company called Quinn Estates to allow the council to take back control of car parks in Sittingbourne that it already owned, and for which it was not legally obliged to pay a single penny? In addition, will he join me in condemning Swale's cabinet for slapping a gagging order on councillors, threatening them with legal action if they dare to expose this shabby deal for council tax payers in my constituency?

Luke Hall: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. As I have said, local authorities are independent of central Government and responsible for their own decisions. He has raised serious concerns about Swale Council and of course, if he has evidence of financial irregularities, he should report it to the external auditors in the first instance. He may also wish to consider reporting it to the National Audit Office, and I would be happy to meet him to discuss the matter further.

Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab): Time and time again, it has been proven that local government has the most efficient public services, yet the largest pressures facing local government are in adult social care and children's services. Despite that, those services will still be cut. Blackburn has growing demand and limited resources.

The Minister may announce huge amounts of money but in reality that will not even cover the unmet demand or the rise in the national living wage. Sticking plasters will not fix the problem. Will the Minister please tell us what he is going to do to end this crisis?

Luke Hall: I will later today present our finance settlement, which the hon. Lady can vote for if she really thinks that there is not more money going to local authorities. There will be a 4.4% real-terms rise, a £1 billion social care grant, and a further £500 million that can be accessed, and the rise in council tax will be the lowest since 2016.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Does the Minister agree that, with the enhanced spending power that local authorities are about to get, they should prioritise care for disabled children? The needs of such children are becoming more complex, and we want to do more as a society to support them, so that should be reflected in the decisions of local government.

Luke Hall: Of course, it is for local authorities to decide their individual local priorities, but my right hon. Friend is right to highlight the fact that the real-terms increase in core spending power for councils up and down the country means that money can be invested in the services that local authorities need the most.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister said that councils are responsible for their own decisions. He is right on one level, but many local authorities are increasingly over-exposing themselves to certain commercial sectors—the Public Accounts Committee has examined this in depth—putting at risk council tax payers and the fabric of local government in their areas. He will know that some councils are at risk right now, so what is his Department doing to ensure that we are protecting council tax payers where local government is not doing so well?

Luke Hall: The hon. Lady raises a serious point about the effectiveness of some types of spending. We are working with the Treasury to review the Public Works Loan Board rates and flexibilities that local authorities have, and we will ensure that we keep her updated in due course on the progress of that review.

Local Growth: North-west

16. **Andy Carter** (Warrington South) (Con): What steps he is taking to encourage local growth in the north-west. [900877]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mr Simon Clarke): We are investing £1.5 billion across the north-west through the local growth fund, including £201 million in Cheshire and Warrington. We have also invited 20 north-west towns, including Warrington, to put forward locally led proposals to draw down up to £25 million from the Government's towns fund.

Andy Carter: What steps is the Department taking to ensure that local councils prioritise brownfield development over green-belt development and make use of sites such as Fiddler's Ferry, a coal-fired power station in my constituency that is about to close?

Mr Clarke: We are putting forward money through Homes England for the development of such brownfield sites. Our national planning policy framework is clear that local authorities should prioritise brownfield land but, equally, we do need to build the homes required.

Local Authorities: Levels of Recycling

17. **Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on supporting local authorities to increase levels of recycling. [900878]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Luke Hall): Our Department has regular conversations with DEFRA about how to support councils to meet the national recycling target of 65% by 2035. The Environment Bill introduces a range of measures to boost recycling, and we will continue to work to ensure that councils are able to play their full role.

Andrew Bridgen: North West Leicestershire District Council is running a 2,000-home trial of food waste separation, and more than 25 tonnes of food waste has been diverted from landfill since mid-December as a result. Given that a third of black-bin waste is food or food related, will the Minister confirm that councils across the country will get financial support to enable them to roll out food waste separation to all homes?

Luke Hall: I commend North West Leicestershire District Council on its work and note its recent “Recycle more...” plan. We recognise the importance of diverting food waste from landfill and will mandate weekly food waste collections in England through the Environment Bill, with DEFRA having committed to fully funding local authorities to do that in line with the new burdens doctrine.

Children in Temporary Accommodation

18. **Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the level of children in temporary accommodation since 2010. [900879]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Luke Hall): Tackling homelessness is a key priority for this Government, which is why we implemented the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 to prevent homelessness. The number of children living in temporary accommodation is lower than the 2006 peak and has stabilised since the 2017 Act came into force. Of course, there is more that we can do, and we are providing a further £437 million in 2020-21 to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping.

Bill Esterson: There are 6,000 children living in unregulated homes, often at great risk to their own safety. Councils have had their budgets cut by this Government, and children in care simply have nowhere else to turn. Six thousand children in care living in unregulated homes is 6,000 too many. When will the Government take the action that is needed to look after this vulnerable group of our youngest people?

Luke Hall: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. He raises an extremely important matter.

The Secretary of State for Education has launched a review to see what more we can do and what further steps can be taken. Of course, it is hugely important to make sure that we are preventing people from becoming homeless in the first place, and that is why we are increasing homelessness and rough-sleeping funding by £69 million in the coming financial year.

Paul Maynard (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con): Local authorities across the UK are placing unaccompanied vulnerable young people in private children’s homes across Blackpool without notifying either Blackpool Council or other statutory local agencies. What steps can the Minister take to ensure that any local authority placing such people in my constituency first notifies both my council and the police that those children are there?

Luke Hall: Local authorities should make other local authorities aware of it when they are placing out of area; of course, we would always encourage local authorities to place in their area wherever possible. I am more than happy to speak to my hon. Friend about the specific example he raises.

Local Government Finance: Protection of Children

20. **Graham Stringer** (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of the local government finance settlement for local authorities to deliver their statutory duties for the protection of children. [900881]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Luke Hall): This Government have recognised and responded to the pressures that local authorities are facing in delivering their statutory duty to protect children. For 2021, we are delivering an extra £1 billion for child social care and 4.4% into core spending power.

Graham Stringer: Andy Burnham’s inquiry into the abandonment of Operation Augusta showed a shocking scenario in parts of Manchester where children were being groomed in open sight. It also showed that before Operation Augusta was abandoned, and when the children’s department was working with the police, it was beginning to be effective in stopping that grooming. I simply do not accept the Minister’s answer that there is sufficient money now or that sufficient money will be provided. Ninety per cent. of children’s departments in this country are underfunded, and all the children’s departments in Greater Manchester are underfunded.

Luke Hall: Of course, of the additional £1 billion of social care grant, Manchester City Council will have access to an additional £30 million to use on children’s social care in the coming year. As we set out in our manifesto, we are committed to undertaking a review of the care system that will allow us to go even further and to make sure that all care placements and settings provide children and young people with the support they need.

I understand the review also made recommendations about policing, and of course we will be starting to recruit 6,000 police officers in the coming year.

Housing Ladder

19. **Anthony Browne** (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): What steps he is taking to help people get on the housing ladder. [900880]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Robert Jenrick): We recently published a consultation on First Homes, our exciting new scheme to give a 30% discount to local first-time buyers, which will help tens of thousands of people across the country to buy their first home. This will add to the 600,000 households already supported by Government homeownership schemes since 2010.

Anthony Browne: I thank the Secretary of State for that reply. Being able to get on the property ladder is a particularly big issue in my constituency—South Cambridgeshire—because property prices are so high, so I very much welcome the First Homes initiative. Can the Secretary of State tell me whether the First Homes initiative will boost the supply of new homes, or will it primarily change the tenure of existing affordable housing schemes?

Robert Jenrick: We hope it will do both. It will increase the supply of new homes by building popular support for new developments, but I completely accept that the housing challenges we face as a country are primarily supply-side. There is only so much that can be done through new demand-side reforms such as First Homes, which is exactly why, as a new Government, we will be taking forward important supply-side reforms such as those in my forthcoming White Paper on the planning system to unlock more land for development and create a simpler, faster and cheaper planning system.

Topical Questions

T1. [900886] **Andy Carter** (Warrington South) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Robert Jenrick): I am delighted to welcome my right hon. Friend the Member for Tamworth (Christopher Pincher) and my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government team. Alongside the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Thornbury and Yate (Luke Hall), who has responsibility for local government, we will be working together to get more people on the housing ladder, end rough sleeping, build safer, greener and more beautiful homes, and level up all parts of the country. I wish to place on record my thanks to my right hon. Friends the Members for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry) and for Tatton (Esther McVey) for their service to the Department and to the Government.

During the recess, many of our communities were affected by Storms Dennis and Ciara, and I pay tribute to the men and women of the emergency services, local councils and the many volunteers on the ground for their tireless work to help people affected. My Department is supporting communities to get back on their feet, activating the emergency Bellwin funding, and providing a financial package of support, including council tax and business rate relief for the worst-affected areas.

Andy Carter: Does my right hon. Friend agree that private sector building owners need to act more quickly to remediate dangerous aluminium composite material cladding on their buildings?

Robert Jenrick: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend on that. Work by building owners in the private sector to ensure the safety of residents living in tower blocks has been unacceptably slow, and I have been consistently clear with them that there is no excuse for their lack of progress. Today I am publishing a list of building owners who do not yet have a clear plan in place to remediate all their buildings. I will not hesitate in future to name others if they fail to demonstrate progress. Today I am asking the relevant local authorities to commence enforcement action against the entities I have named, and I will be supporting those local authorities to do this at pace.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): It is good to see the Secretary of State still in his place after the Cabinet reshuffle. He is serious about the job, and he certainly has a serious job to do, given that hundreds of thousands of people are living with the mental and financial burden of having unsafe cladding on their home, nearly three years after the terrible Grenfell Tower fire. Never mind his exhortations, he promised that all social sector blocks with Grenfell-style cladding would have that removed and replaced by the end of last year. Why has that vital promise been broken?

Robert Jenrick: We have taken decisive action to address the challenge of ACM cladding; we banned combustible cladding on buildings, and we have also brought forward the £600 million scheme, for both the social sector and the private sector. I am frustrated that some, particularly in the private sector but also in the social sector, have taken so long to do this. That is why I am taking the action I am today, as promised, to name and shame the private sector entities that have failed to take the actions that all of us in this House would expect them to take, particularly given that public money is being put at their disposal now in order to remove this dangerous cladding. I will take all the steps necessary to do this and I will do so as quickly as possible.

John Healey: We have heard this before, and frustration and exhortation simply are not sufficient. Social sector blocks are just the tip of the iceberg, and the Secretary of State still has not got a grip on those. Four months ago, he promised action against private block owners who are not removing unsafe Grenfell-style ACM cladding, but his own departmental figures show that 43 block owners—one in four—do not even have a plan in place. He has to do more to act, and that is before we even get into dealing with 1,000 extra non-ACM unsafe blocks. Enough is enough: will he now accept and back the Labour plan for legislation to make those private block owners do and pay for the remedial action, and put a stop to the scandal whereby vulnerable flat owners are having to pay simply to make their homes safe?

Robert Jenrick: The right hon. Gentleman is behind the curve on this one; he is behind the action we are taking as a Government. We have already said that we are going to bring forward the fire safety Bill, which was in the Queen's Speech and which will give fire and rescue services the powers that he wishes—I hope that

means he will be supporting that Bill when it comes forward in the coming months. We have said that we will follow that quickly with the building safety Bill, which will be the biggest change to fire safety and building standards in this country in my lifetime.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab) When?

Robert Jenrick: We will be doing that, as we have already said, before the summer recess.

John Healey: In draft.

Robert Jenrick: In draft, because this is an important and complex piece of legislation. As regards those buildings that still have ACM cladding, all bar a very small number of owners now have a clear plan to remediate that cladding. About a third have taken it off, about a third are in the process of doing so, and the remainder have a clear plan, except for the small number of egregious building owners I have named today.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): On infrastructure and community projects all across Scotland there are EU flags that proudly show where European funding has benefited those organisations. Now that Scotland has been dragged out of the EU against our will, we will no longer benefit from that funding. When will the details of the shared prosperity fund come forward? There was meant to be a consultation on it in 2018 but that did not materialise, so will the Secretary of State update the House on when the shared prosperity fund will come forward, to give clarity and certainty to communities?

Robert Jenrick: We will bring forward our proposals on the UK shared prosperity fund in due course. There is a significant sum in the European territorial co-operation fund—around £600 million—which I believe is what the hon. Gentleman speaks of. It is important that we get it right, so we will fully consult partners throughout the United Kingdom to ensure that we have a UK-wide fund that is committed to levelling up all parts of the country.

T3. [900889] **Karl McCartney** (Lincoln) (Con): Would the Minister care to offer guidance on whether town fund boards should be populated by the usual suspects who have appeared on local enterprise partnership boards in the past decade, or does he feel that we should seek a fusion of new ideas and new faces?

The Minister of State, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mr Simon Clarke): We are always up for new ideas. Town deal boards should be business-led and representative of their communities. We provided guidance on their membership and made it clear that we expect to see a business chair and the local MP on the board. We will set out a clear decision-making process for boards to follow.

T2. [900887] **Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Some 850,000 people are currently living with dementia, and that includes 2,000 people in my Oldham East and Saddleworth constituency. The typical care costs for somebody living with dementia are £100,000. In its Fix Dementia Care campaign the Alzheimer's Society has called for an additional £8 billion

to be spent on social care, including £2.65 billion specifically for dementia. What discussions has the Secretary of State had with the new Chancellor to ensure that that happens?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Luke Hall): The Department has regular conversations with the Treasury about all sorts of matters. We are investing £1 billion in social care funding, and £500 million is available to local authorities. I am happy to meet the hon. Lady to discuss that campaign.

T5. [900892][R] **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): Please may we have urgent reform of the planning system to prevent the preferential treatment given to Gypsies and Travellers to build in the countryside and to ensure that the planning system works equally for everyone?

Robert Jenrick: I have great sympathy with the issue that my hon. Friend raises, and it will be addressed in our forthcoming White Paper on the planning system.

T4. [900890] **Taiwo Owatemi** (Coventry North West) (Lab): Victims of domestic violence are often forced to choose between staying with an abusive partner or becoming homeless. What help are the Government providing to local authorities to ensure that no one is faced with that decision?

Luke Hall: The hon. Lady raises an extremely serious and important matter. On 17 February we announced £16.6 million for 75 local authority projects, for the delivery of support to victims of domestic abuse and their children in safe accommodation, helping up to 43,000 survivors. The fund will allow local authorities to maintain existing services until the new duty comes into force in April 2021, subject to the successful passage of the domestic abuse Bill.

Mr Speaker: I call Craig Williams. Not here.

T7. [900894] **Mr Richard Holden** (North West Durham) (Con): Four communities in County Durham benefited from the high streets fund, but Labour-run Durham County Council supported none of the communities in my constituency of North West Durham. Will my hon. Friend investigate the possibility of reopening the fund so that Consett and the three-town area of Tow Law, Crook and Willington can access that vital source of funding?

Mr Simon Clarke: I thank my hon. Friend for his question; it is great to have an MP for North West Durham who is committed to fighting hard for his community rather than grandstanding. Our £1 billion future high streets fund is key to levelling up the economy of all parts of the country. There will be a second phase of the fund and we will bring forward further details in due course.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): Earlier in this questions session, the Secretary of State announced a new homes ombudsman, which will be welcome if it has the right powers. Will he also consider requiring an escrow account for each new build property, so that a proportion of the house price can be withheld until the snagging is completed and remedial work is carried out?

Robert Jenrick: I will happily give that some careful thought.

T8. [900895] **Chris Clarkson** (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): People across Greater Manchester are rightly concerned about Andy Burnham's Greater Manchester spatial framework and its plan to concrete over precious green spaces. Does the Minister agree with me, and with local groups in Heywood and Middleton such as Save Our Slattocks and Save Bamford Green Belt, that the Mayor should have released a revised plan with up-to-date housing figures before the election, so that people had a chance to judge his plan for their communities before he asked for their vote?

The Minister for Housing (Christopher Pincher): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State answered a similar question earlier. Ministers have a quasi-judicial role in the planning system, so it would not be right for me to comment on the merits of this particular plan. However, the Mayor must meaningfully consult local residents in developing his plan, to ensure that he carries their trust. I understand that Mr Burnham will be in London again tomorrow, so my hon. Friend might have an opportunity to discuss it with him personally.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): Both the Secretary of State and the Housing Minister have spoken about building safety regulations, but what regulation is in place regarding the installation of lithium batteries in new homes, and will they meet me to discuss this?

Christopher Pincher: I am very happy to meet the hon. Lady to discuss the matter further. It sounds like an issue that we should consider.

Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con): After our third one-in-100-years flood in seven and a half years in

Calder Valley, the support package announced last week for the 1,187 properties that were flooded was a welcome relief. However, it appears that the match funding element of the package for those who fund-raise for residents badly affected by floods is not included. Can my right hon. Friend confirm whether the match funding is included, as it was last time, and whether it will be available to South Yorkshire before Christmas?

Robert Jenrick: May I praise my hon. Friend for the hard work that he has done on behalf of his communities, who have faced severe flooding over the past two weeks? We have worked together and brought forward a significant financial package that is comparable to that provided in 2015. I do not believe that anyone has yet approached the Government to ask for match funding for a charity foundation, for example, as happened in 2015, but I would be happy to consider that if it was suggested.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Later this afternoon we will discuss the local government finance report, but there will be no true long-term sustainability for any local authority until adult social care has been resolved in this generation. We have heard lots about the Government's desire to create a consensus on the issue. Where are the proposals so that we can start to discuss them?

Luke Hall: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that, on top of putting £1 billion a year into social care, we will be bringing forward that long-term plan this year. We of course look forward to those discussions in the weeks and months ahead. I very much hope that a true cross-party consensus can be reached, because we need to resolve this so that everyone has the dignity and security they deserve.

Syria: Security Situation

3.32 pm

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the security situation in Syria.

The Minister for the Middle East and North Africa (James Cleverly): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for bringing this urgent question to the House. We are deeply concerned by the crisis in north-west Syria, where the situation on the ground is deteriorating. Over 900,000 people have been displaced while fleeing the regime and Russian bombardment. They are fleeing northwards and being squeezed into increasingly dense enclaves. With camps full to capacity, many are sleeping in the open, in temperatures well below freezing.

Nearly 300 civilians have been killed in Idlib and Aleppo since 1 January this year. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has confirmed that 93% of those deaths were caused by the regime and its allies. International humanitarian law continues to be ignored, with civilian infrastructure being hit probably as a result of active targeting. As recently as yesterday, the White Helmets reported that Russian warplanes hit a children's and women's hospital in the village of Balioun in Idlib.

The UK has condemned, and continues to condemn, these flagrant violations of international law and basic human decency. Following UK lobbying, in August 2019 the UN Secretary-General announced a board of inquiry into attacks on civilian infrastructure supported by the UN or that were part of the UN deconfliction mechanism, which we continue to support. We look forward to the publication of the results as soon as possible.

We have repeatedly pressed—including at the UN Security Council—for an immediate, genuine and lasting ceasefire. We have called a number of emergency council sessions on Idlib in New York, most recently on 6 February alongside the P3, where the UK ambassador to the UN, Karen Pierce, reiterated our clear call for a ceasefire and our support for Turkey's efforts in the region. There is overwhelming support for that in the Security Council, and we regret very much that the Russians continue to obstruct the possibility of agreement.

As the Foreign Secretary noted on 31 January this year, only a political settlement in line with UN Security Council resolution 2254 can deliver a lasting peace for Syria. The UK will continue to support the efforts of the UN special representative for Syria, Geir Pedersen, to that end. We regret that the Syrian regime continues to stall the process, despite the cost to the Syrian people and the loss of Syrian lives.

Despite this political obstruction, the UK remains an active leader in the humanitarian space. In the financial year 2019-20, the Department for International Development has allocated £118 million to projects implemented by organisations delivering cross-border aid, primarily into north-west Syria, including into Idlib. This has helped to provide hundreds of thousands of vulnerable people with food, clean water, shelter and healthcare, including psychosocial support.

We have provided funding to response partners, including the UN, to pre-position essential supplies to support innocent families and civilians displaced by conflict and are supporting all our partners to respond to this humanitarian crisis.

Mr Ellwood: Before I begin, may I thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question? I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, and the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern), who I know also put in for this urgent question.

For almost a decade, we have seen the terrible events unfold in Syria and have occasionally offered a limited response to Assad's barbarism, but since August 2013, the west has taken a strategic back seat.

I welcome the Minister to his place. He and I attended the Munich security conference. I hope that, next year, we will have a larger British contingent. The theme at that conference was the failure of the western project. It was an admission of the loss of common understanding of what it means to be part of the west—what we believe in, what we defend, and what we fight for. Nowhere is that more applicable than in what is happening in Syria, where Russian-backed Syrian forces, as has been outlined, continue to adopt the same brutal tactics that we saw in Homs, in Hama and in Aleppo, causing so much misery to millions. The latest escalation has seen almost a million people displaced, including women and children.

As we saw in the reports on Sky News over the weekend, Assad continues his advance, deliberately bombing hospitals and causing infants to freeze in the cold winter. Yet again, attempts by the UN Security Council to secure a ceasefire are vetoed by Russia. The prospect of a bloodbath grows higher, as does that of a direct conflict between Turkey and Syria. The words come again from the west, but we continue to watch on.

May I ask the Minister to please answer these questions? Given the UK's P5 status, what is our role? Has Turkey, a NATO ally, requested any support? Indeed, has any been offered, such as introducing a no-fly zone to prevent helicopters from dropping barrel bombs? There is talk of a summit on 5 March. Is Britain even invited to that? What discussions has he had with our European partners, particularly on what options we can consider that bypass a stagnant United Nations? Does he now agree that the west's inability to commit to any post-military phase after the counter-Daesh offensive has actually given Russia greater autonomy in shaping Syrian events?

On the growing influence and power of Russia, does the Minister share my concerns that the UN will go the way of the League of Nations if its ability to adjudicate internationally is not repaired? Finally, is he not concerned that the west's growing reputation for hesitating is giving ever greater influence and confidence to non-western alliances to pursue their own agendas, as they know that the west is likely to respond only with words?

We will soon celebrate the 75th anniversary of victory in Europe, reflecting on a time when Britain did not flinch from its international duty and from stepping forward when other nations hesitated. If global Britain is to mean anything in this dangerous and complex world, now is the time to show it.

James Cleverly: I thank my right hon. Friend for those points. I was pleased that he, too, attended the Munich security conference, where I met representatives not only from the Syrian region but from the wider international community, which, as he says, takes the situation in Syria incredibly seriously. I very much regret the targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure by the regime and by Russian forces.

My right hon. Friend mentioned the history—the League of Nations. On Russia’s veto at the United Nations, there is of course countervailing pressure. It is better to have as wide representation at the United Nations as possible. The veto is part of the mechanisms put in place in 1945 at the creation of the UN to ensure that as many people as possible could be around the table, but I do not think that anyone at the time envisaged the veto being used to protect regimes such as Assad’s, which has been regularly targeting civilians and their infrastructure.

The United Kingdom is part of the small group on Syria, which includes Egypt, France, Germany, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the United States of America. It is particularly important that Arab nations be represented on that small group that discusses the situation in Syria. There is a challenge, of course, in balancing the UK taking what my right hon. Friend might describe as a more active role, and the need for a sustainable solution that is agreed both by the protagonists in the region and by the surrounding nations, but we are certainly making sure that the UK voice is heard on the international stage, and that our actions are felt on the ground, particularly on the humanitarian front. Since 2011, we have been one of the largest bilateral donors, and we remain at the forefront of the humanitarian response. To date, we have committed £3.1 billion in response to the Syria crisis—our largest response to any single humanitarian crisis.

The UK is, and will remain, a powerful and passionate voice calling internationally for a ceasefire and the de-escalation of conflict in the region, both at the UN and through the small group on Syria.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker. I also thank the Chair of the Defence Committee, the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), for securing it. I welcome the Minister to his position.

What is happening today in Idlib fills us all with horror and dismay, but it should also fill us with frustration, because it was clear that this stage of the conflict was coming. Seventeen months ago, in response to another urgent question, my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), the shadow Foreign Secretary, warned us of

“the terrible bloodshed and humanitarian crisis that is looming in Idlib,”

and spoke of

“the urgency for all sides to work to find some form of peaceful political solution to avert it”—[*Official Report*, 10 September 2018; Vol. 646, c. 466.]

We have not seen that urgency from the international community, and now we see all the terrible consequences of that. Hundreds of thousands are being forced to flee their home; innocent civilians are being targeted by Assad’s airstrikes; there is indiscriminate bombing of jihadist-held towns and cities; and Turkey is being

drawn ever deeper into the conflict—the number of its casualties continues to rise. Those are just the immediate consequences.

What does the Minister expect to happen once the Syrian Government forces are in full control over Idlib? Does he expect, as many analysts do, that the jihadists of Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham will give up on their campaign of territorial control and open battles and instead commit to a long-term campaign of terrorist insurgency and guerrilla warfare? How will he and the international allies respond to that development? What action has been taken on an international level to respond to the fresh humanitarian crisis in Syria, and to ensure that the innocent civilians fleeing for their lives and from the regime’s onslaught on Idlib at least have some safety and shelter to flee towards?

James Cleverly: The hon. Gentleman invites me to speculate as to what might happen. I am uncomfortable doing so. This is a complicated and difficult situation, and rather than speculating, Her Majesty’s Government are trying to prevent the worst of what is already a terrible humanitarian crisis from becoming even worse. I have already mentioned the actions that we are taking at the multinational level, both in our position on the UN Security Council and within the small group on Syria, and I do not think there is much more I can add to my statement on that.

With regard to what we are doing specifically in response to the humanitarian crisis, as I said, we have already committed £3.1 billion to this. Since 2012, across Syria and the region, we have provided over 28 million food rations, over 18 million medical consultations and over 12 million vaccinations. Our aid provides life-saving support to millions of Syrians, supporting refugees to remain in the countries in the region, and enabling the host communities to accommodate them. I think there is almost certainly unanimity across the House that we need a ceasefire and de-escalation, and for the regime forces, backed by the Russians, to stop targeting civilians so that a sustainable political response can be negotiated. That remains our position, and that is what we will continue pushing for on the international stage.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend to his place. From one still-Chairman to one ex-chairman, may I ask him whether, when we hear words such as, “There is no military solution to the conflict in Syria”, he recognises that what we are watching is the military solution to the conflict in Syria? The problem is that it is being written in the blood and the death of Syrian civilians, and our voice, sadly, is too quiet in that. I recognise that he has recently entered his post. I hope very much that he will inject life into Britain’s strategy in Syria, because there is an opportunity for Britain to speak out and to partner with important allies in the region and in Europe to make our voice heard, and I know that he can champion that. What is he going to do to make sure that Britain’s voice is heard even after this war is tragically won by a brutal dictatorship in Damascus?

James Cleverly: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments about my role in this. The challenge that we have with regard to Syria is the complex relationships between the protagonists on the ground. Our priority has to be to impress on the Syrian regime in Damascus, and its

[James Cleverly]

Russian allies, that the first thing that has to happen is that the targeting and attacking of the civilian infrastructure has to stop. We know that this is a well-established tactic. The brutalisation of civilians on the ground really has to stop: that has to be the precursor to anything else.

We respect and support Turkey's position. We hope that the language that we have heard recently from both Turkey and Syria about a further escalation of conflict does not come to pass, and that not only will we have our enduring commitment to humanitarian support, but we will push at UN and other levels for an international response that sees a sustainable, peaceful future for the people of Syria. But the first thing that has to happen is that the violence has to stop.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): The situation in Syria is quite simply a humanitarian catastrophe, with babies and young children dying in the freezing cold, and Assad's regime and its allied militias using rape and sexual violence against girls, women and men as a weapon of war. Western powers must not stand by and turn a blind eye to these actions. The UK ambassador to the UN said that what the Syrian Government are doing on the ground is

"protected by a Russian veto"

and called on Russia to

"end its support for this murderous campaign and the barbaric Syrian Government."

Russia's indifference to human life and to its obligation to protect it must be challenged directly. Will the Secretary of State respond to calls from my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), who called on the UK Government in his letter on 21 February and in this Chamber on 12 February to put pressure to establish a humanitarian corridor? We need deeds, not words.

James Cleverly: The hon. Lady is right that the humanitarian situation in north-west Syria is intolerable. At the international level, we have sought to maintain routes for humanitarian aid going into Syria. That has to be done with international co-operation and without Russian vetoes. She reinforces my—and, indeed, the Government's—concern about Russia's actions on this, and we call on Russia to de-escalate and to allow humanitarian aid to reach the people who need it through as many routes as possible. That remains our position, and we will continue to push this at the international level.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am going to run this urgent question until about 4.15 pm, so speedy questions and short answers will be very helpful. I call Mark Pritchard.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): On the issue of displaced persons, widows, orphans and refugees in camps in northern Syria, does the Minister share my concern that some of those camps—some of which are funded by British taxpayers—are becoming a refuge for former ISIS leaders' wives, who are running a new ISIS regime in those camps, making it a one-stop shop for the radicalisation of more people, including children? What is being done to ensure that the British taxpayer is not funding ISIS mark 2?

James Cleverly: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. The position of the UK Government and the Department for International Development is clear: we take a zero-tolerance approach to our funding being diverted and used to facilitate international terrorism or violence. We will continue to monitor the situation in these camps as best we can. We do not have a full diplomatic or embassy structure in Syria, for obvious reasons, but we will ensure that UK money is well spent.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker, and I thank the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) for asking it in the way that he did.

When the Minister describes the United Kingdom as "an active leader in the humanitarian space"

in relation to Syria, does he understand how that sounds to the Syrian diaspora, whose suffering we have discussed so many times in this House? As my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr Mahmood) put it, we knew that this was going to happen, and in that sense, we in this House are all complicit in what is going on in Syria. Every time a Minister comes to the Dispatch Box with nothing new to say and only regret, it is brutal for the people in Syria who right now are freezing as bombs fall on children's heads. Has the Minister asked the United Nations Secretary-General to go to Idlib himself, to show leadership on behalf of the world? If we can do nothing else in this country, can we not take in some more Syrian refugees?

James Cleverly: I have not had a chance to speak directly with representatives of the United Nations, but we have pushed and, as I said, our ambassador to the UN has made clear the UK position on Russian involvement and the Syrian regime's targeting of civilians, which is unacceptable; she has made that point in no uncertain terms. The simple truth is that there are millions of displaced people both internally in Syria and in neighbouring countries. The best thing for the UK to do is to ensure that the violence stops so that, where possible, people can return to their homes. That has to be done at the international level.

While I completely understand the hon. Member's passion for the UK to take in more refugees, the simple truth is that the numbers of displaced people in the regime would be impossible for the UK to host, and that that would not be a credible response to this situation. The UK is working and will continue to work at the international level to de-escalate the situation in Syria, and we will continue to help refugees in the region, as I say, in one of the largest humanitarian efforts this country has made.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): May I congratulate my successor on his appointment? In my opinion, it is the best job in Government. Apropos his recent visit to Munich, did he discuss with our German partners their ambition to think to the future and to start to build homes to which refugees in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan can safely and with dignity return? While it is understood that we should not in any way do anything that will support the murderous Assad regime, backed by Iran and Russia, will he assure the House that we are thinking about what will happen when the war-fighting phase stops, mercifully, and we can look forward to a future in which refugees can return home voluntarily and with dignity?

James Cleverly: I thank my right hon. Friend for his comments. I have to say that, having been called to the House to make this response, it does not necessarily quite feel like the best job in Government just yet, but this is a very important topic, and a really sensitive and important part of the world, and I thank him for the work he did when he was the Minister in the Department.

I did not get the chance to speak with German representatives specifically on the issue that my right hon. Friend has brought up, but I did speak with a number of European colleagues while at the Munich conference. We will ensure that the UK continues to play an active and engaged part within the international community both to de-escalate and, ideally, to stop the conflict in the region, and to build a sustainable, peaceful future for the Syrian people.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I welcome what the Minister said about the recent attacks on hospitals. He will be aware that there have been at least 578 such attacks on healthcare facilities, resulting in 890 deaths of medical personnel in the course of this conflict. Will the Government treat that as a war crime at the highest level, and in particular will they refute the suggestion from the Assad regime that all healthcare facilities in Idlib have been rendered inoperative and therefore are not civilian objects in terms of international humanitarian law?

James Cleverly: The international community has a long-standing position on the targeting of both civilians and civilian facilities, and we condemn in the strongest terms—as I have said, our representative at the UN has done so—both the Assad regime and the Russians’ targeting of civilian resources and civilian establishments. We also make it clear that, while there are concerns about potential terrorists and foreign national fighters in the Idlib region, this gives no cause at all for either the Russians or the regime in Damascus to suggest that the targeting of these civilian facilities is appropriate. It is not. We condemn it and we will continue to do so.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): One of the groups the murderous Assad regime now relies on is Hezbollah, supported by its Iranian paymasters. Does my right hon. Friend share the concern of a number of us who were in the region last week and heard from several sources about Hezbollah trying to replicate what they have done on the Lebanese border and stockpiling hundreds of thousands of missiles targeting Israel? Does he agree that that can only mean more bad things for the people of Syria and the people of Israel?

James Cleverly: I understand my right hon. Friend’s concern. I saw the reports of rocket exchanges going into Israel from Syria. Obviously, the Government want to see peace in all parts of the region, including Israel, and we want to ensure that there are no pockets for terrorists, which is one of the key reasons why peace and stability in Syria is such an important issue.

Sir Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): Following on from what was said by the Chair of the Select Committee on Defence, the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), what the Government are trying to do in terms of humanitarian aid is very laudable, but, as has been said, we are in danger now of

the United Nations beginning to look like the League of Nations. Is a possible solution the one suggested by the right hon. Gentleman: that we look at how we can use NATO and Turkey’s involvement with NATO to provide some sort of cover for the people of Idlib, because clearly the Russians in the Security Council are not going to suddenly agree to actions that we would like to see taken? It is not just about humanitarian aid and good words in the Chamber; it is also about something happening on the ground to stop the killing of innocent people.

James Cleverly: I understand the point the hon. Member makes. I think the international community would be concerned about committing military forces, which could have the impact of increasing, rather than decreasing, the violence in the area.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): We have stalemate in the Security Council with one permanent member saying “No.” What is the feeling in the General Assembly, which is an alternative means of getting some idea of what the UN really thinks?

James Cleverly: Unfortunately, I have not had the opportunity to test the position of the UN General Assembly on this issue, but I reinforce the point that we will continue at UN Security Council level and more widely in the UN and within the Syria small group to push for a de-escalation and peace in Syria.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): In December 2015, the majority of Members in this House were persuaded to give approval to military action in Syria on the basis of two assurances: that it would effectively end the Daesh threat of terrorism in the states of the United Kingdom, which has not come to pass; and that it would probably lead to a transitional civilian Government in Syria within about six months. I understand that the Minister cannot go into details here, but can we have an assurance that a thorough and honest assessment has been done and will be reported to Members in an appropriate forum to make sure that we understand that the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence have learned lessons from those forecasts, which turned out to be disastrously over-optimistic?

James Cleverly: The situation that we saw in terms of Daesh’s control of the ground in Syria is now completely different: Daesh has largely been defeated on the ground. That is for the good. Obviously, the current situation in Syria is far from what any of us would want, but we are now looking to address the issues, as I have discussed—the Syria regime targeting civilians and the support from Russia. However, I do think it is to be welcomed that Daesh’s control of large parts of Syria—at one point it controlled an area the size of the UK—is no longer the case.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): In 2013, we were asked to bomb one side in the Syrian civil war and, in 2015, we were asked to bomb the other. Do the Government accept that this is a war between monsters on the one hand, like Assad, and maniacs on the other, like the Islamists? Other than the Syrian Democratic Forces led by the Kurds, who are we supporting in this war? Are the Government now saying that we support Turkey’s invasion, which suppressed the Syrian Democratic Forces led by the Kurds, who were our only allies?

James Cleverly: My right hon. Friend makes an important point about the complexity of the situation on the ground in Syria. Members of the House, or people outside, who seek simple solutions—the idea that there are obvious good guys and obvious bad guys and we just need to pick a side—will be disappointed. What we will work towards is a de-escalation of violence, support for internally and externally displaced people, and a sustainable political solution for Syria.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Amid the grim litany of war crimes in the Syrian civil war, the continued deliberate bombing of hospitals is particularly shocking. I applaud the Government's humanitarian effort—as I am sure the whole House does—but the more we and international allies and the UN call for a ceasefire and are ignored, the more we demonstrate that we are completely unable to protect the civilians on the receiving end of those bombs. Have there been any recent discussions with allies about whether a no-fly zone could make a contribution to the protection of those civilians?

James Cleverly: We are pressing for an end to aerial strikes against civilians in north-west Syria. On the specifics of a no-fly zone, no-fly zones have to be enforced and the risks of military escalation in the north-west are in no one's interest. We are, therefore, sceptical that such a position would command international consensus, so we will continue to push, with our international friends and allies, to encourage the de-escalation of violence in the region.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Following on from the question by my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) about Hezbollah, may I ask my right hon. Friend—I congratulate him on his new role—what assessment he has made of the threat to Israel with the resurgence of Hezbollah in Syria? What help are the Government giving to the Kurdistan region in northern Iraq to deal with the influx of Syrian refugees?

James Cleverly: Conflict and political instability provide a traditional hiding place for international terrorists. That is one reason why we are looking to stabilise the situation in Syria. At the moment, the main concern seems to be in north-west Syria, rather than north-east Syria, where Kurdish forces have most recently been proactive, but we will continue to work with all our international allies to reduce safe havens for terrorism, reduce conflict and protect the people of Syria.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister, a few moments ago, I think suggested that he had not spoken personally to senior UN officials. May I urge him to do so, particularly Mark Lowcock, not least given that he is a former permanent secretary of his own Department and is playing a crucial role in this crisis? Perhaps he could discuss with him the situation of refugees. Although he said that they should stay within the region, Turkey has made clear that it will not accept further refugees. Other countries already have millions and he is making clear that Britain will not take any more either, so where should they go?

James Cleverly: The situation is that Turkey is already host to over 3 million Syrian refugees. The best thing we can do is to bring a speedy end to the violence in the region. Challenging though that is, that is the best thing for us to do to create a situation where refugees can return to their country of origin.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his position. I had the pleasure of working with him very closely over the past three years and I am delighted for him. Can I ask him to ask the officials at the Foreign Office to give him as quickly as possible a risk assessment of the possibility of article 5 having to be triggered if a pushback against Turkey, a NATO ally, happens?

James Cleverly: I thank my right hon. Friend for that question. Our desire at the moment is to reduce the risk of further conflict, particularly any conflict that might spill over international borders into a NATO member state.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): The Minister is clearly aware that there is great pressure on the countries surrounding Idlib, many of which have taken millions of refugees. He is also clearly aware that the situation on the ground in north-west Syria is dire and that it is often difficult to get humanitarian aid to those who need it most. So will he not reconsider the suggestion made by my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) that we take more refugees on the resettlement route? That is not the whole 12 million—she did not ask for us to take them all. She just asked whether we could take some more. There is no reason for us not to do that. Will he not consider that?

James Cleverly: The UK is, and always has been, a hospitable country and we do take international refugees. However, the idea that the UK taking some more refugees will fundamentally change the situation on the ground is unrealistic, so our focus must be to de-escalate the situation in the region, end the violence and stop the targeting of civilians. That is the only real, sustainable way to reduce the pain and suffering of the people of Syria.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): This House failed to act in 2013 and that was a real turning point. Since then, Assad, Iran and Putin have cynically, shamefully and systematically worked to massacre and displace civilians in Aleppo and now in Idlib, flagrantly breaking international humanitarian law, as I saw when I attended the UN peace talks in Syria. The truth is that we are not on the ground and there is not much that we can do, but will the Minister confirm that, behind the scenes, the UK continues to make a significant contribution to track 2 and track 3 negotiations and to holding Putin, Assad and Iran to account?

James Cleverly: The UK has been clear that the actions of the regime and its Russian backers are completely unacceptable and completely fly in the face of internationally accepted norms. We will continue to push that at the UN level and in other places to make sure that our position, and the position of our international partners, is left in no doubt in the minds of Assad and Russia.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): The situation is clearly deteriorating, and the Minister just described it as intolerable. Even though it is hardly believable that things are getting worse, they plainly are and there is an imperative to act, so what more can he do—what practical steps will he commit to—to protect the innocent civilians on the ground? Why will he not commit to taking more Syrian refugees as part of an international humanitarian response?

James Cleverly: I refer the hon. Lady to the answer I gave a few moments ago: the numbers of Syrian refugees coming to the UK will not fundamentally change the situation on the ground. The UK will continue to act with international partners at the UN level and at others to de-escalate the situation and to push to end the violence and the targeting of civilians, because that is the only real, sustainable way to address the situation in Syria.

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): One of the most significant abuses of the Geneva conventions and the rules of law has been the primary targeting of hospitals by Russian air power and Syrian artillery. Why are we not calling them out more by naming and shaming units and using the UN to do so?

James Cleverly: Our representative at the United Nations has spoken in no uncertain terms about how wrong the behaviour of the regime and the Russian backers has been in targeting civilian facilities and civilians. I am very proud of the fact that the UK has supported the humanitarian efforts in the region. We will continue to do so and have committed to doing so in future, but ultimately, the only sustainable solution is a political one in which the regime in Damascus and its Russian backers understand that their actions will not be accepted at the international level.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): On that note, the UK has a very proud history of standing up for international humanitarian law. What steps are we actively exploring to ensure that those responsible for this bloody war are held to account?

James Cleverly: As I say, we continue to work with international partners. We have made it very clear that the regime has stepped well beyond any internationally recognised bounds. We welcome the EU's adoption

of new listings under the Syria sanctions regime—18 businesspeople and two entities have been listed. The UK will continue to work with the international community to ensure that those who profit from the conflict are held to account.

Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con): I welcome the news that we have made such progress in combating Daesh as a fighting force. Will the Minister update us on whether the coalition remains in place to root out Daesh in the caves between Syria and Iraq in which they are currently hiding?

James Cleverly: The international coalition against Daesh is still in existence. Until that risk has been completely eliminated, I can foresee only that we will work internationally to achieve that.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): This is one of the worst humanitarian situations since the war: 6.2 million internally displaced people, 5 million externally displaced people. Surely it is high time this country stepped up to the plate and used its considerable influence with the United Nations. Will the Minister therefore consider having discussions with the Secretary-General to build an effective, broad-based alliance, so that we can begin a peace plan that will effectively begin the end of this humanitarian crisis?

James Cleverly: The Government will continue to work with international partners to seek a consensus, to address the actions of the Assad regime and to put in place a politically sustainable future for the people of Syria. I have no doubt that we will continue to do so at the UN level and others.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Come off it—we wield no influence that will restrain either Russia or the regime, do we?

James Cleverly: My right hon. Friend's question is characteristically pithy. I happen to disagree. We still have significant influence on the international stage and we will use it to ensure that this conflict is brought to an end as quickly as possible.

Points-based Immigration System

4.15 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement about the United Kingdom's new points-based immigration system.

Last week, I announced our plans for a radical new approach that works in the interests of the British people. It will be a fair, firm and fundamentally different system in the control of the British Government that prioritises those who come to our country based on the skills they have to offer, not on the country they come from, and it will enable the UK to become a magnet for the brightest and the best, with special immigration routes for those who will make the biggest contribution. We will create new arrangements for new migrants who will fill shortages in our NHS, build the companies and innovations of the future and benefit the UK for years to come.

As this Government restore our status as an independent sovereign nation, we will set our own immigration standards and controls as an open, democratic and free country. The Government have listened to the clear message from the British public and are delivering what the people asked for in the 2016 referendum and the December 2019 general election. That includes ending free movement through the introduction of a single global immigration system that prioritises the skills that people have to offer, not where they come from, and restoring public trust in our immigration system with a system that truly works for this country. That is what people voted for, and we are a Government who will deliver on the people's priorities.

We are ending free movement: that automatic right for EU citizens to enter and reside in the UK, which does not apply to people from other countries. Now that we have left the EU, this ambitious Government of action are ending the discrimination between EU and non-EU citizens so that we can attract the brightest and best from around the world. Our country and our people will prosper through one system and an approach that is in the control of the British Government—one that will also deliver an overall reduction in low-skilled immigration, as the public asked for.

Many of the values that define our great country originated in the huge benefits immigration has brought to our nation throughout its history. People from every corner of the globe have made an enormous contribution to the fabric of our society, which is why at the heart of this new single global immigration system will be a focus on attracting talented people from around the world and on the contribution they and their families will make, irrespective of their country of origin.

Last Wednesday, I published a policy statement setting out the new UK points-based immigration system, which will start operating from 1 January 2021 and will work in the interests of the whole United Kingdom. This will be a single, comprehensive, UK-wide system for workers and students from around the world. Our points-based system will provide a simple, effective and flexible arrangement to give top priority to the skilled workers we need to boost our economy and support our brilliant public services. All applicants will need to demonstrate that they will have a job offer from an approved sponsor. The job must be at an appropriate skill level and the applicant must be able to speak English and meet tougher criminality standards and checks.

We have acted on the advice of the Migration Advisory Committee to make the skilled workers route more flexible, as businesses asked for, and we have reduced the required skill level to the equivalent of A-level qualifications and cut the general salary threshold to £25,600.

The threshold for many NHS workers and teachers will be set in line with published pay scales to ensure that our public services do not suffer and we attract the talent that we need. Experienced workers who earn less than the general threshold, but not less than £20,480, may still be able to apply tradable points to reward vital skills and to bring us the talent that our economy needs. For example, a PhD in a relevant subject will earn extra points, with double the number of points for specialists in science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Additional points will be awarded for occupations that struggle to fill vacancies, and I am asking the Migration Advisory Committee to keep its list under regular review to ensure that it reflects the needs of the labour market.

The Government will ensure that talented employees from overseas on whom our great NHS relies can come here to work and provide high-quality, compassionate care. That means that we will prioritise qualified staff who seek to move to the UK to work in our NHS, as well as retaining our own national commitment—through the investments made by this Government—to invest in and train more brilliant nurses, doctors and public health professionals in our own country. The new NHS visa system will provide a work visa with a fast-track decision, a larger dedicated advice service for applicants, and reduced fees.

Like many other Members, I represent a partly rural constituency. Our commitment to British agriculture is clear. In addition to the reforms that I have outlined, I am quadrupling the size of the pilot scheme for seasonal workers in the horticulture sector to ensure that our farms and our horticultural sector continue to thrive. That is happening immediately.

We will continue to welcome international students who want to study in our world-class universities across the United Kingdom, and there will be no cap on their numbers. Those who apply will be accepted provided that they are sponsored by an approved educational institution, have the necessary academic qualifications and English language aptitude, and are able to support themselves financially once they are in the United Kingdom. When they have finished their studies, our new graduate route will allow them to stay in the UK and work at any skill level for up to a further two years. Let me also take this opportunity to reassure the House that the immigration arrangements for members of the armed forces, musicians and other performers are completely unchanged, and those routes will operate as they do now.

In line with the ending of free movement, there will be no immigration route for lower-skilled workers. No longer will employers be able to rely on cut-price EU workers. Instead, we are calling on them to invest in British people—as well as investing in technology and skills—to improve productivity, and to join the UK Government's mission to level up our skills and economic growth across our country. Those changes are vital if we are to deliver a high-skill, high-wage and highly productive economy, and because we have provided certainty in respect of the new immigration system, the economy and businesses have had time to adjust.

The proposals set out in our policy statement are just the start of our phased approach to delivering a new immigration system. We will continue to refine our immigration system, and will build in flexibility where it is needed. Over time, more attributes for which points can be earned—such as previous experience and additional qualifications—may be added, which will allow us to respond effectively to the needs of the labour market and the economy. However, to be effective the system must be simple, so there will not be endless exemptions for low-paid, lower-skilled workers. We will not end free movement only to recreate it in all but name through other routes.

The world's top talent will continue to be welcome in our country. From January we will expand our existing global talent route to EU citizens, giving all the world's brightest and best the same streamlined access across the UK. Reforms that I introduced last week will allow us to attract even more brilliant scientists, mathematicians and researchers through that route to keep this country at the cutting edge of life-changing innovation and technology, and the points-based system will provide even more flexibility to attract the finest international minds with the most to offer. Alongside the employer-led system, we will create a points-based unsponsored route to allow a limited number of the world's most highly skilled people to come here without a job offer as part of the phased approach, if they can secure enough points.

Our new fair and firm immigration system will send a message to the whole world that Britain is open for business as we continue to attract the brightest and best from around the world, but with a system that the British Government have control over. Our blueprint for taking back control will transform the way in which people come to our country to work, study, visit or even join their family. Our new independence will strengthen border security, allowing us to reject insecure identity documents from newly arriving migrants. We will be able to do more to keep out criminals who seek to do harm to our people, communities and country.

Finally, I am pleased to say that when it comes to EU citizens already in the UK, the EU settlement scheme—the biggest scheme of its kind ever in British history—has already received 3.2 million applications resulting in 2.8 million grants of status. Through this system, we will finally develop a true meritocracy where anyone with the skills who wants to come here will have the ability to do so. This is just the start of a phased approach to delivering a new system. I will shortly be bringing forward an immigration Bill and radically overhauling and simplifying the complex immigration rules that have really dominated the system over a number of decades. For the first time in decades, the UK will have control over who comes here and how our immigration system works. I commend this statement to the House.

4.26 pm

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Streatham) (Lab): I would like to thank the Home Secretary for giving me early sight of this statement. She and the Government call this a points-based immigration system, but Professor Alan Manning, the departing chair of the Migration Advisory Committee, has derided this and called it a “soundbite”—that is, meaningless phraseology. The truth is that the Government are introducing a set of restrictions on migration for work including the damaging salary threshold,

but that is not the sole restriction. Workers earning below the salary threshold are not low skilled at all. There is no such thing as low-skilled work: just low-paid work. All work is skilled when it is done well. In fact, outside London and the south-east, they are the majority of workers. Again, they are underpaid, not low skilled. In trying to exclude their overseas recruitment, Ministers run the risk of doing even greater damage to our public services than they have done already.

Ministers must surely be aware that a key problem for the NHS is, as its leaders tell us, that the exit door is closed. Patients who are well enough to be discharged from hospitals are not being discharged, because they lack access to social care packages. Blocking the overseas recruitment of social care workers who are generally paid well below the threshold will cause major problems with social care. It is already in crisis and this will exacerbate the existing problems in the NHS, yet Ministers seem unconcerned. I must mention the need for the new NHS-specific visa. Surely the obvious thing would have been to create points for NHS jobs in the new system, but then I suppose the Government would have to admit that the salary threshold was simply not feasible and that the system just would not work. This is certainly not a single global immigration system, and it has already been proved that a number of exemptions will be needed to make it work.

Social care and the NHS are not the only areas that will be hit. The Government tell us that the unemployment rate is currently close to its lowest, but that completely contradicts Ministers' suggestions that immigration causes unemployment or creates slack conditions in the labour market, leading to low pay. The Home Secretary seems to believe that the gaps can be filled by the economically inactive, but I strongly doubt that the Government intend to get carers, the elderly and students into work by raising their wages. It is more likely that they will cut benefits once again. Many employers report that they will struggle to fill vacancies or even to close the gap caused by the departing EU workers, who will now lose their rights under the system.

The requirement to speak English is a complete red herring. This is dog-whistle politics. Most people who come here to work—the Government's system will demand that they have a specific job offer—come here with some English language skills and learn more as they go along. It is difficult to function in the labour market without any English at all, which is why they already speak English when they come here. Do the Government intend to split up families where the spouse or child has less-than-perfect English? This would be cruel and inhumane. Do the Government also intend to block the recruitment of scientists, mathematicians and IT specialists, for example, if they have less-than-perfect English? If so, that will completely undermine Ministers' boasts about global Britain recruiting the brightest and best. In fact, the policy will tend towards recruiting only the most desperate if their spouse would be blocked from coming, because others may find employment in a country in which their spouse can reside.

What of the right to a family life in general? Will the new work visas allow that right? If not, which scientist or person with a PhD would not choose a country that allows the right to a family life? There is also no justification for denying access to public funds for years. If someone is working here, they are paying taxes, and

[Bell Ribeiro-Addy]

they and their family should have access to the benefits paid for by those taxes, including working tax credits and access to the NHS. Have Ministers considered the public health implications of restricting access to the NHS in that way, even if they are unable to consider the human costs? What about spouses who become victims of domestic abuse being denied access to refuges? That is shameful.

Finally, I want to address a grave concern shared by many Opposition Members regarding workers and citizens' rights. We cannot accept that work visas are tied to specific employers and want reassurances that that will not be the case. Otherwise, the Government will be creating conditions of bonded employment, where the threat of dismissal implies the threat of deportation. That would be disastrous for migrant workers and their families and detrimental to the interests of the entire workforce.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am expecting to run this statement until around five o'clock.

Priti Patel: I welcome the hon. Lady to her new position and wish her every success in the role. However, I am a little disappointed, because it sounds like she has not actually read the policy statement, and she has used her remarks to conflate—[*Interruption.*] If the Leader of the Opposition will allow me to continue, instead of being rude and interrupting, I will come on to address the specific points. He should have the courtesy and the patience to listen. I appreciate that he is in a hurry—

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): Don't put her down.

Priti Patel: I was not putting her down at all. If the right hon. Gentleman will listen, the hon. Lady was obviously conflating several issues with a new immigration system that, as I have clearly outlined, is a phased approach that focuses on skills, not on aspects of family reunion, benefits, welfare, or access to public funds—

Bell Ribeiro-Addy *indicated dissent.*

Priti Patel: The hon. Lady may shake her head in disagreement, but the policy is fundamentally set alongside the fact that we have left the EU. This is about an immigration policy in the control of a British Government, not subject to EU laws, EU policies and EU alignment. That is a fundamental shift and a fundamental change. This system is about taking back control, as the British Government have said, of our borders and ensuring that we can get the brightest and best through a tiered, points-based approach, as outlined in the policy statement.

The system will end the reliance on low-skilled workers and, importantly, the hon. Lady should join the Government in welcoming our collective mission to ensure that people are paid higher wages. We want a high-skilled economy, not a low-pay economy. As for social care, social care is not at all about low-skilled work. People working in social care should be paid properly, and it is right that businesses and employers invest in skills to provide the necessary compassionate care.

It strikes me that the Labour party seems to have closed its ears to the remarks of the British public in the general election and the 2016 referendum and is basically still the party that is advocating open borders and for a free-for-all on immigration.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I am enormously pleased that my right hon. Friend is here in this job. She is doing brilliantly, and all of us here believe that for certain. On the migration policy that she has announced over the past week, will she confirm that the reality is that many of our constituents are concerned about the scale of migration? They are not anti-migrant. With net migration at over 1 million over three years and now responsible for about 80% of all population growth, the scale is unprecedented. Given all that and the costs and benefits, will she now confirm that the purpose of the policy is ultimately to bring the scale of that migration down to manageable levels?

Priti Patel: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Government have been very clear and have listened to the messages from the 2016 referendum and the general election. Of course, this is about ensuring that the brightest and the best come here.

Through a points-based system, the British Government will have control over immigration and numbers. We will reduce numbers, in due course, for the long term, but we will also bring in new checks and measures, which is what the British public have been calling for. They want to know the Government are in control of a system that brings in tighter checks and tighter regulations. Yes, the system should not be closed for business—it should be open for business—and it should bring in the brightest and the best. The system should deal with some of the issues in getting numbers down, but it should also address the other routes in terms of EU migrants and the criminality checks that desperately need to be brought in.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): Despite lots of competition, this pretend points-based system surely amounts to one of the most damaging, unimaginative and unpopular policy announcements made by a Home Secretary in recent years. Do not get me wrong: it will be fine for the big multinational companies in the City with their armies of immigration lawyers, but it will be a disaster for everybody else.

Surely the Home Secretary regrets that her paper insults half the population by characterising their hard work as “cheap” unskilled labour and, indeed, by insinuating that their work could just as easily be done by the long-term sick or by robots. Why have employers been given just a few months to prepare for these massive changes when the Home Office took three and a half years just to dream them up? Will she listen to the swathes of industry leaders telling her it will be impossible to fill vacancies because of the salary thresholds? Will she listen to the employers who are worried about being mired in the red tape and expense of sponsorship and visa processes?

Why has the Home Secretary removed even the half-baked temporary worker scheme that was meant to operate as a transitional measure? Why is there no provision for self-employed workers? What has happened

to the remote areas pilot scheme promised by her predecessor and to the heavily trailed extra points that were to be on offer for working outside London? And why has she said nothing about the tens of thousands of extra families that will be destroyed if she extends the UK's barbaric family migration rules to their relationships? Is that her plan?

This will be disastrous across all manner of key sectors in Scotland, from agriculture to hospitality, from fishing to manufacturing and from construction to social care. Free movement was the one part of the migration system that actually worked for Scotland. Does the Home Secretary even understand the basic point that reducing migration is a disastrous policy goal for Scotland? Has she read the Scottish Government's paper on a Scottish visa, and will she finally commit to engaging on those proposals in good faith?

Priti Patel: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. First of all, it is important to recognise that the new points-based system will work in the interests of the whole United Kingdom, which does include Scotland. Independent experts, including the Migration Advisory Committee, have recommended that a single, less restrictive system is absolutely right and is essential to attract the brightest and the best. Of course, we are already working with stakeholders across the country on how the system will work and how it will support all communities. I have already touched on various sectors, including seasonal agricultural workers.

The hon. Gentleman specifically asked about businesses. We are introducing greater flexibility for businesses, and those businesses that have engaged with the Home Office—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Gentleman may shake his head in disagreement, but the business community specifically asked for a number of factors, including: abolishing the resident labour market test; removing the cap on the number of skilled workers; and reducing the salary threshold, as it has been.

We have reformed the exceptional talent route, and we are working on a simpler, streamlined sponsorship process, both of which businesses asked for. We also aim to reduce the time taken to process visas. Skilled workers will also be able to switch easily between employers through a sponsor licence, which is effectively what businesses have asked for. We have delivered on that through this system.

It is fair to say that businesses have not only been engaged. The chief executive of Hays, the recruitment giant, recently said:

“To build a world-class economy, our businesses need access to world-class talent and not just originating from...the EU.”

I have a final point to make to the Scottish nationalists. I appreciate that we have been engaging and we have had dialogue with them, but it is important right now that the Migration Advisory Committee—*[Interruption.]* If the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) just stops chuntering and lets me make this point—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. We do not conduct debates while sitting.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab) The clock.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I can see the clock. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for pointing out the clock—thank you very much indeed.

Priti Patel: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. The MAC has stated that we should have a single UK immigration policy, one based on one system that will benefit every single part of the United Kingdom.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Well done to the Home Secretary on taking back control of our borders and ending low-pay migration. Will she confirm that 10 months is more than enough time for talented officials in the Home Office to implement this excellent scheme, as she, the public and the Government want?

Priti Patel: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right; the talented teams who have been working on this policy area have absolutely helped us to deliver this in our first 100 days as a new Government. We promised that we would deliver the people's priorities, and that is exactly what we are doing.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The Home Secretary has said that she wants the new visa scheme to be in place from January 2021. The policy document also says that the deadline for the EU settlement scheme for EU citizens already living here is June 2021, and that until then employers will only be expected to and allowed to check whether someone has an EU passport. Will she therefore confirm that the Home Office does not intend to enforce the new scheme through or with employers for the first six months? If it does intend to enforce it, what is she expecting employers to check?

Priti Patel: The right hon. Lady is right about the deadlines and the timeframe for the EU settlement scheme, and also in saying that by January 2021 we will have established the outline—the first phase—of the points-based system. We are in the process of working with employers. Going back to the comment made just now by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), we are engaging with employers on the system, the sponsorship route and the way in which employers in the UK work with those who will be coming over from the EU next year so that they have that period to confirm their status and carry on working. We are engaging with employers, and that is my answer.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): Our excellent Home Secretary had two fundamental questions to answer today: was she going to reflect the democratic will of 70% to 80% of the British public, not to do away with immigration, but to control and manage it properly, and was she going to do it in a way that worked in the national interest, for all of us and all the immigrants who come here to work and give our country the skills that they carry? Is she as surprised as me that the primary thrust of both Opposition spokesmen seems to be to allow British profit-making companies to maximise their access to cheap labour?

Priti Patel: In short, I am not surprised by the position that the Opposition have taken, and it shows once again the contempt they have been showing to the British public.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): The Home Secretary has said that additional points will be awarded for occupations that struggle to fill vacancies. In the tech sector, jobs are often lower paid at the start and ill-defined—they do not actually have a job title. So how will she ensure that the MAC recognises those emerging jobs and can act in real time?

Priti Patel: The hon. Lady is right; our economy and labour market are changing, thanks to technology and emerging skills that may not even be reflected in the discussion and debate that we are having today. That is why we will be looking to bring in, from next year, a tradeable points system, which recognises not only talent and skills, but the role the MAC has to play in assessing the labour market. This is fundamentally changing the way in which we look at the labour market and emerging sectors, whether in new technology or other sectors, where we know we will need to surge people and their skills. Obviously, that work will take place with the MAC.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) was right to point out that the clock is ticking. It is not going any faster than it normally does, but this statement is going rather slower, because questions have been rather long. When a question is long, the Minister has to give a long answer in order to answer the whole question. Therefore, let us all try to have shorter questions, so that the Minister can give shorter answers. In that way, everyone will get in. Otherwise, most people are not going to have a chance to say anything.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): I heartily congratulate my right hon. Friend on bringing forward this policy, which she and I first discussed when I visited fruit farmers in her constituency when she was a thrusting young Back Bencher. Will she confirm that the great advantage of her scheme is that it gives flexibility and that we can now adapt our needs to supply and demand and the development of new labour-saving technologies?

Priti Patel: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. I recall our great visit to Tiptree and the fruit farms there. He is absolutely right to speak about how we can invest in not only people but technology. That is the ambition of this Government as a whole. We will take new approaches and make sure not only that we have the brightest and the best but are a place of great innovation.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I have been approached by someone who has been a carer since 1996. She has specialised in dementia and end-of-life palliative care, and she has comforted people who have lost their loved ones over the course of her 25-year career. She is on a register and can be struck off, just like a doctor, but her pay defines her, by the Home Secretary's own criteria, as low-skilled. The carer in question is my mother and I am deeply proud of the work she has done over those 25 years. The reality is that the Home Secretary is pinning carers as low-skilled because she will not tackle the issue of low pay in the care sector. She should do the right thing and resolve the pay and conditions of those working in the care sector throughout the country.

Priti Patel: On the contrary, I define care as a good quality and it is—

Chris Elmore: Low-skilled. You said it.

Priti Patel: No, it is not low-skilled.

Chris Elmore: You said it.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order.

Priti Patel: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Caring is not a low-skilled occupation and it is wrong for anybody in this House to say that it is. Carers provide essential and compassionate care to people—our loved ones—across our country and society. There is an important message for employers in the care sector: they should increase their pay to reflect the quality of care that is given. That is absolutely the right thing to do.

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): I am really pleased that my right hon. Friend has grasped the thorny element of the agricultural sector; there are 20,000 seasonal agricultural workers in my constituency alone, so I am hoping that her pilot scheme will grow. Will she make sure that the nimbleness and speed with which the appeals are dealt with is top of her priority list, so that when big companies want highly skilled workers, they can get them, even if they appear to be doing a low-skilled job?

Priti Patel: That is absolutely right. We have quadrupled the seasonal agricultural workers scheme, which is vital. The flexibility in the system is crucial in respect of the way we turn around the applications. That is in effect what businesses asked for and that is what we are going to deliver.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The Secretary of State said in her statement that there will be “no immigration route for lower-skilled workers.”

Even if one puts aside the patronising aspect of that statement, who does the Secretary of State think will build our homes, serve in our hotels and restaurants and care for our elderly? Does she accept that although she might see the statement as delivering “a high-skill, high-wage and highly productive economy”, what the rest of us hear is low caring?

Priti Patel: If the hon. Lady has read the policy statement, she will have seen that when it comes to needs in our labour market and our economy, the points-based system will not only involve a scoring system, but with the Migration Advisory Committee we will look at the labour market as a whole across key sectors.

Christine Jardine *indicated dissent.*

Priti Patel: I am sorry that the hon. Lady continues to shake her head, but that is absolutely the right route forward. It is vital that businesses invest in people domestically, skill them up and pay them well and create the right kind of career paths for them so that their skills can be recognised.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): As a scientist, I welcome the Government's intention to make it easier to attract leading scientists, engineers and mathematicians to come and work in the UK. Will my right hon. Friend

confirm whether she has plans to cap the number of people who can qualify for tier 1 exceptional-talent visa status?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right when it comes to exceptional talent. In fact, last week I announced a new approach to the exceptional-talent route, with mathematicians and scientists. I have been clear that we intend to grow that to make sure that our country, economy and labour market benefit from that, along with some of our great institutions—our universities and academic institutions. Of course, we want to continue to make sure that they flourish and grow.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): The Secretary of State is part of a Government who rightly want to expand housing supply. The construction sector is characterised by many self-employed contractors, yet the Government are not introducing a dedicated self-employment route. What reassurance can the Secretary of State give the sector that the skills shortages we already face—for joiners, electricians, bricklayers and plumbers, for example—will not fall off a cliff at the end of 2020?

Priti Patel: The hon. Lady is right about self-employment. We are already discussing specifically with the construction sector, because of the way it contracts individuals through the self-employment route, how we will ensure that the skills that are needed in the labour market are absolutely catered for. Of course, with the points-based system we are looking at posts and positions that meet the RQF3 threshold—that is the route of qualification—and those discussions are already underway.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. We have to go a lot faster.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary on bringing forward this points-based immigration system—another Conservative manifesto policy being delivered. As an NHS doctor, I have worked with many talented colleagues from around the world. Can she confirm that the new NHS visa will enable doctors from around the world to come and work in the NHS quickly and easily?

Priti Patel: I absolutely can. It is a fast-track NHS visa, so the applications will be processed within two to three weeks, provided that they are sponsored directly by parts of the NHS system. That will apply to doctors, nurses and allied healthcare professionals.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Albert Einstein famously spoke very little English. The Secretary of State speaks about attracting the brightest and the best, but how much damage is she willing to inflict on our research sector and how many Einsteins is she happy to lose in pursuit of her immigration targets?

Priti Patel: The hon. Lady has failed to recognise that the points-based system is absolutely designed to attract the brightest and the best, and if she had heard my comments she would know that those who might not

meet the threshold will be able to come because they have the skills that our academic institutions need, and that is the right way forward.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): Like my hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin), I represent a large rural constituency that employs many thousands of seasonal migrants. In welcoming the quadrupling of the seasonal agricultural workers scheme, may I ask my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary to keep a beady eye on the scheme, and to keep the door open to possible further increases, should that become necessary in future?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is right about the SAW scheme, but he will also recognise that a dedicated occupation shortage list already exists specifically for Scotland, and of course that will continue.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Does the Home Secretary recognise that by equating skills and salary, she is saying to the lab technician driving innovation in Newcastle University and to the careworker helping my constituents in Elswick that they are unskilled and talentless? Will she not bring forward a fair system that reflects our economic and social needs, rather than scapegoating immigrants who make such a contribution to our society?

Priti Patel: The hon. Lady will recognise from the policy statement, which I am sure she has read, that points can be applied to the skills that are required across sectors. That would apply for lab technicians—I discussed that last week at Imperial College London—and equally for the social care system. Specifically on the social care system—it is right that people raise this issue—the Department of Health and Social Care, working with the care sector, is not only looking at what the points-based system will mean, but investing in the sector to train people so that they can continue to deliver great social care.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I very much welcome the introduction of a skilled points-based immigration system, which is commonplace in many developed economies around the world. Will my right hon. Friend increase resources for tackling illegal immigration?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Illegal migration is a significant issue facing our country and many others, and this Government have a very strong and clear strategy for tackling it.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I was confused by what the Home Secretary said about musicians and performers, because it certainly did not fit with what is being reported in the music press this week—in *NME*, for example—about a savings requirements on performers coming in. Our music industry thrives on people being able to perform and tour, as the Musicians' Union has argued, and to come here and collaborate. I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Priti Patel: Let me clarify that there will be no changes to the existing routes.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I warmly welcome what my right hon. Friend is doing. Is it not the case that countries that have points-based systems have much stronger output and productivity per worker? Is it also not the case that all we are doing is saying that we should take control of our immigration policy and decide who comes here?

Priti Patel: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. The pledge that we made to the British public is that the British Government will be in control of our new immigration system. He is also absolutely right that our aspiration is for a high-wage, high-skill and highly productive economy, and that is what we are working to deliver.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): The Secretary of State has made great play of quadrupling the seasonal agricultural pilot scheme from 2,500 to 10,000 people. At a push, that would just about—maybe—fill the shortfall in Scotland, but it comes nowhere close to the 100,000 seasonal workers required across the UK. Let me ask her this: how many thousands of tonnes of food and vegetables need to rot in the fields before she is dragged back here to apologise for this dog-whistle nonsense and to rip it up?

Priti Patel: I fundamentally disagree with the hon. Gentleman's tone and the point that he has made. We have been very clear about this: we are growing the pilots. The pilot was established 12 months ago—let us say 12 months ago—and we have now announced that we are quadrupling the seasonal agricultural workers' pilot. [*Interruption.*] Yes, to 10,000. That is quadrupling the scheme. At the same time, he will have heard that we are calling on business, and on all sectors, to invest in technology to increase wages and to increase productivity. That is something that we, as a nation, need to do collectively across all sectors.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I appreciate that the Home Secretary is providing full answers to very serious questions, but the House will have to forgive her if she gives quicker answers, and not criticise her for not providing full explanations; otherwise, everyone will not get a chance to speak—they will probably not get a chance to speak anyway.

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): I welcome the move that is being promoted today. As an ethnic minority immigrant who came here to work in the national health service, that is to be expected. After I arrived here, the system changed. There are now opportunities for all Commonwealth English-speaking—well, sort of English-speaking—people from the top universities in the old Commonwealth. Should we not be campaigning to bring them here especially for our national health service?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There are two points to make here. We continue to train people domestically for our NHS, but the world is changing. We have friends and partners in the Commonwealth, and it is right that we apply the system equally rather than discriminating in favour of EU nationals. We need to apply a system that is fair across all nations in the world.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State apologise for the anger and hurt that her comments have caused to careworkers? Will she tell us what discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government about the huge increase in funding that would be necessary to end low pay in the sector, while also tackling the recruitment crisis that is leaving 1.5 million people without the support that they need?

Priti Patel: Let me reassure the hon. Lady that I have been working across all Government Departments on the delivery of this policy statement on the points-based system, and that I have covered all the issues, many of which have been raised by Members this afternoon.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Is the Home Secretary as surprised as I am that those on the Opposition Benches support a scheme that discriminates against citizens outside the EU, and do not support a scheme that is fair to everyone?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend makes a valid point. We are ending discrimination, obviously. We are open for business and we are open to all countries and to all nationalities when it comes to immigration through the points-based system.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Will these rules undo the injustice of the tier 5 rules that are currently stopping supply priests from Africa getting short-term visas in the summer months, thereby denying Christian and other communities the opportunity for worship in the summer?

Priti Patel: As has been outlined, it is pretty clear that the points-based system is open and firm, but fair. Importantly, it ends discrimination that has existed for too long in our immigration system.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that we have already protected the rights of EU citizens who are in the UK, many of whom live in Kensington? Already, 3 million people have applied for settled status.

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise the EU settlement scheme. She will have heard me say that so far 2.8 million people have been granted settled status, and there have been over 3 million applications.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): My constituent Naseer Afridi is one of many highly skilled migrants who have been put into debt and bankrupted as a result of this Government's attitude to migrants in paragraph 322(5) of the immigration rules. Does the Home Secretary not realise how insulting it is when she says that she will bring in highly skilled migrants, given that these highly skilled people have been treated so badly by her Government?

Priti Patel: I would say the complete opposite. The system that we will bring in will end discrimination and show that we are being firm and fair. Everybody who has the right level of skill can come to the United Kingdom, and they will be treated equally and fairly.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on at last getting a grip on uncontrolled immigration to this country. Does she agree that flexibility is the key? I am sure that she can give the House an assurance that she will keep an eye on all sectors to make sure that flexibility is retained in the system.

Priti Patel: It is important to restate for the benefit of the House the Government's focus and emphasis on the labour market and its needs. The system is flexible so that assessment can be made of any strains, and so that we can surge employment in certain key sectors.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State said in her statement:

"We will continue to refine our immigration system, and will build in flexibility where it is needed."

Does she recognise that denying migrant workers the right to a family life—the right to bring their family—is inflexible, and a breach of the Human Rights Act 1998?

Priti Patel: I hope the hon. Lady will recognise that the points-based system—she will have heard me say this in my statement, too—is welcoming those with the right skills and attributes, and that applies equally to their families.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): Last week my office met representatives of the Russell Group, who were very clear that they welcome the new immigration system, because it allows them to recruit from every corner of the world. I moved to America because my husband was offered a job there. I applied for a spousal visa. If I got it, we would move; if I did not, we would not. This system will allow us to recruit people and pay them a decent wage. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Opposition do not like it because the British people do like it?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend makes the very valid point that obviously we are on the side of the British public when it comes to delivering the people's priorities.

Last week I too met people from the Russell Group and other universities who are supportive of the routes that we are providing for the brightest and the best, and of our ensuring that we get the global talent that our academic institutions need.

Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab): When I was a careworker, some of the highest skilled people I know taught me how to work miracles in 15-minute calls. This Government view people who help others who are sick, elderly or disabled as low skilled because they are low paid, and deny them the special status being offered to billionaires and footballers. For the record, will the Secretary of State explain which aspects of care-work she considers low skilled?

Priti Patel: The hon. Lady will know—I have already said this, but I will restate it—that I am working with the Department of Health and Social Care and its Secretary of State specifically on the routes into and support needed in the care sector.

Nadia Whittome *indicated dissent.*

Priti Patel: The hon. Lady shakes her head, but importantly we are also looking at investment. The Government are investing in social care in a record way. That will make a difference to wages, training and investment in social care workers across the UK.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I am sorry; I know that more people wanted to speak—*[Interruption.]* There is no point in the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) making gestures at me. Members will be aware that we have a lot of business tonight. I promise you that if I let this statement go on, you would not thank me at half-past 11 this evening, when you would still be here to vote. Mr Speaker and I hope that people will realise that a statement should be followed by questions, not speeches. We really must make these things work much faster in future. Let us see if we can do the next statement rather faster.

Flooding

5.4 pm

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): With permission, I will make a statement to the House on the recent flooding caused by Storm Dennis, which followed Storm Ciara and affected many parts of the country.

I would like to begin by extending my condolences to the families and friends of the five individuals who sadly lost their lives as a result of these storms. I am sure that the thoughts of the whole House are with those grieving families today. Our thoughts are also with those who have suffered damage to their properties as a result of the storms. To have one's home flooded is an incredibly traumatic experience, and I am conscious that some have flooded repeatedly over recent years.

Storm Dennis cleared the UK during the course of Monday 17 February. However, this remains a live incident, and I would urge people in at-risk areas to remain vigilant. We are monitoring the situation closely, and most areas are moving into recovery phase. However, rainfall over the past few days is still leading to higher water levels, so we will continue to see effects this week.

Communities have been affected across our Union. We have had an incredibly wet winter. Some areas have already received almost double their average rainfall for February, with others experiencing a month's worth of rain in just 24 hours. Records have been broken. Eighteen river gauges across 15 rivers recorded their highest levels on record during or triggered by Storms Ciara and Dennis, including the Colne, the Ribble, the Calder, the Aire, the Trent, the Severn, the Wye, the Lugg and the Derwent. Storm Ciara flooded over 1,340 properties, and the latest number of properties affected by Storm Dennis stands at over 1,400. Wales has also seen significant impacts, and we are in close contact with the Welsh Government.

In anticipation of the storm, we stood up the national flood response centre on Friday 14 February. The scale of the response has been huge, from setting up temporary defences to knocking on doors and issuing residents with warnings. The Environment Agency issued 343 flood warnings for Storm Ciara and 514 for Storm Dennis. On 17 February, we saw a record concurrent total of 632 flood warnings and alerts issued in a single day. Two severe flood warnings, 107 flood warnings and 207 flood alerts remain in place in England. There are also an additional 13 flood warnings and 39 flood alerts that remain in place in Wales, and one flood warning in Scotland.

We have been sharing information with the public so that people can prepare for flooding wherever they live. We have deployed over 3 miles of temporary flood barriers and 90 mobile pumps, and we have been keeping structures and rivers clear of debris. Over 1,000 Environment Agency staff per day have been deployed, with the assistance of about 80 military personnel. In Yorkshire, the military helped to deploy temporary defences in Ilkley and kept the road open between Mytholmroyd and Hebden Bridge in Calderdale. I would like to record my thanks to all the response teams, including the Environment Agency, local authorities, our emergency services and the military. They are all still working hard, with over 20 Government bodies, local authorities and volunteers at work across the country.

The Government acted swiftly to activate the Bellwin scheme to help local authorities cope with the cost of response in the immediate aftermath. On Tuesday 18 February, we also triggered the flood recovery framework to help communities get back on their feet. I am working alongside the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government to help households and businesses recover. This includes making available hardship payments and council tax and business rate relief. Households and businesses will also be able to access grants of up to £5,000 to help to make them more resilient to future flooding, and a ministerial recovery group is co-ordinating efforts across Government. Storms Ciara and Dennis affected thousands of acres of farmland, so we will consider the need to extend the farming recovery fund once we have all the necessary data.

Investments made in recent years have significantly improved our resilience, but there is much more to do. We are investing £2.6 billion in flood defences, with over 1,000 flood defence schemes to better protect 300,000 homes by 2021. To put this into context, in the floods of 2007, 55,000 properties were flooded, but with similar volumes of water in place this year, thankfully far fewer properties have been flooded, and flood defence schemes have protected over 90,000 properties in England this winter. Our manifesto commits us to a further £4 billion in new funding for flood defences over the next five years.

Since the incidents of 2015, we have strengthened and improved our system of flood warnings, and in 2016 we introduced the Flood Re scheme, so that insurance cover for floods is accessible for at-risk properties. An independent review of the data on insurance cover will help us to ensure that it is working as effectively as possible.

Of course, we recognise that none of these steps will take away the anguish of those who have suffered flooding in the most recent storms. Climate change is making the UK warmer and wetter, with more frequent extreme weather events. We need to make nature's power part of our solution, alongside traditional engineered defences. We are already investing £10 million to restore our peatland habitats, planting enough trees to cover an area the size of East Anglia, with a new £640 million nature for climate fund, and supporting farmers to be part of our plans to prevent flooding through the new environmental land management scheme, to reduce and delay peak flows in our landscapes.

Later this year, we will set out our policies to tackle flooding in the long term, and the Environment Agency will publish the updated flood and coasts strategy. This country will also lead global ambitions on climate change as the host of COP26 later this year, urging the world to achieve net zero in a way that helps nature recover, reduces global warming and addresses the causes of these extreme weather events. I commend this statement to the House.

5.11 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I would like to thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement and welcome him to his role. I have a lot of time for my fellow west country MP. I regard him as decent and competent, and I look forward to working with him. To be fair, this is a much better statement than the one the Government made only a few weeks ago about Storm Ciara, but not enough is being done. Simply explaining what has happened does not stop it happening again.

On behalf of the Opposition, I want to send my condolences to the families who have seen loved ones die as a result of Storms Ciara and Dennis. I would also like to thank the emergency services, the Environment Agency, local councils, volunteers and those who have worked tirelessly to protect homes and businesses, rescue people and animals from rising waters and fallen trees and reinforce flood defences.

It is because I have so much time for the Secretary of State that I am disappointed by the slow and pedestrian approach we have seen from Ministers since the flooding hit. Where was the Prime Minister? Where was he? Why was a Cobra meeting not convened? Why was there no national leadership from this Government? Why have the Welsh Government and communities in Wales not received the same extra support as those in England?

During the general election, the Prime Minister reluctantly visited flood-hit communities to win votes—he was out with his mop, pushing water around shops. But now that he has his majority, he is nowhere to be seen; he is missing in action. He was taking a break in a mansion in Kent instead of giving our nation the leadership that those communities under water genuinely deserve.

We know that the climate crisis means that we will see more extreme weather more often, and the consequences will be felt most by the communities that are most vulnerable. Since Parliament has declared a climate emergency, it is clear that the Government need to do things differently, but they are not yet, and I say to the Environment Secretary that that needs to change. I want the Government to wake up to the reality that more extreme weather will happen more often. It is not a one-off incident—these are not freak accidents. This is the world in which we live, and we need to have a proper plan for flooding that will address the causes and help the communities that are under water.

That plan needs to match the scale of the crisis, with proper funding, reversing austerity cuts and ensuring that funding is available to those areas that suffer the most—a new plan not bound by match funding rules that discriminate against poorer areas compared with more affluent ones. It must look at catchment management; upstream solutions, to ensure that we hold more water upstream; tree planting and hitting tree planting targets; a new role for our farmers and water companies; and banning burning on peatlands. It must resource our emergency services fairly, and importantly, the councils that carry the highest flood risk should be adequately recognised in the local government spending review. In short, we need a plan that recognises the climate crisis, and we must act before it is too late.

We need to move away from building homes on floodplains. Banning building on floodplains makes sense, but it depends on our definition of a floodplain. Most of London is in a floodplain, so let us be clear about the immediate need to ban building on vulnerable floodplains, where rising waters are a genuine risk. Will the Government continue to allow house building on vulnerable floodplains, against the advice of experts? What extra steps will the Government take to listen to the communities that have been devastated by two successive storms? Will the Government allow homes built after 2009—especially those on floodplains—to be covered under the Flood Re reinsurance scheme, since they are not at the moment? We cannot build flood defences with austerity or Government press releases,

so by what date will the Government have reversed the austerity cuts to flood defence schemes that Conservative Members so enthusiastically voted for in the past?

I wish the Environment Secretary a very long and prosperous stay in his new job, but I offer him this one piece of advice. Every time homes flood, every time the Prime Minister is missing in action and every time Government press releases outweigh Government action, I will ask him to act. Today, therefore, I ask the Environment Secretary for a new plan for flooding, a new approach to reverse austerity cuts to flood defence schemes, and a proper investigation into these floods, which carries the confidence of communities currently under water, so that lessons can be learned and homes protected from the inevitable flooding that will happen again.

George Eustice: I thank the shadow Secretary of State for his kind words and for welcoming me to the Dispatch Box. There is much he said that I can agree with, and indeed that was contained in my statement, but there are obviously some things that I cannot agree with.

The hon. Gentleman will be aware that, in a Government, we have a Cabinet with Cabinet Ministers who lead on particular issues. When the Prime Minister appointed me a week ago last Thursday, the first thing we discussed was the upcoming Storm Dennis. We discussed how we would approach it, and he made it clear then that he wanted me to lead on this. That is entirely right, and it is entirely right as well that a statement such as this one on these issues should be led by me as the Secretary of State.

The hon. Gentleman asked why we did not stand up Cobra. The reason is that we stood up the national flood response centre, which is also hosted by the Cabinet Office. It is a similar mechanism to Cobra, but dedicated to flood response, engaging all the relevant authorities necessary to address a flood incident.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the devolved Administrations, including Wales. Flood response is a devolved matter, but I can tell him that on the day the flood events took place, DEFRA and the Environment Agency were immediately offering mutual aid to the Welsh Government, should they need it. We offered what help they would need in order to respond.

I understand the hon. Gentleman's point about the fact that extreme weather events are becoming more common. Indeed they are, and that is why we are committing an additional £4 billion over the next five years. I also agree with him that we need to be looking at nature-based solutions—natural dams and floodplains, and tree planting upland to try to hold water upland so that it does not get into our urban areas.

On the issue of building on floodplains, the Environment Agency is already a statutory consultee, and in the overwhelming majority of cases local government follows the recommendations of the Environment Agency. Sometimes that will involve not building in areas where there are floodplains, but an outright ban on building on all floodplains would prevent the expansion of the majority of our lowland towns and cities. In some cases, the advice of the Environment Agency will be that it is okay to build on them, provided it is an appropriate development and designed in a way that manages flood risk.

John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): In Scotland, we do not build housing or allow developments on floodplains. Flooding has become an all too familiar story in this place, and listening to the stories about individuals, businesses and communities devastated by the effect of flooding is indeed heartbreaking. I have listened to everything that has gone on, and when I was chair of the all-party group on flood prevention in this place, we heard story after story about the devastation caused to local communities. I, too, praise the courage, knowledge and professionalism of the rescue services. Dealing with the impact of flooding seems to be a never-ending story for them in this country.

As the former chair of the all-party group, I heard this narrative and I visited places affected. I visited the constituency of the hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty (Nigel Adams), and saw how a local medical centre could not afford insurance. The insurance premium went up to something like £400,000, and it could not move. These things were all too common, and people were left bewildered, not knowing who to turn to. In Scotland, we know who to turn to if we have an immediate need. The problem in England is that it is still following the same path as it was before.

I resigned from the all-party group on flood prevention; my friend the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) has now taken over that role, and I wish her all the best. But to listen to businesses and communities that have been devastated by flooding is a never-ending, heartbreaking story. That group carried out a lot of good work; we saw Flood Re introduced and new products that are supposed to prevent or control water ingress into houses, but nothing much seems to have changed since all that happened.

Where is the Prime Minister? He is reportedly avoiding the flooded areas so as not to detract from communities' situations—or the Secretary of State's situation, as we heard earlier—but, as has been said, that did not stop him turning up and holding emergency briefings in the run-up to the election. So where is he?

That is in contrast to our First Minister in Scotland. She has visited hard-hit communities; she is not afraid to have difficult conversations with anyone. The SNP Government will continue to work with and support our local authorities. We have committed about £42 million each year through the local government capital grant, helping our communities invest in flood protection measures. This Prime Minister said recently he would rather die in a ditch. That flooded ditch is now a castle moat he is hiding behind—not so our First Minister.

George Eustice: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for updating us on the steps that the Scottish Government have taken. Scotland has been less severely affected than other parts of the country by the recent floods, but there have been some effects—there have been some flooding incidents.

The hon. Gentleman made a point about insurance. As I said, we have introduced the Flood Re insurance scheme to ensure that people with properties who were unable to get access to insurance because of a flood risk are now able to.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I remind the House that, as we said in the last statement, statements are followed by questions, not speeches. We must have short questions; it will not harm the Minister or the Chair if we have long questions and speeches, but it will harm the people who do not get a chance to be called, so I ask for some courtesy and brevity.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to his new post; it is well deserved.

Flooding is going on and it comes very suddenly, so we will have to manage it in the future. Some rivers need to be slowed down, and for some we need to increase the flow as they get to the sea.

With Flood Re, there is a cut-off date of 2008. Many people who bought houses after 2008 cannot necessarily get insurance. It is time that we looked at that again, because Flood Re has worked but many people cannot actually get access to it.

George Eustice: I am conscious of the point that my hon. Friend makes, and indeed that was made to me by residents when I visited York with the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) at the weekend. For houses built in recent years, we have known about potential flood risk, and that should have been factored in in the planning system. So it would be rather extraordinary for there to be modern-built houses where the risk is so high that they cannot get insurance.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): A quarter of all the families who were affected across the whole of the United Kingdom were in one local authority in Wales, Rhondda Cynon Taf, including my own patch. Many of those people, in very poor communities, have no insurance because they have to choose between putting food on the table and paying the insurance bill, so they have lost literally every single thing that they had. We have a massive bill for the local authority of more than £30 million just to put the culverts right, to dredge the rivers and to sort out the bridges that have fallen into the rivers. That is twice the capital funding allocation for the whole council for a year. We need money from the Government. We do not want talk of mutual aid; we need money and we need it now.

George Eustice: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that flooding and response to floods is a devolved matter and therefore in the first instance is a matter for the Welsh Government, but I am aware that he and others have raised some concerns about funding, and of course if the Welsh Government were to approach my colleagues in the Wales Office that is something that could be considered.

Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con): After the 2015 floods, we battled to get a wider catchment plan for the Calder Valley put in place, including grip blocking, reservoirs being reduced, leaky dams being addressed and tree planting. Some of those measures have been put in place, but that has been done by hundreds and hundreds of volunteers, and it is not enough. With climate change, we really are just toying with this. Will my right hon. Friend meet me and some volunteers to see the benefits of a more robust investment plan for the Calder Valley from Government in some of those measures?

George Eustice: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that point, and I am of course more than willing to meet him, other residents and local authority leaders in Calder Valley. I have also undertaken to hold a summit in Yorkshire to discuss flood concerns more generally. There are a number of important projects in the Calder Valley, including at Hebden Bridge and Brighouse. Some of them have concluded, while others have not yet been completed, for reasons that I know he is aware of.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): Cobra met twice on Boxing day in 2015 and again on 27 December. It was instrumental in unlocking the funding and resources we needed to recover in the Calder Valley. Whatever was stepped up this time was absolutely not comparable in providing the practical help we needed very quickly in Calderdale on this occasion. Can the Secretary of State tell me when the guidance on grants for resilience will be made available to local authorities? Will he confirm that those grants will be available for those who flooded in 2015 and claimed then, but have since flooded again?

George Eustice: We will, during the course of this week, be issuing local authorities with more detailed guidance on the flood resilience fund. Our view at the moment is not to give it to people who have already claimed it, since they have already invested to make their homes more resilient.

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): Herefordshire was very hard hit. I want my local authority to focus on making good some of the terrible damage we have suffered, rather than getting its Bellwin application in by 15 March. Will the Secretary of State do all he can to ensure that local authorities are doing what they are meant to be doing, rather than claiming the money? Will he make sure that Herefordshire does not miss out on the farming recovery fund, like it did last time?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend makes an important point, but a lot of local authorities will say that they need access to that money, or at least to know that they will be able to reclaim some of their new burden costs, in order to make precisely the response he talks of.

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): The Secretary of State will be aware of the horrendous and unprecedented flooding that hit my constituency of Pontypridd last week. Our area has never before been hit with the flooding and landslides we have seen. My community and local authority simply could not have prepared for this amount of rainfall and devastation. Does he agree that we urgently need better protections? Will he fund an urgent review of all former coalmining sites in the south Wales area and bring forward the necessary funding to ensure the safety of all our communities?

George Eustice: The hon. Lady will be aware that this is a devolved matter, but I am more than—

Hon. Members: No, it's not!

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Don't shout at the Secretary of State. *[Interruption.]* And don't shout at me, either. *[Laughter.]*

George Eustice: Flood response and dealing with the result of floods is a devolved matter, but we have arrangements across the UK to support one another when one area is particularly affected. If the hon. Lady would like to write to me with her suggestions, I will be more than happy to discuss them with colleagues in the Welsh Government.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement and pay tribute to the emergency services, who have worked across our country to bring relief in these very difficult times. Parts of my constituency are subject to a groundwater flood alert issued by the Environment Agency. Groundwater flooding is a hidden threat. Can he confirm that the Environment Agency will continue to regularly monitor boreholes in areas subject to groundwater flooding, so that residents can have confidence that they will receive proper and timely alerts?

George Eustice: My right hon. Friend makes a very important point. The Environment Agency is monitoring groundwater levels very closely. It has been an extraordinarily wet winter, with land waterlogged and the water table already very high, so there will be parts of the country where groundwater flooding remains a risk.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the staff at City of York Council, the Environment Agency and the BBC, who have been a lifeline to my constituents. Will the Secretary of State now review the contracts the Environment Agency has with the people providing the flood resilience schemes? It is four years since the Boxing day floods and businesses as well as properties have again been flooded. We need to have those contracts reviewed.

George Eustice: I was pleased to be able to visit the hon. Lady's constituency on Sunday, when this was one of the matters we discussed. There has been some frustration that the flood resilience programme has not been delivered as quickly as possible there, but she will be aware that we have been reviewing the performance of some contractors. The worst of all worlds is for us to spend money on putting in place measures that then prove to be ineffective due to cowboy contractors.

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in recording my gratitude to the teams from the Environment Agency, the emergency services, local councils and the amazing volunteer groups, such as the Appleby emergency response group in my constituency, who have been working around the clock to protect people and their properties from flooding?

George Eustice: I am more than happy to join my hon. Friend in commending the Environment Agency staff, local authority staff and our emergency services, including the fire brigade and the police, all of whom have been working incredibly hard to protect people in their homes and, if necessary, to assist them in evacuation.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): My constituents have been battered by gale-force winds and rain for the last three weekends, resulting in localised flooding of the River Eden. This is not normal; it is the

[Wendy Chamberlain]

result of inaction on a climate emergency that is only going to get worse. Urgent action beyond that outlined in the Minister's statement is required, so will the Government look to moving forward the net zero target to help to prevent the climate change disaster that is blighting our communities?

George Eustice: We have made more progress than any other OECD country in decarbonising our economy to date. We are the first major economy to commit to net zero by 2050 and, later this year, we will, of course, be hosting COP26. This is a Government who take climate change very seriously, and it is the case that extreme weather events such as we have seen are linked to climate change.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend very much for his statement. I congratulate him on his new post and on the measured manner in which he has made public statements, and thank his colleagues for triggering the Bellwin scheme. Would he agree with—and hopefully take the advice of—my constituent, Mr Bryan Edwards, who has been chairman of the Molverley drainage board, on the confluence of the Rivers Vyrnwy and the Severn, which has flooded every winter for decades? He said that we should slow it up at the top—by that, he means holding water in the hills, with more reservoirs, more planting, more trees and more adaptation to soil—and speed it up at the bottom, which means taking the example of what we did in Somerset and instructing all the hard-working people in the Environment Agency to dredge the rivers, as well as giving extensive powers to the internal drainage boards to keep ditches, waterways and smaller rivers clear.

George Eustice: My right hon. Friend and I were involved together in the 2014 floods—I remember that well and the incidents we had in Somerset. It is the case that we absolutely want to hold water upstream using nature-based solutions. When it comes to speeding up water downstream, it can sometimes be complicated. Sometimes, it is the right thing to do but, sometimes, if it is a very tidal area, racing water at high speed when there is an incoming tide can cause concerns, and indeed, that was one of the concerns that we had in Gloucester and Tewkesbury last week.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): I should declare that I had responsibility for flood risk management in Wales up to 2010. In England, the Environment Agency requires a 8:1 return on investment in flood defences, which discriminates against the protection of low-value property. In the case of Rhondda Cynon Taf, which is particularly susceptible to flash flooding accentuated by climate change, this means a disproportionately low amount of money through the Barnett consequential is given to Wales, and we need extra money because of our topography. Will the Minister give an assurance that the extra money given to Wales is based on hardship, risk and topography, not on population and not on property values?

George Eustice: There is not a specific 1:8 requirement for flooding schemes—it is just that, overall, that is the average return on flood schemes. When we assess where

we are going to direct capital, it is predominantly based on the flood risk of a given area and the number of homes that a particular scheme will protect.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): My constituency is largely on land recovered by Dutch engineers and is therefore probably the most flood-prone constituency in the country. We have seen flooding this time on the other side of the border in Selby, due to the Aire washlands overtopping. My hon. Friend the Member for Selby and Ainsty (Nigel Adams) is helping residents there but obviously cannot speak today from the Back Benches. I urge the Secretary of State, given the particular risk that we have in my area, to look very closely at the proposal for a national flood resilience centre in Scunthorpe. The council has done its part in providing the land. The University of Hull and the Humberside fire service are providing funding. We need the Government to step up and provide funding so that we have a proper national centre.

George Eustice: My hon. Friend raised this issue with me last week. I would be more than happy to meet him and representatives from his local authority to discuss their proposal.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) asked about the Government's responsibility for coal tips. The Coal Industry Act 1994 says the UK Government are responsible for the management of all former coal sites. Will the Secretary of State agree to investigate these sites—there have been slips in recent days—and ensure that, if funding is needed, the sites remain safe? We do not want repeats of recent history in Wales.

George Eustice: We are all conscious of the terrible history related to this issue. I can confirm that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales met the First Minister this morning and that this was one of the issues discussed. We reiterated our offer of help and there will be a joint approach to the issue of flood risk in coal areas.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): The devastation in Shrewsbury, our town in Shropshire, is appalling. I hope the Secretary of State will take time out of his busy diary to see the extent of the misery my town is facing. I wrote to him today asking him to visit Shropshire to meet local Environment Agency staff and Shropshire Council, as they have a long-term solution for managing the River Severn, which runs through 18 constituencies. Rather than piecemeal flood defences, which just push the problem further downstream, we need a holistic approach to managing the whole river, including through wet washland schemes.

George Eustice: My hon. Friend makes an important point. The Severn has been the most affected water catchment in this most recent event. The demountable barriers at many places along the Severn have proved crucial in preventing more properties from being flooded, but of course I am more than happy to visit Shrewsbury and his constituency to meet the local Environment Agency staff.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): When the Fields estate flooded, the Llanhilleth Miners Institute sprang into action. It was a critical respite place for local people

who needed help, but it also incurred high emergency costs as a result. What support will the Government provide across the UK to third sector trustees and volunteers who acted as a bridge to their community in this difficult time?

George Eustice: The Government obviously focus predominately on supporting local authorities with immediate costs through the Bellwin scheme but, as I said in my statement, we also recognise the critical role that voluntary groups played up and down the country.

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): The Secretary of State has really been thrown in at the deep end. I congratulate him on his appointment. I can testify to how hard he and the local flood resilience teams have been working on this issue. The Rivers Severn, Avon and Teign always flood. We are more resilient than we were 10 years ago, but he knows that we still need some new schemes, so will he meet me as soon as possible to discuss the schemes that the Environment Agency has drafted for Tenbury Wells and Severn Stoke?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend's constituency was the first hit, and one of the hardest hit, in this most recent bout of events, and I am of course willing to meet her. I am aware there is a proposed scheme for Tenbury Wells that is awaiting additional partnership finance, but I will obviously talk to her about how we can progress that.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): More than four years on from the Boxing day floods in 2015, the flood defence scheme for Kirkstall in my constituency is still £23 million short of Government funding. Small businesses cannot take advantage of the Flood Re scheme and as a result many are struggling to get insurance or are paying impossibly high excesses or premiums. Will the Government look again at whether Flood Re can also apply to small businesses?

George Eustice: As I said in my statement, we are reviewing Flood Re to check that it is fit for purpose.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Will the Government give new guidance to planning inspectors to take flood risk very seriously and be more careful about building on floodplains? In my area, the risk has been greatly increased by people ignoring that.

George Eustice: My right hon. Friend has made an important point. Under the planning system, the Environment Agency is a statutory consultee for a very good reason, and local authorities should follow its advice unless they have a very good reason not to. As I said earlier, in the overwhelming majority of cases—more than 97%—the advice of the Environment Agency is followed.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): Parts of South Yorkshire were devastated by the November flooding, so I was pleased to hear the Secretary of State reiterate his commitment to a flood summit in Yorkshire. I have been asking for such a summit since November. When is it going to happen?

George Eustice: Within the next two months.

Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): As we have already heard this afternoon, Shropshire has been badly hit by Storm Dennis. About half the houses affected are in my constituency, on both the River Severn and the River Teme. Upstream from Tenbury Wells, Ludlow has had floods. What we need there are flood defences similar to those that are available elsewhere on the River Severn. As we speak, householders in Bridgnorth, Clun and Shrewsbury are expecting water levels higher than those of Monday last week. That is an immediate challenge. In the aftermath of the floods, will my right hon. Friend, as he considers the next phase of flood defences, also consider towns such as Bridgnorth, Ludlow and Clun in my constituency?

George Eustice: Demountable defences, which can be temporarily placed alongside key rivers such as the Severn, have played an important role, but, as my right hon. Friend says, we are not out of the woods yet. Water levels will continue to rise, and some towns, including those that he mentioned, continue to be at risk.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): While I understand the argument about devolved competences, extreme flooding—and it was extreme in south Wales last week—goes beyond constitutional considerations. Does the Secretary of State not agree that the allocation of resources on the basis of an outdated Barnett formula is clearly unsuitable in such extreme cases, and will he return to the House later in the week with a written statement outlining the collaboration that he has undertaken with the Welsh Government?

George Eustice: As I said earlier, the Secretary of State for Wales met the First Minister this morning to discuss some of these issues. As the hon. Gentleman will know, when it comes to funding matters and the Barnett formula in particular, other Departments will also have an interest.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): It is, of course, wrong to build in flood risk areas, yet just this morning I took photographs—which I will send to my right hon. Friend later—of an industrial digger actually in water, preparing the land for house building. Permission had been given not by the local authority, but by a previous Secretary of State on the advice of the inspector. This is madness. Will my right hon. Friend have discussions with our right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government to stop this from happening?

George Eustice: I shall be more than happy to look at the specific issue that my hon. Friend has raised.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Over the last three weekends, Otley, in my constituency, has seen the worst flooding since Boxing day 2015. A £2 million alleviation scheme is due to be completed this year, but the relevant permissions from the Environment Agency have not yet been sorted out, and planning permission and advice on the national policy framework are still needed. Leeds City Council is ready to deliver the scheme. Will the Secretary of State meet me, and the relevant agencies, to ensure that it goes ahead?

George Eustice: I should be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss those issues. During my visit to York, I realised how complicated the position relating to such schemes can be. Some people are asking “Why are things not already happening?”, while others are nervous about impacts on access to the river, for instance, or about noise. Getting the schemes right means consulting communities, and going through a planning process that can take some time.

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): The Arun River valley in my constituency has experienced severe flooding from Storm Dennis and, before that, Storm Ciara. The Environment Agency has done a magnificent job in responding in inclement conditions and at antisocial times, but it has recently announced plans to cease flood risk management activities in many parts of the river. Will the Secretary of State join me in calling on the agency to delay, in the light of recent floods?

George Eustice: I should be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss his concerns further. Last week many flood alerts were in place, including severe flood alerts. The standard approach is that when a flood risk goes down such alerts are dropped, but if my hon. Friend writes to me expressing his specific concerns, I will look into them.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): As the Minister will be well aware, Hull is at permanent risk of flooding, which is one of the reasons why local businesses have got together to develop a project called Lagoon Hull. A lagoon would protect against the rising Humber. Will the Minister please meet a delegation to talk about how we can develop these ideas to protect our city, not just for now but for the future?

George Eustice: There are a number of examples of projects that use lagoons to manage surplus water during times of flooding, including one at Salford. Either I or another ministerial colleague will be more than happy to meet the promoters of the scheme that the hon. Member has mentioned.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): May I urge the Secretary of State not to forget the devastating impact of recent storms on coastal communities such as Pakefield on the Suffolk coast? A few months ago there was no worry about the homes there, but now their very existence is at risk.

George Eustice: My hon. Friend, who represents a coastal community, highlights an important issue. It is important to recognise that it is not just fluvial flooding that is a threat, and that coastal flooding and coastal surges are also a major threat to our coastal communities.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): In his statement, and in his interview on “The Andrew Marr Show” on Sunday, the Secretary of State rightly acknowledged the increasing frequency of extreme weather events. Does he agree with his predecessor about the merits of having a statutory duty to prepare and plan for flooding and extreme weather events, and of putting that duty on fire and rescue authorities? Will he meet a delegation, including myself and members of the Fire Brigades Union, to consider the merits of that course of action, which already applies in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales?

George Eustice: Because of the increased frequency of such flood events, there have been a number of reviews of our approach to flooding, including the Pitt review under the last Labour Government and others since then. We have significantly improved our ability to forecast weather events and flood events and to respond to them through organisations such as the local resilience forums, on which fire brigades are fully represented.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): I have just been hosting a Woodland Trust reception, where we have been highlighting the importance of our native woods and trees in tackling our nature and climate emergencies. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Government’s policy to provide 75,000 acres of extra tree cover per year up until the next Parliament is important not only for tackling climate change but for flood management?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Some of these nature-based solutions not only help with biodiversity and with tackling climate change; they can also improve our resilience to flooding by increasing the permeability of the soil to prevent run-off into our watercourses.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): Businesses on the Lansil industrial estate in Lancaster are flooding again and they tell me that they cannot take much more of this, so what support can the Government offer to small family businesses that are often major local employers and that are repeatedly at risk of flooding?

George Eustice: As I made clear earlier, we have stood up the flood recovery framework, and that includes business rate relief and also grants to help our businesses to repair the damage in a way that is flood resilient.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): In my constituency we have had two severe flood warnings in the last week, and as I speak the River Severn is rising and Ironbridge looks set to experience difficulties with the flood barriers overtopping. I thank the Minister for the amazing work of his team and of the Environment Agency. Will he ensure that my constituents in the affected areas will continue to receive this level of support during this very difficult time?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend makes the important point that we are not yet out of the woods with this particular incident. Rainfall over the past 48 hours is still working its way through the Severn in particular, and towns such as Ironbridge are still at risk. We are monitoring the situation closely.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): Storm Dennis caused huge damage across Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney. Our communities and local people showed amazing resilience, and our local authorities, despite years of Tory austerity, were at the forefront of delivering support. The Welsh Government have offered a fund, yet despite the unprecedented nature of these floods, the United Kingdom Government have offered no additional financial support to Welsh communities. Why not?

George Eustice: As I said earlier, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales met and discussed this matter with the First Minister. However, the Welsh Government have not yet specified what support, if any, they would want.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I am sure that my right hon. Friend has stood under a roof to see the sheer volume of rainwater that falls off. The more we build in our towns and cities, the more water falls onto increasingly concrete areas. Surely the planning system should sort something out, so that the developers must ensure when such agreements are made that water can escape to an appropriate place.

George Eustice: I agree with my hon. Friend. It is critical that the right drainage infrastructure is put in place through the planning system, and we should be doing more to promote sustainable urban drainage, for example.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): When the storms came to Wellingborough, the floodplains flooded, as they were supposed to, but 50 horses were unfortunately illegally settled on the floodplain. Four of those horses have died, and the emergency evacuation of 43 horses is continuing at this very moment. Will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss a problem that continues to affect not only my constituency, but others across the country?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend raises a rather tragic case. My officials have already spoken to the RSPCA, which is investigating the circumstances of this particular case and, as he pointed out, removing the remaining horses. We have also asked Animal and Plant Health Agency officials to look at the disposal of the dead horses.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): As my right hon. Friend has already said, we have had a lot of rain throughout the autumn and winter, and many areas of the country are waterlogged. Some fields in Lincolnshire are flooded or have been flooded and remain waterlogged, meaning that farmers have not been able to plant crops. What is my right hon. Friend doing to support farmers? In particular, will he consider removing the three-crop rule for this year, because farmers are simply struggling to get the seeds planted?

George Eustice: We do have a farming flood recovery fund, but we have not activated it yet because it generally supports the recovery of lost grassland or damaged hedgerows and walls in the aftermath of an event.

However, we are looking closely at whether we could put in place derogations to assist farmers should they be unable to get their crops in the ground.

Robert Largan (High Peak) (Con): Climate change is leading to more frequent extreme weather. The weather last summer led to the evacuation of Whaley Bridge following structural failures of the Toddbrook reservoir dam. Disappointingly, the inquiry into the incident is yet to report. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that the report will be published as soon as possible, so that we can learn the lessons? The people of Whaley Bridge deserve answers.

George Eustice: I can give my hon. Friend that undertaking. The review has now concluded, and the report will be released at the earliest possible opportunity.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): My constituents are persecuted by ongoing flood warnings and flood alerts. Thankfully, although we have had some flooding, we have not seen a repeat of 2014. Does the Secretary of State agree that we urgently need to build the River Thames scheme to protect homes and communities?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Every part of our country suffers some degree of flood risk, and we have approaches that prioritise capital spending in the areas that are most at risk and where we will protect the greatest number of homes. The Environment Agency will shortly publish an updated strategy.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): The prize for patience and perseverance goes to Dr Kieran Mullan.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I have seen examples in my constituency of local residents warning of flood risk outside of recognised floodplains, but development happened anyway and, sure enough, flooding follows. What more can we do to ensure the planning system listens to local knowledge about local flood risks that the Environment Agency may not typically recognise?

George Eustice: In any planning system, it is obviously open to people to contribute during the consultation phase. As a general rule, local Environment Agency staff, who understand the topography and hydrology of different rivers in a given catchment, are best placed to make such judgments.

Points of Order

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I tabled two named day questions on 9 January, but the Home Office is yet to respond, and I hope that you can help me in seeking a resolution, because the questions are important. One asked how many women and men have been granted settled status under the EU settled status scheme, and the other asked how many women and men have been granted pre-settled status under the scheme. I do not know whether the Government do not know the answer or do not have the figures, but I am sure you agree that they need to give me an answer at some point—whether they know it or not.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Lady for her point of order. She knows, as the House knows, that the Chair has no responsibility for Ministers nor authority to tell Ministers when they should answer questions, but Mr Speaker will be concerned that the hon. Lady put down a named day question and that no answer has been forthcoming after such a long time. I am sure that the hon. Lady's purpose is to draw general attention to this matter, and I think she has successfully done so. I am sure that the Treasury Bench will note what she has asked.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. One hundred years ago today, a woman made a speech in this Chamber for the first time—[HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] While I do not agree with everything that Nancy Astor said or did, her maiden speech on the dangers and perils of alcohol paved the way for many more of us to speak in this House. I wonder whether you had heard of any way to celebrate that centenary.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I congratulate the hon. Lady on bringing forward the best point of order I have ever heard in the Chamber. It is good to note this important anniversary. It was a wonderful occasion when Lady Astor made her maiden speech in this Chamber, as the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) knows so well given his work to arrange celebrations for this great centenary. The hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) tempts me to give a personal answer to her question. I am with her in my disagreement with Lady Astor's strange ideas about alcohol. There are many ways in which the centenary ought to be celebrated, and perhaps some of us will be able to do so this evening by proving Lady Astor wrong—[*Laughter.*]

Policing (England and Wales)

[*Relevant document: Tenth Report of the Home Affairs Committee of Session 2017–19, Policing for the future, HC 515, and the Government Response, CP 62*]

5.57 pm

The Minister for Crime, Policing and the Fire Service (Kit Malthouse): I beg to move,

That the Police Grant Report (England and Wales) for 2020–21 (HC 51), which was laid before this House on 22 January, be approved.

I am proud to be part of a new Government who are delivering on the people's priorities. The public have demanded an end to the horrific crime and violence that has recently blighted our streets once again. They deserve no less, and it is our duty to deliver the safer towns, villages, cities and country that they want. That means enthusiastically supporting our outstanding police to cut crime. They are our first and finest line of defence against murderous terrorists and ruthless drug gangs and our protection against burglars, robbers and rapists. All hon. Members will join me in paying tribute to their world-renowned courage, sacrifice and professionalism.

As the natural party of law and order, the Conservatives owe the police the resources they need to get their immensely important job done. One of the first acts of this Government was to start recruiting 20,000 new police officers, giving them the strength in numbers they now need, supporting and equipping them with the powers and kit to keep us safe, including lifting restrictions on emergency stop-and-search powers for all forces across England and Wales and, crucially, giving them new and immediate funding to keep our streets safe.

Nothing is more important than protecting the British people, and the settlement will do just that. Our generous offer also recognises the immense challenges that policing faces today. Crime is becoming increasingly complex, serious violence is threatening ever more people, and ruthless thugs are finding new ways to exploit the vulnerable. The scale, range and brutality of the new criminality we face is daunting, but we are rising to the challenge by empowering our police to fight back. This deal will give them the power to take down the criminals and bring those threatening our people and communities to justice.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): Cleveland currently receives no serious violence funding, despite having the third highest level of violent crime in the country. The hon. Member for Redcar (Jacob Young) appealed to the Prime Minister at Prime Minister's questions last week for more resources, but he was fobbed off. Will the Home Secretary now review it and give Cleveland the funding it needs to tackle serious violence in our area?

Kit Malthouse: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise the issue of serious violence, which is blighting not only Cleveland but other parts of the country, too. It is obviously a huge focus of my work.

We are giving Cleveland police an extra £10 million this year, which I hope it will use to tackle some of the serious problems there. I have met the chief constable of Cleveland police, who is doing sterling work to move the force from one that has sadly been underperforming to one that can hopefully satisfy the needs and desires of the people of Cleveland.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Has the Minister had discussions with chief constables, and has it emerged from those discussions what priorities they have for the new police officers? I can think of plenty in the Thames valley, but has he had the experience of the chief constables on how they can make things much better with these extra police?

Kit Malthouse: I am pleased that my right hon. Friend's police force, in particular, will receive a very large settlement of just under £32 million. We are having an ongoing conversation with the wider policing family about how and where our priority activity should take place. That discussion is being held under the auspices of the new National Policing Board, on which all arms of policing are represented. The board will settle the priority action that will be taken forward.

We have had discussions, particularly at the board's last meeting, on prioritising violence. At the top of the list, murder is the tip of the iceberg of violence, which features many types of crime. I hope we will move to a 360° approach to fighting crime over the next few months and years, and I hope that chief constables will support us in doing so.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The Minister mentions the priorities set by the National Policing Board. One thing that I and chief constables across Wales and England have been raising for a number of years is economic crime and scamming. There is a constant pressure from new scams, so will he talk to chief constables on the National Policing Board about setting economic crime as a priority so that increasing numbers of vulnerable people are not attacked by scammers, who are becoming increasingly clever in taking people's money?

Kit Malthouse: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. As I have said, the technical complexity of crime has changed significantly over the past few years. One question we have to ask ourselves, both in the Home Office and in the UK policing family, is whether we have the skills and capability to deal with some of those issues.

I will come on to the settlement later, but it is partly about investing in some of those capabilities, not least in tackling online economic crime, which we are sadly seeing become increasingly prevalent as the internet penetrates even more of our lives.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Does not the very generosity of this settlement remove from some forces the excuse that they do not investigate fraud but, rather, palm it off on Action Fraud, which has proved to be totally useless?

Kit Malthouse: I would expect a no less challenging question from my county colleague, and he is right that the fight against fraud has perhaps not been as effective as it could have been over the past few months and years.

We are giving a lot of thought in the Home Office to how policing should structure itself for a crime type that has become increasingly complex. A fraud might be perpetrated in one geography—perhaps in the New Forest, sadly—by a perpetrator in another geography who transits money through another country and draws

that money in a fourth place. These are complex and technical difficulties that we will have to address in the years to come.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Due to the huge cuts in policing budgets and youth services, knife crime is now at epidemic proportions. We have had another fatality in Slough in recent weeks. The Minister has mentioned the extra resources for the Thames valley but, given that Slough is affected by a disproportionately large amount of knife crime and violent crime, will he ensure that the lion's share of that funding is catered towards Slough, rather than areas that are not as affected by crime?

Kit Malthouse: I think I am right in saying that recorded crime in the Thames valley is lower than in 2010, but that is not a cause for complacency. I recognise some of the problems that towns around London like Slough and, indeed, Andover in my constituency have experienced, much of it driven by the drugs trade. The hon. Gentleman will know that we have done a huge amount of work, and will be doing more, on the county lines problem that drives a significant amount of violence in towns like his. He will be hearing more from me on that in the future.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): Gloucestershire constabulary has one of the lowest settlements of all police forces. Will my hon. Friend explain to my constituents how these figures are made up so they can see why they have such a low increase?

Kit Malthouse: As I am sure my hon. Friend knows, money for policing is shared out on the basis of a funding formula. I have studied the formula in some depth, and it is incredibly complicated and hard to understand. He is therefore right to raise the issue of confusion in the public's mind about how money is allocated.

We have already said publicly that we believe the funding formula is outdated, and I hope and believe that, in the years to come, we can work to find a more equitable division of the spoils for policing and, critically, one that the people we serve understand.

This settlement sets out the biggest increase in police funding in a decade. This £700 million will pay for the recruitment of the first 6,000 of the 20,000 additional police officers, an increase of almost 10% of the core grant funding provided last year. Overall funding for police and crime commissioners will increase by £915 million to £13.1 billion if they make full use of the council tax flexibility available to them. Total police funding will increase by £1.1 billion to £15.2 billion.

Every single force in England and Wales will see a substantial increase next year. If their police and crime commissioner decides to maximise precept flexibility, Durham will receive an extra £9.7 million, Lancashire will receive an extra £22.6 million and West Midlands will receive almost £50 million more. These are serious increases, representing, on average, a 7.5% rise.

Mrs Heather Wheeler (South Derbyshire) (Con): Will my hon. Friend come to visit Derbyshire and meet Angelique Foster, our PCC candidate, who is putting together a superb plan for what Derbyshire policing ought to look like with this extra new money?

Kit Malthouse: I would, of course, be delighted to visit Derbyshire once again. I was there only a few months ago to visit the chief constable and the current police and crime commissioner.

I have already agreed to attend a crime summit in Derby, and hopefully other Derbyshire MPs will be involved. In fact, I was there to see the striking “knife angel” sculpture, which was standing outside the city’s cathedral. I am more than happy to visit once again.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): In Lincolnshire we are fortunate to live in one of the safest areas of the country, but my constituents write to me regularly about antisocial behaviour, burglary, lead theft and fly-tipping. I am delighted that we will get 120 more police officers in Lincolnshire, an increase of 11%. What can my hon. Friend do to support those new police officers in tackling the crimes that worry my constituents so much?

Kit Malthouse: The best thing I can do is encourage them, once again, to elect a Conservative police and crime commissioner in May who will be focused on their priorities. I am pleased to note that, in the past couple of weeks, Lincolnshire police’s inspection report has significantly improved, which I gather was the cause of some celebration in the Lincolnshire media. The Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), was trumpeting the triumph of her local police force.

We will be supporting Lincolnshire police in all its work, and it has made a special grant application that we will be considering in due course. I recognise that a county like Lincolnshire, which is very large and sparsely populated, faces particular challenges that we will want to address.

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that, with this extra funding for the Metropolitan police, it is time that the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan—who is responsible for policing in London—revisited his list of police station closures, including the important Belgravia police station in the Westminster part of my constituency?

Kit Malthouse: I know Belgravia police station very well indeed—[*Laughter.*] It was not through having spent any overnight stays there. During my time in policing in London, I visited it on a couple of occasions. The Met will be in receipt of a further 1,369 police officers, who will need to be accommodated somewhere. As I have said in the media in the past, perhaps to some hilarity, their lockers will need to go somewhere, and an expansion of the size that London will see over the next few years means that a general review of the property strategy is sensible.

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): In Clacton, we led a campaign to increase the precept for policing, it spread across Essex, and I am very glad that we have more police officers in Clacton and we have town centre teams. However, like many parts of the rest of the country, we have a lot of knife crime and it needs to be dealt with. What is my hon. Friend thinking of doing to stop young people getting drawn into that sort of crime in the first place?

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend, in his typically astute way, raises an extremely important point. Although we talk a lot in this House, and certainly in my job, about the enforcement aspect of crime, one key area—one of the twin pillars of success—is investment in young people, particularly in diverting those on the margins of criminality away from it and showing them that there is a better life. Obviously, the Government have committed significant funding to that, not least in the Home Office, where we have a couple of hundred million pounds to spend on it. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport has £500 million to spend over the next few years on youth intervention and youth projects, and we will be focusing, certainly in the Cabinet Committee that the Prime Minister is chairing, on that aspect of crime, alongside enforcement at the same time.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Kit Malthouse: If Members do not mind, I would like to make a bit of progress. I will allow others to come in a little later.

This settlement will turbocharge the unprecedented recruitment of 20,000 police officers over the next three years. All forces will have the resources they need to meet rising demand. The impact of the extra officers should not be underestimated, with the recruitment targets showing how each area will benefit. By March 2021, West Yorkshire police aims to recruit some 256 extra officers, and the figure for Greater Manchester is almost 350. As I said, the Met, a force I know well, will soon be able to deploy an extra 1,369 officers on the streets of our capital. The spending round, which concluded in September, confirmed that an additional £750 million would be made available next year to deliver this uplift. This settlement confirms that £700 million of that will go directly to PCCs to support the first wave of recruitment, and £168 million will be ringfenced to help pay for recruiting and employing additional officers. Forces will be awarded a portion of that in line with their funding formula allocation. It will be linked to results, with the money paid out as they make progress against their recruitment targets. That will ensure that forces make full use of this investment, delivering good value for money for taxpayers and the results they expect to see. In addition, £50 million of the settlement will deliver national elements of the police uplift programme to ensure that it is a success. That will include central co-ordination, national recruitment campaigns, Police Now training and College of Policing support.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): The Minister mentioned Durham, which has lost 380 officers since 2010. Even with these replacement officers—they are not new ones—there will still be a shortfall of 154 officers for County Durham. Can he tell me when County Durham will get back to the level of police officers it had in 2010?

Kit Malthouse: Obviously, these 6,000 officers are a down payment on a three-year protection plan, under which we will be recruiting 20,000 police officers. Just for clarity, I should point out that these are extra police officers—

Mr Jones: They are not. They are replacements.

Kit Malthouse: This is on top of the numbers we need to recruit because of those who retire—we see 6,000 to 8,000 retire. At the end of March, or possibly April, we will be publishing details of our recruitment performance and the baseline figure where we believe we have started, agreed with forces, so that Members across the House and the public will be able to see how we are performing. We hope that by the end of the three-year recruitment process we will have a greater number of police officers than we did in 2010.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Unfortunately, the South Wales force faces a similar situation; since 2011, the number of police officers has been brought down from 3,400 to 2,800. The figures announced by the Government in October showed that there would be an uplift of just 136 officers in this new recruitment scheme. Obviously, those 136 will be very welcome—I wonder how much progress we are making on that—but they represent a substantially smaller number than the amount cut since 2011.

Kit Malthouse: To repeat what I said in my earlier answer, those 136 are the first instalment of a three-year programme. We are recruiting 6,000 and there are a further 14,000 to go. Although we have yet to decide completely how the remaining 14,000 will be allocated, it is not hard to surmise that all forces will receive more than in this year. I ask hon. Members to hold fire and rejoice in the fact that these first 6,000 will be recruited—we hope—in 12 months' time. That is on top of the number of police officers baked into the very large financial settlement last year. It means that by the end of three years the number of police officers in this country should be higher than it was in 2010.

No two areas of this great country face the same challenges. This Government want to level up our communities, but to do that we must tackle regional issues head on, including crime. PCCs have continued to ask for more flexibility and funds to respond to local priorities. We have listened to their pleas and empowered them to target the criminals plaguing their towns and communities. This settlement allows all PCCs to raise council tax contributions for local policing; it is less than 20p per week for a typical household—just £10 per year. If all PCCs decide to maximise their flexibility, the result will be £248 million of additional funding for local policing. Locally elected PCCs will decide how to use that flexibility, and will be accountable to their electorate for using it to cut crime and deliver real results in their areas.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I have been contacted by some shooting organisations so that I can put this on the Minister's plate. The Countryside Alliance and the British Association for Shooting and Conservation have expressed concern about firearm certificate renewals and new applications across the whole of mainland England and Wales. They have indicated to me that there is not a uniform system of renewing firearm certificates. We must remember that those who have such certificates are the most law-abiding people in the whole of the UK. Will he assure us today that firearms licensing will be delivered equally across all counties and police forces in England and Wales?

Kit Malthouse: Obviously, it is a responsibility of the local PCC and the chief constable to make sure that they deliver the services they are mandated to deliver in

an effective way. The hon. Gentleman will be pleased to hear that I held a meeting two weeks ago with the British Shooting Sports Council, and one or two of its constituent members, to discuss exactly some of the difficulties he raises. This is on my list; alongside being Policing and Crime Minister, I am the firearms Minister. The hon. Gentleman should be assured that I will be paying attention to that issue in the months to come.

The horrific attack in Streatham just weeks ago showed that the threat of terrorism in this country remains all too real. I know that all our thoughts are with the victims and all those affected, and I would like to pay tribute to the remarkably brave police officers who stopped the attacker before more harm was done. To keep people safe, we must also invest in our homeland security, which is why this settlement increases funding for counter-terrorism policing by £90 million to more than £900 million. That includes a continuation of the £24 million uplift in armed policing.

We are also tackling high-harm crimes that devastate families, towns and communities. Serious and organised crime exploits the vulnerable and fuels much of the horrific violence on our streets, so we will allocate £155 million next year to help the police fight back—this includes funding new capabilities for tackling illicit finance. We are also investing in national policing priorities that benefit all forces across the country. That includes making sure we keep up with the criminals we are pursuing. Our systems simply must be up to scratch to help us stay one step ahead as crime evolves. We will invest £516 million to improve police technology in 2020-21, which will upgrade critical infrastructure such as replacing the Airwave communication system with the 4G emergency services network. It will also fund the development of the law enforcement data service, replacing the existing police national computer and police national database.

The funding I have set out represents an unprecedented scale of investment in our police forces, but we must not lose sight of the fact that this is public money that we are spending, and the public expect to see a return on that investment. This Government are clear that the police must continue to focus on improving efficiency and productivity to deliver value for money for the people they serve. Members should be in no doubt: I will be holding the police to account for their spending and performance, because we are a Government driven by the people's priorities. The demand of these hard-working, honest, law-abiding people is simple: they want to see more police on our streets and less crime, and they expect us, as public servants, to deliver. So, today we have provided the funding needed to do just that.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Does the Minister not accept that increasing the precepts at a local level means that too much of the burden is borne by our constituents in their council tax total? It may be described as another pound a week or whatever, but that is on top of all the other council tax increases that they face. It is just £1 too many for them.

Kit Malthouse: That is obviously a judgment for the local police and crime commissioner to make. We chose to limit the uplift in cash terms so that even those forces that raise a relatively small proportion of their funding from council tax could benefit as well, but in the end it is something that, as I say, police and crime commissioners

[Kit Malthouse]

will have to decide for themselves and take their chances in May. I hope and believe that the British people are willing to pay an extra 20p a week to improve their security, but I should say that it is £248 million alongside a huge investment from the Government. In the end, it is all the public's money. Our money is not magicked from anywhere; the public pay it. Whether they pay through council tax or other means, their priority is that we should invest in our police officers. The recruitment of 20,000 new police officers is wildly popular.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): What particular provision is being made to address the problems of rural policing, especially in rural Wales?

Kit Malthouse: As a Member of Parliament who also represents a rural community—220 square miles of glorious Hampshire countryside—rural crime is at the top of my list, too. The hon. Gentleman will know that across the police and crime commissioners community significant effort has been put into a rural crime network, and I will be keen to sit down with them in the months to come to see what more can be done. It is worth pointing out that although specific aspects of rural crime—whether that is poaching, machinery theft or whatever—are perhaps different, too many of our rural communities are now plagued by the sort of crime that we became used to seeing only in metropolitan areas. One of my key priorities is that forces that have large rural communities recognise that dealing with serious violence has to be top of their list, just as it is in London, Manchester or Liverpool.

The police must now play their part. To ensure that they deliver, we have attached a number of expectations to the settlement: first, we expect to see continued efficiency savings by the use of collaborative procurement through a new commercial operating model, BlueLight Commercial; secondly, we expect forces to work with us to develop an approach to drive maximum value from the funding spent on police technology; thirdly, we expect forces to use the uplift in their core grant funding to cover the wider costs and infrastructure improvements needed to accommodate and deploy the additional officers effectively; and finally, we expect forces to improve productivity through digital, data and technology solutions, including mobile working. Through the National Policing Board, the Home Secretary and I will personally hold the sector to account for the delivery of improvements.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): I realise that the Minister will naturally focus his resources on uniformed officers—we understand that—but I wish to ask about technical capability, particularly in relation to revenge porn. I introduced a private Member's Bill that would have made it a criminal offence to distribute people's private explicit sexual images without their consent. That is now illegal, but it is not clear that the police have the resources or capability to deliver on the law, because thousands of cases are reported and only a handful go to court. There are also legal issues relating to the showing of malicious intent and not having anonymity of victims. Will the Minister ensure that the capabilities are there and work with other Ministers to ensure that the new online harms Bill enables more prosecutions of these hideous crimes?

Kit Malthouse: The growth of online criminality in all its forms is alarming to us all, and not least to those of us who have teenagers or young people who are uniquely exposed to it in a way that perhaps we were not in the formative stages of our lives. The hon. Gentleman is quite right that the online harms White Paper will look at some of this stuff. There is no doubt about it: the police do not necessarily have all the capabilities that they need in what is a fast-evolving area of crime. We are having that conversation on an ongoing basis with the National Crime Agency and with policing more widely. There is, however, a wider sense that the platforms that enable these kinds of communications need to step forward, as everybody else in this country is going to step forward to tackle crime, and shoulder their share of the responsibility for making sure that our young people in particular but frankly everybody can live a life unmolested and untroubled by crime. It is certainly an aspiration of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport that that should be the case. Crime cannot be solved by the police alone; it takes us all, in a sensible and civilised society, to stand shoulder to shoulder with them, whether in a commercial guise or a personal guise, to help them in the mission of driving down crime and making sure that we live in a safe country.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): The 347 extra officers in Greater Manchester will be welcomed, particularly by my residents in Bramhall and Cheadle Hulme who have been really suffering and are very worried about the rates of acquisitive crime and burglary, sometimes accompanied by violence. I met the Greater Manchester Mayor and police and crime commissioner to ask him to submit a safer streets fund bid on my behalf, and I hope it will be successful. I am concerned that since July the police data for crime in our area has not been available because of a failure of the computerised system. Does the Minister agree that we need the reassurance of knowing the crime rates in our local areas before we can tackle them?

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The police cannot fly blind; data is critical to their job. I well know the problems of Manchester and asked the chief inspector of constabulary to go and have a look at some of the issues there. I am pleased that my hon. Friend is encouraging the Mayor to make a bid to the safer streets fund. We know that relatively simple modifications to architecture or the built environment can significantly reduce some acquisitive crimes. I gather that, as long as residents use them, the fitting of gates to alleys can reduce burglary by around 40-odd per cent., and we know that better street lighting can reduce acquisitive crime by around 17%. There are simple things that can be done, and we have £25 million to show what can be done in the hope that Treasury colleagues will then see it as an investable proposition for the future that if we make small adjustments to the way that we live, we can “design out” crime.

The settlement demonstrates the strength of the Government's support for our outstanding police. We are backing them to build a more secure Britain and empowering them to deliver safer streets for the people we all serve. Members should have no doubt that the settlement represents a new golden age for policing in this country and a dark day for criminality. I commend the motion to the House.

6.27 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): I listened with interest to the Minister's presentation. In particular, I listened when he described the Conservative party as the natural party of law and order. Not all of our constituents would agree with that, having seen the relative cuts in funding and the spike in violent crime. I shall return to that later.

I wish to say at the outset that the Opposition will not be opposing the police funding settlement, but we remind the Minister that it is not just about the total settlement but about the police funding formula. For five years Ministers have been promising to revise the police funding formula, and I argue that that is a concern not just for Opposition Members but for Members of all parties. Ministers have had five years. Perhaps they can make greater haste in something that is so key to the effective fighting of crime in all parts of our country.

Although we are far from satisfied with the Government's plans for policing overall, the Opposition believe that this is the first time since the Labour Government that there has been a funding settlement for the police that does not in real terms undermine them further, so in the circumstances it would be wrong to oppose this particular funding settlement. Let me be equally clear, though: I do not want to be cruel, but the Opposition have no confidence in this Government to restore policing to its proper strength or to tackle serious crime. I strongly doubt—I shall explain why—that the Government will even meet their own pledge to recruit an extra 20,000 police officers. I see Government Members who are new to the House looking shocked, but I remind them of this Prime Minister's track record on policing and police recruitment.

When the current Prime Minister was Mayor of London in 2012—those of us who are London MPs remember that well—he sent a list of nine promises to every household in London. His political marketing claimed that it was his “nine-point plan for Greater London”. No. 4 on the list was:

“Making our streets and homes safer with 1,000 more police on the beat”.

I have to tell the House that this pledge was never met, even though it was signed by the current Prime Minister himself, so I do not think that his record on policing provides much confidence that he will meet his manifesto commitment to recruit 20,000 extra police.

Secondly, I want to turn to an issue with the funding settlement, which is inadequate even in its own terms. When the Minister announced the funding settlement, the Home Office claimed that it was the biggest for a decade, but that was a decade of cuts in police funding—cuts made by Ministers now on the Government Front Bench. It is not much of a boast when the settlement represents an uplift only when compared with the cuts made in previous years.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that what the settlement actually means for West Midlands Police—the second largest police force in the country—is a funding gap of about £10 million, so it will have to make savings despite the settlement?

Ms Abbott: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for bringing some reality to the discussion.

The Opposition have learnt that police chiefs have also recently been told to find another £165 million in 2019-20 and up to £417 million in 2020-21 as a result of the overhaul of pension schemes recently announced by the Treasury. We of course support better police pensions, and indeed better public sector pensions in general, but we do so by arguing that they should be properly funded, whereas Ministers want the money to support them to come out of the extra moneys that they are announcing today. The amount provided in the funding settlement to cover the pension changes is nowhere near the amount it will cost the police. There is a real risk that, with this poor beginning, the Government will fail to meet their total recruitment target. I hope that Government Members are taking due note.

Thirdly, I want to question the Government's entire approach to this matter, because although police numbers are a key factor, they are only one aspect of combating serious and violent crime. The Government's goal must be to keep our citizens safe, but their track record is abysmal. I know that this set of Ministers like to pretend that the record of the past 10 years has nothing to do with them, but most of the Ministers now in office voted for the police cuts that have been made. This is continuity Toryism, and they are continuity Tories.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): Is the right hon. Lady very proud of the Labour Mayor's record on tackling crime in London?

Ms Abbott: As we know, the Labour Mayor is ultimately dependent on funding from the Government. Given the funding available, I am confident that Sadiq Khan has done the very best he can. The issue comes back to the totality of funding and the police funding formula.

The Tories cut the police and they should own it—cuts have consequences. But they also did much worse: they presided over soaring serious and violent crime, and an abysmally low detection and sanction rate—cautions or charges—even for some of the most serious crimes. The latest crime data for the year ending September 2019 was recently published. It shows a 7% rise in offences involving knives or sharp instruments recorded by the police. That is 46% higher than when comparable recording began—in the year ending March 2011—and the highest on record. That is the Government's record.

Offences involving firearms hit a low in March 2015 but have risen since. Robbery offences are at a 10-year high. Fraud incidents are up sharply and now there are almost 4 million fraud crimes a year, often impacting on some of the most vulnerable members of our communities. Over the long term, the trend in total crime had been downwards, but under successive Tory-led Governments since 2010 that overall progress has stalled. A key part of this is the fact that central Government funding for police and crime commissioners has fallen by 30% in real terms since 2010-11.

Mr Kevan Jones: Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is also moving money from the most deprived areas to some of the wealthiest? For example, 50% of properties in County Durham are in band A, so the ability to raise a great deal of money locally is quite limited, unlike in Surrey or Woking, where, given the larger council tax base, further money can be raised. This is moving money from poor areas and giving it to wealthier areas.

Ms Abbott: My right hon. Friend raises a key point about the precept. Ministers like to claim that by generously allowing PCCs to raise a greater precept, they are somehow doing them a favour. The truth is that reliance on money raised by the precept hits poorer communities that have lower house prices harder. It is not equitable to be endlessly praying in aid the precept, rather than providing proper funding from the centre.

Matt Western: My right hon. Friend is being generous in giving way. To elaborate on her point, in Warwickshire there was a 12% increase in the precept last year, and I think we are now seeing an increase of another 5%. Of course, wages increases are way off those increases, so the public are facing a really regressive tax. It is unfair, as my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) explained.

Ms Abbott: The precept is a regressive tax, and the Government should think twice before making out that their increasing reliance on precept-raised funds is some sort of progressive move.

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): With a 6.6% increase for Surrey and a 7.9% increase for County Durham, does the right hon. Lady not agree that this is a down payment on the Government's levelling-up agenda for police forces across the country?

Ms Abbott: What can I say—nice try?

The National Audit Office recently said that the Home Office

“does not know if the police system is financially sustainable.”

That is the National Audit Office talking about Home Office Ministers.

However, the Government did not confine austerity to police officer numbers; they also cut thousands of police community support officers and thousands of police support and administrative staff. That has had two consequences. First, there has been a huge detriment to community policing, which is often the first eyes and ears on everything from vandalism and petty crime all the way through to terrorist threats. Secondly, the cuts to admin staff, often dismissively called “backroom staff” on the Government Benches, have meant that police officers have had to do more of their own admin work, so less time is available for police work as such.

The consequences have been terrible, as most of our constituents know. Compared with the previous year, the proportion of crimes resulting in a charge or summons fell by one percentage point, from 8.7% to 7.4%—the lowest ever recorded. That continues a downward trend since March 2015, when 15% of crimes were resolved with a charge or summons. No category of crime registered a majority of prosecutions. The sad fact is that too much crime goes undetected, largely because of a shortage of police officers, and therefore unpunished, and the public are all too well aware of that. It is truly shocking that the very lowest prosecution or summons rate was in cases of rape, with just one in 70 cases leading to charges. In all cases of violence against the person, just one in 13 cases led to charges or summonses. As we have argued consistently, cuts have consequences.

Alex Cunningham: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way. She is outlining the things on which all this extra money needs to be spent. In his

response to me, the Minister suggested that the extra £10 million for Cleveland—that is half of what we have lost since 2010—should be used to tackle violent crime, but other areas where violent crime is actually lower get specific targeted resources from a separate fund. That is not fair. Does she share my bewilderment as to why Ministers seem to be blind to the needs of Teesside?

Ms Abbott: I entirely share my hon. Friend's concern that the people of Teesside do not appear to be treated fairly. Cuts have consequences—in Cleveland as well as everywhere else. Over the past 10 years, almost every conceivable social factor has contributed to rising crime. Ministers did not mention these things, but let me remind the House that youth services have been slashed, schools have been encouraged to exclude pupils, inequality and poverty have been made worse, some of our young people have become resigned to a life of zero-hours contracts, and drug and alcohol rehabilitation funding has been slashed. Mental health funding has been decimated, as, too, has the probation service, which we have seen in the probation activities in relation to recent terrorist activity. The criminal justice system is in crisis. Our prisons have become places where a person is more likely to become a hardened criminal, a drug user, or radicalised.

It is an abysmal record of failure. Ministers cannot expect their claims of being the natural party of law and order to be taken seriously when they have allowed the criminal justice system to fall into this state. It is no use these Ministers simply partially making good some of the police cuts that this Tory Government have made—that is all that has been claimed of this policy. They are not even restoring all the cuts that they have made since 2010. Effectively tackling crime is not just about funding the police properly, but about funding all those services, such as the youth service, education and the NHS, which help to bear down on crime. The Government do not intend to do that, and we on this side of the House believe that without a proper level of funding for the police force, for schools, for youth services and for the NHS, we will continue to see the negative consequences. There will be a spiral of violent crime, which causes so much fear in all our communities.

6.42 pm

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. Just before I start, may I remind the Opposition that we are in this plight because of the spendthrift ways with which they ruined our country?

Alex Cunningham: You've had 10 years, man. Ten years.

Richard Drax: Ten years is how long it was predicted to take to get this country back. I know the Opposition do not like to hear it, but that is the truth of the matter. *[Interruption.]* Yes, there was a banking crisis too, but the people of this country do not forget the spendthrift ways of the Opposition.

Mr Kevan Jones: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Richard Drax: No, I will not give way, because others wish to speak. There are maiden speeches to be given, and I very much look forward to hearing them.

May I first pay tribute to Dorset police—the chief constable and all the officers who serve under Dorset police?

Chris Loder (West Dorset) (Con): Hear, hear!

Richard Drax: Ah, there is another Dorset MP in his place. The Dorset police do a fantastic job, as I am sure my hon. Friend would agree.

The aim of the police, in my view, is to prevent crime and to catch criminals—that is it. I welcome my hon. Friend the Minister to his place. He is doing a wonderful job, as he always has, and will be an extremely able Minister. I am sure he would agree that the police have more and more pressures piled on them, from looking after people with mental health issues to picking up wandering dogs. That is not their job. Their job is to catch criminals and to prevent crime. A lot of their time is taken up with doing other tasks. I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for this increase in our funding, but I must remind him, as I have done in the past, that Dorset is near the bottom of the pile. We welcome the levelling up, but more levelling up is needed, and the funding formula, which Opposition Members have mentioned, definitely needs to be looked at.

Before I get on to the three points that the police and crime commissioner has asked me to raise, I would like to touch on minor crime. I will not speak for very long. We hear time and again about the effects of minor crime. As a journalist for 17 years, I covered those sorts of things, and I saw the damage that they did. One old lady, for example, lost all her belongings when a burglar stole her husband's war medals. She died a year later from a broken heart. That is not a minor crime. It is burglary, which is very serious, and the effects of it are devastating. That is why we need more police officers on the beat. I understand that the nature of crime has changed and that more officers are now behind the scenes dealing with online crime and all those things. I get that, but that does not negate the need for men and women in uniform—not in yellow jackets. Can we get them back in their blue uniforms with the proper hats, please, so that we know what a policeman looks like? They stand for law and order. They are not a whole bunch of children on a sort of trail with yellow jackets all over the place. We need more officers on the beat, so that people can actually see them and the criminals who are about to commit a crime can see them. That means foot patrols in our cities, our towns and our villages. There is nothing that beats a foot patrol. I know that because I am an ex-soldier who served in Northern Ireland. That was our job—to deter the terrorist and, in the event, to catch them in the act.

Tom Hunt: Does my hon. Friend agree that in tackling crime, the police should spend far less time hounding members of the public for what they may or may not think on societal issues, such as in the case of Harry Miller and Humberside police, and far more time taking the side of the law-abiding majority and cracking down on the activities of Extinction Rebellion activists that we saw in Cambridge last week?

Richard Drax: I absolutely concur with my hon. Friend. As my colleagues know, I am very forthright in my views. Why did those police stand there while those activists dug up the lawn? If I did that, I would lose my job, my reputation—everything. They did not. Why not?

That cannot be right. This is why we need more officers, to catch these people who are committing minor crimes. Minor crime undermines morale in our rural environment, in our towns and in our cities. Antisocial behaviour is another classic case in point. We need the police officers to jump on it, and jump on it fast.

Let me turn to the three points that I quickly want to make. We have a huge influx of tourists, and the funding formula does not cater for that. I would welcome some clarity on that when one of the Ministers sums up.

As part of the uplift programme, we have 50 new officers, whom we welcome. This is very good news. This uplift will take place over three years, and we expect another 120—I hope they come—but the police budgets are confirmed only one year at a time. A multi-year settlement would greatly help forces to plan for the future. Perhaps the Minister can expand on that when he sums up.

My final point relates to cases of fraud against the older population, which is becoming far too frequent. Sadly, many elderly people—many of my constituents—have been done on the telephone by these awful people who go to great lengths to sound like a bank or whatever it may be. The PCC said that he is mindful of the current review of serious and organised crime and aware of the negative publicity surrounding the national agency, Action Fraud. Does the Government have plans to deal with fraud in a different and more effective way in the future?

May I conclude in the same way that I started, by praising Dorset police and all the brave men and women who keep us safe both in the day and at night?

6.48 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): May I begin by agreeing with the Minister and thanking all the people who work for our police force—not just the men and women in uniform, but the community support officers and the support staff? Certainly, I thank those individuals in County Durham who work under the inspiring leadership of Jo Farrell, the chief constable, and her senior management team. I have not yet had an opportunity to mention the former police and crime commissioner, Ron Hogg, who sadly died in December. Ron was a great public servant, not only as a senior police officer, but as a visionary police and crime commissioner. He will be greatly missed across politics in County Durham. He had dedication to not just policing but the community. That shows the best of our police; they are not separate from, but part of, their community.

The Government's new strategy aims to create the impression that December 2019 was year zero—that they had no responsibility for, or involvement at all in, anything that happened before that. The Prime Minister and Ministers prattle on at great length, like a flock of constipated parrots, about how another 20,000 police officers will make all the difference, but they do not say what they had to do with our having fewer police officers on our streets today. We are also given the impression that these “extra” 20,000 officers—they are not extra; they are replacement officers, restoring the number that the Government took away—will somehow solve all our local criminal justice and crime problems, and will be the panacea.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Does the right hon. Member agree that there is so much more to policing with a small p than police officers? The best way to deal with crime—petty crime, knife crime and serious violence—is to deal with its causes, and to take a more holistic approach through health and education.

Mr Jones: I do not disagree, and I shall come on to some of those points. Even if we get 20,000 more police officers, the population in this country has grown since 2010 from 62.8 million people to 67.2 million. The idea that 20,000 officers would make up for that difference, and enable local police to deal with the responsibilities and pressures on them, is absolute and complete nonsense.

Take the example of County Durham. I am glad that my new neighbour, the hon. Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden), is here. Since 2010, Durham constabulary has lost 380 police officers. Through the money being provided by the Government, it will gain 226. There will still be 154 fewer police officers than in 2010. No doubt in this debate we will again hear a lot about levelling up—it is the in phrase. I doubt that in the police and crime commissioner elections, Conservatives will go around saying, “The Conservatives have cut 154 police officers in Durham,” but that is the fact. The issue is not just the numbers; it is also experience. We have lost a huge number of officers with many years’ experience. Since 2010, some have taken early retirement and others have left the force. The idea that we can replace that expertise and knowledge with new police officers is complete and utter nonsense.

Demands on our police are increasing; Members have referred to fraud and cyber-crime, and as my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) pointed out, there has been a withdrawal of services in other sectors as a result of austerity. Mental ill health, for example, is creating a huge issue for local police; unfortunately, in many areas, because of cuts, the police are the last resort when it comes to mental health, though they should not be. Youth services and other services that have been cut have led to the issues being generated on our streets.

Police do not work in silos. They are part of our community. The Minister said that the Conservative party was the natural party of law and order. I am sorry, but the record speaks for itself. Putting aside the soundbite of 20,000 extra police officers, let us look at what the Conservative party has done. There are 20,000 fewer police officers, and there has been a 20% cut in real terms to the police budget. We can have as many more police officers as we want, but if the court system cannot cope, it is no good putting police on the beat. In the last 10 years, 25% of the Crown Prosecution Service’s lawyers have been cut, and a third of its staff have gone. I am sorry, but dealing with crime in this country is not all about the police, and they would recognise that.

We can add to that the closure of courts. Since 2010, 162 courts have closed, and 50% of the courts estate has been axed. In my area, we used to have magistrates courts in Consett, Chester-le-Street and Durham. There is now one, in Peterlee, in the east of the county—not the easiest place to get to for those in my constituency and that of the hon. Member for North West Durham. That is a capacity problem, and it has also broken the key link between magistrates and their local area. I am not criticising them in any way, but those on the magistrates

bench in Peterlee are not connected to many local communities. That makes a fundamental difference to their being able to understand the nature of the people who come before them.

Mr Holden: I agree with the right hon. Member about Ron Hogg, who was very much part of the community in County Durham and was well respected. Does he agree that the police and crime commissioner is the essential link with the community, and that someone with police experience, like Ron Hogg, is exactly who should represent the community in our great county?

Mr Jones: Ron was a very good friend of mine, but he was not a typical police officer. The hon. Gentleman may be trying to portray him as a hard-line “hang ’em and flog ’em” person, but Ron was far from that. We see that in his invention and implementation of Checkpoint, the alternative justice system, which is making a real difference in Durham. If the hon. Gentleman is saying that the only qualification needed by the police and crime commissioner is being a former police officer, then I am sorry, but I do not agree with him. Ron played a variety of roles in his life, but what he brought to the post was a passion for community, and for making sure that the underdog was listened to; those were the important things. He was not afraid to take on those, including members of the Conservative party, who accused him at the last PCC election of being soft on criminals because he introduced Checkpoint. He was far from soft on criminals, but he wanted to ensure that the systems that he put in place solved the problem, rather than just getting a soundbite for a headline, which unfortunately is what the Government are doing.

Do we need more police officers on the streets? Yes, but we cannot get away from what has happened in the past 10 years. I am sorry, but it is no good the Minister saying that this is a great settlement; looking at what has happened in communities, it is not. Policing is not in a silo; the prison population, for example, is bursting at the seams, and if we do not soon get a system that enables people to be diverted away from prison, I am not sure how the system will cope. There is nothing worse than the victims of crime seeing perpetrators get away, not because the police cannot detect them, but because the court system is incapable of dealing with them.

If the Government wanted a new start, I would have preferred it if they had looked at the criminal justice system as a whole, instead of focusing on what would get them headlines. “20,000 more police officers” is an easy soundbite to remember; “25% more CPS lawyers”, for example, does not have the same ring to it, because many of our constituents are not aware of the vital role that those lawyers play in ensuring that very bad people get taken off the streets.

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman talks about the holistic nature of the system that means it needs to be looked at together. Does he agree that we should take a leaf out of the book of what has happened in Wales—and now, increasingly, in Cornwall, and in Devon, in my constituency—in looking at cross-working between fire, police and ambulance services? As he said, many crimes have some basis in health matters, particularly mental health matters, and

therefore working together, given the services' different strengths and weaknesses and their different geographical nature, would be a very good way of trying to look at this holistically and make best use of the resources that we do have.

Mr Jones: It is no good starting to take money out of certain parts of the system such as mental health services or local councils' support to local communities if we do not tackle, for example, the social care agenda. I will give the hon. Lady the example of an individual who has dementia or Alzheimer's and leaves her home. That takes up a huge amount of police time. They are the responders who have to look for that individual. That ties up resources. I totally agree that there has to be a holistic approach, but it has to be joined up. Austerity was not that. Austerity was to see what the Government could slash out of the system and where. This Government have taken too much out of certain parts of the system.

If the Minister wants to get back the mantle of the party of law and order, he has to put money back into the court system, back into policing, and back into the probation service—because the Horlicks that was made of that system, in which we want to rehabilitate people, has put the thing back even further. Yes, a holistic approach is fine in talking about the structures of what policing, ambulance and fire services do. They already work very closely together. But that will not save money if we are taking big chunks of 20% out of the budget overall.

Let me finally turn to financing, which was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western). This is a debate that has to be had. How should our policing be funded? This Government have an approach that they have in local government as well—if anyone wants to wait until later on, they can perhaps hear my contribution to the next debate as well. The Government are moving away from centrally allocated moneys to locally raised finance. The argument behind this is that it is more democratic and allows local people to have a say. That is complete nonsense. It is about reducing the amount that central Government have to pay out and pushing the burden on to local taxpayers.

The Minister said that he will give local police and crime commissioners the freedom to raise the precept to a certain amount. That is holding a gun to their head. They have no option when they are faced with things such as the issue around police pensions referred to by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington, which they have to do to the maximum. That moves money around the country, from poor areas such as mine to the more affluent areas. In County Durham, under the way that the system works at the moment, because 50% of our properties are in band A, the ability to raise large amounts of additional revenue locally is limited compared with Surrey, or somewhere else that has a larger tax base and perhaps a larger number of band G and band H properties and so is able to raise a lot more money. If that continues, the ability of areas such as County Durham to raise revenue for policing will decline.

The big debate is partly about extra police numbers—yes, we do need extra police numbers: we need to restore the 20,000, and I look forward to the campaign by the hon. Member for North West Durham for the extra 154 police officers who are needed even to get back to where we were in 2010—but if we do not have a big debate about

how our police are funded, then we will continue with this process that means that poor areas will get poorer, and the blame game that this Government want to play on the level of policing will continue. That will do nothing at all to help the professional people we rely on for our public safety at local level or to protect the communities that we all represent.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call Laura Farris to make her maiden speech.

7.4 pm

Laura Farris (Newbury) (Con): It is an absolute honour to make my maiden speech today, 100 years to the day since Nancy Astor, the first woman to take her seat in Parliament, made hers. It is also an honour to make this speech as the MP for Newbury, succeeding Richard Benyon, who represented us for 15 years. Richard was totally dedicated to the community. He was a brilliant campaigner who, during his time in this House, slashed rough sleeping, championed mental health services, secured transformative upgrades to the train service and, after some devastating winters, brought in permanent flood defences that have protected thousands of homes during the battering we have seen over the last fortnight. He was an outstanding Minister at DEFRA and a true environmentalist. Whether it was protecting global marine life or introducing beavers to the River Kennet, there was no issue, big or small, that he would not fight for. He is missed in Newbury. Even now, 10 weeks after my election, there are people who have taken the trouble to look up their new MP, written out my email address and begun their email with, "Dear Richard"—I think perhaps more in hope than expectation.

It is the honour of my life to represent my home in Parliament: where I was born and where I grew up. That place is in my bones. The constituency takes its name from the town but it includes two others, Thatcham and Hungerford, surrounded by a web of west Berkshire villages that run approximately from the west of Reading to the Wiltshire border. It is home to Vodafone, the constituency's biggest employer; the Atomic Weapons Establishment in Aldermaston; and the famous racecourse, of course. As of last week, I can add that we boast the best pub in the country—the Bell at Aldworth.

Ninety-five per cent. of our schools are good or outstanding, but the thing that I am most proud of is the quality of provision for special educational needs. We have Mary Hare School for the deaf, which has the largest sixth form for deaf students in the country and sends many of them on to further education and university. We also have The Castle School, which provides an outstanding education for children with particularly complex special educational needs.

It is a beautiful part of the world. If you go up to the Berkshire downs in Lambourn to see the racehorses training at dawn, you will find country that is as wild as Dorset, but if you plunge down the pathways that link the villages of Bucklebury, Stanford Dingley and Frilsham in the east, you will find woodlands that are as mythic as anything in English folklore. It has context in the story of this nation. During the civil war, there were about 48 hours when the history of England was determined on the battlefields of Newbury. It has felt the smack of resistance during the Greenham peace camp and the pulse of insurgency during the protests over the Newbury bypass.

[*Laura Farris*]

And it has experienced catastrophic human tragedy—the Hungerford massacre, the dark day in 1987 when that little town endured the mass shooting of 17 people.

Those last incidents took place during my childhood and are scored deeply on my memory, because at the time it was my father who was the MP. He served the seat for 18 years until 1992, and he was the MP when I was born. The way that he supported, defended and championed that community, particularly through its darkest hour, shaped my entire view of public service. I am not the first daughter to take her father's seat—it has happened once before: on the Labour Benches, in the seat of North West Durham—but it is the first time that it has happened in my party. Nearly 30 years have passed since my father died, and I was young when he did, but he sparked a passion for politics, and he always taught me to think freely and to keep testing my ideas. I think of him every day that I walk through these corridors and I am proud to follow in his footsteps.

This debate concerns the new funding settlement for the police. My constituency welcomes the £33 million for the Thames Valley police, from which we will benefit and which will lead to 50 new police officers. Before I entered the House, I worked as a barrister with a specialism in employment law, and I bring that interest to Parliament. I saw that, as with so many sectors of work, the primary challenge in employment is not always recruitment but the retention and development of staff in a modern society.

One of the great challenges we face is the age of our workforce. In the last 20 years, the number of people working beyond their 60s has quadrupled and, with an ageing population, that trend is likely to continue. I noticed in the cases I worked on that there was a fundamental divide between those who felt that, by their late 60s, they had earned the right to retire, and those who found the suggestion of retirement an absolute insult and felt that there was still a place for their skills and experience in the workplace. While we must, of course, respect personal choices, the fact remains that those who wish to continue working into their old age are sometimes treated as an eccentricity or an indulgence, rather than people of vigour and capability. There is an imperative for us to recalibrate our attitude to the potential and prospects of older people in the workforce.

We also need to think about the way we work. I am delighted that my party's manifesto raised the possibility of making flexible working the default for all jobs. For too long, flexible working has been confined to women, usually linked to motherhood and—tacitly, perhaps—to an inferior participation in the workplace. But all the research shows that, regardless of gender, the benefit that employees most value after their pay is the ability to work flexibly, whether in terms of location or hours. We know that flexibility has a crucial role to play in the retention of women, the reduction of the gender pay gap and the equitable distribution of home and childcare responsibilities, all of which I know to be core objectives of this Government's one nation agenda.

I conclude by saying that, in the cases I worked on, I saw that, for so many people, their job—or, their loss usually lost by the time they reached me of it,—was about so much more than pay. It was fundamental to their sense of self, in terms of what it said about their

talent, their dignity and their place in the world. So I will always fight for the jobs and security of my constituents, and it will be their opportunities and their aspirations that will guide my work in this House.

7.11 pm

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Newbury (Laura Farris) on her excellent maiden speech, which was thoughtful and thought-provoking. I lived and worked in Thatcham in the early '80s. We may not agree on everything in our time here, but what she says about the area is absolutely true, and listening to her description of it brought back many happy memories. I think we have all seen that she is a truly worthy successor to Richard Benyon.

I welcome the Government's commitment to beginning the process of restoring police numbers, although it is only fair to remind the House—including the hon. Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax)—that it was the Tory party, aided and abetted by their then friends the Lib Dems, who in 2010 embarked on the disastrous course of cutting police resources by 20% and ignored the warnings that it would lead to a rise in crime and undermine the police's ability to cope. Those warnings have been repeated by Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services, the Public Accounts Committee, the Home Affairs Committee and the chief constables of Greater Manchester and the West Midlands, who all acknowledge that the cuts have undermined the police in the battle against crime.

When confronted with that, the Government often cite—as the Minister did today—the need for the police to change because of the changing nature of crime. I accept the need to change as crime changes, but it is easier to manage such change if there is not a constant preoccupation with managing cuts, which is the problem that most police forces are living with. The cuts have made it harder to recruit new people with the skills and talents needed to tackle modern crime. They have made it harder to acquire new equipment and technology and, as we have heard from a number of people, they have led to collateral demand or cost shunting for the police, whereby reductions in other services because of austerity place extra demands on the police; mental health is a particularly good example.

I acknowledge that the police have tried to deal with these resource shortages. They have tried to redefine the issue of visibility with new initiatives such as online reporting and telephone interviews, but that approach falls down because of staff shortages. The chief constable of my force in the West Midlands said last April that what is “cheesing off” the public is the police's inability to get to grips with “the routine stuff” and the failure to return calls and follow up reports from the public. He simply does not have enough resources to do the routine stuff. That is seriously undermining public trust in the police, which is exacerbated by the switch to reactive policing because of the reduction in neighbourhood policing.

I want to raise two areas of particular concern: fraud and retail crime. Only last April, HMICFRS reported concerns about the lack of a national fraud strategy, which I am sure the Minister is aware of. It said that the disjointed approach to fraud was leaving “fraudsters feeling they can act with impunity”.

Last week, I was alerted to a fraud affecting a 68-year-old retired teacher who has been robbed of £157,000—money he built up in his pension pot—in a scam where the fraudster hacks and mimics the email of solicitors engaged in house conveyancing. The response he received from the City of London fraud review team seems to be more concerned with how quickly they can close the case than tracking the fraudster and recovering this poor gentleman's hard-earned cash. That is not right, Minister—something has to be done.

With retail crime, we see a problem that is reaching epidemic proportions. Traders have lost faith in the police. The value of goods stolen must exceed £200 before most forces will take the matter to court. Meanwhile, more than 100 shop workers are being attacked daily while simply trying to do their job. Retail crime is costing us around £2 billion per year. It is serious, and it ought to be policed.

I welcome any extra resources, but the problem of relying so heavily on the council tax precept to increase police resources is that it results in areas such as the West Midlands, which has the second largest force in the country and a complex range of crime, only being able to raise an extra £8.2 million through the precept because of the council tax base. I urge the Minister to review the demands made of forces such as the West Midlands and to help us find a better way of funding some of that demand. I hope he will be willing to meet a cross-party delegation from the West Midlands to consider some of the pressures the force faces. As I pointed out to the shadow Home Secretary, even after an increase in funding, the West Midlands will still experience a funding gap of £9.8 million this year, so further savings—further cuts—will be required. As the Minister knows, there will be significant pressures in the coming year in terms of pay and price inflation, and the force is wondering how that will be managed.

I genuinely welcome the Minister's efforts, and I hope he is right that this is a down payment. I hope we are about to embark on a sustained period of increasing police resources, as well as a constructive review of how policing needs to change. I hope the Minister will consider how we fund the extra demands being made of forces such as the West Midlands. I hope he will take on board the impact that the decline in neighbourhood policing is having on the public. I hope he will look again at neglected areas—what Chief Constable Thompson of the West Midlands calls “the routine stuff”—and respond to the growing problems of fraud and retail crime.

7.19 pm

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate about police funding, which is a particularly important issue for North Devon. North Devon faces significant pressures because of its relative isolation and rurality, and policing is no exception. Our police officers have a large geographical area to cover, different types of crime to prevent and limited opportunity to co-operate with other forces. This, on top of the fact that North Devon welcomes over 6 million visitors a year, means that our police need all the support they can get.

In this context, I welcome the increase in the budget for Devon and Cornwall police—up 7.4% for 2020-21. This will help to fund the recruitment of 141 new

officers, on top of the 176 through the police precept, while still being able to deliver on the 2.5% above-inflation pay increase that our officers thoroughly deserve. It is also good that the work of our police and crime commissioner, Alison Hernandez, will be supported.

I was glad that the Minister made reference to a greater focus on technology, and Devon and Cornwall has been at the forefront of that. Our police force was the first to have a dedicated drones team that can help to tackle rural crime, locate a missing person or help the police view hard-to-reach areas. We also have the country's first digital search dogs team, who are able to identify technology such as sim cards to track the evidence left by some of the worst and most serious criminals. When policing an area as large as North Devon, innovation is a necessity, and it comes as no surprise to see Devon and Cornwall take the lead.

Due to the unique circumstances of North Devon and the south-west peninsula, there are a number of long-standing issues that need to be addressed so that Devon and Cornwall police can see even greater benefits. The relative isolation of Devon and Cornwall police makes co-operation with neighbouring forces difficult. For example, only 10% of our force area lies within 7 miles of another force. This obviously limits the potential for cross-force co-operation, which might otherwise be a way of relieving some of the pressure on our officers.

Over the summer months, North Devon and the south-west see a swell in population. While our economy depends in large part on tourism, which I am only too glad to see continue, that does present challenges when it comes to policing. During the summer, the police see an 11% increase in the number of crimes committed, a 14% increase in the number of incidents and an 18% increase in the number of high-risk missing people. However, funding for our force remains considerably below the per person, per day average across the rest of England and Wales, and that is before we take the higher summer population into account.

North Devon has historically received less money than I believe it should, and this is a broader issue that affects a number of policy areas, whether it is schools, health or policing. I am glad that this Government are committed to levelling up every region of the UK, and we have made much progress towards a fairer funding settlement, but in my mind there is still some way to go. Our police force has shown itself to be innovative and determined, but there are some pressures that cannot be mitigated through innovation and determination alone.

I would like to end by reiterating my welcome for the additional funding. Despite the challenges that North Devon faces, the police grant report will represent a significant improvement in support for the police. I know Ministers are conscious of the issues we face, but I would love to extend an invitation to the Minister to come to North Devon to see for himself the triple impact of tourism, isolation and rurality.

7.24 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): It is a great pleasure to be able to speak in this debate, and to follow some excellent contributions from both sides of the House, particularly the speech of the new hon. Member for Newbury (Laura Farris). I have a

[Stephen Doughty]

slightly odd connection with Newbury. In fact, I used to sing in a group with the son of the late MP for Newbury, David Rendel, so I heard many good things about the constituency, and I have spent some time there myself. It was an excellent speech, and I look forward to seeing her contribution in the months and years to come.

I want to speak today about a series of issues arising from my interactions with the police both locally in my own constituency and in relation to some of the concerns we have explored on the Home Affairs Committee in the last couple of years. I will raise some concerns with Ministers that I hope the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), can address in her remarks.

First, I want to thank South Wales police and pay tribute to them for their work and that of police forces across Great Britain. I have had the privilege of engaging with them not only through the work of the Home Affairs Committee, but during the last year through taking part in the police parliamentary scheme. I have been able to get an insight, behind the scenes, into the day-to-day reality for our officers on the ground and on the frontline. That has included everything from meeting members of the National Police Air Service and hearing some quite harrowing tales of their experiences dealing with the Grenfell tragedy, right through to taking part in a unexpected but quite serious police chase down the M4 going after a dangerous individual. The police interceptor was sent to apprehend them, and I happened to be in the car at the time, which certainly brought home to me very directly the risks and challenges our police officers face every day.

I want to pay tribute to the work in my own local community. Just this afternoon, I have seen an excellent example of that. Two of our local PCSOs, Neil Crowley and Sa'ipolu Uhi, were actually in a partnership meeting in Cardiff bay, discussing tackling county lines, as well as knife violence, serious violence and drug dealing locally. In the middle of that meeting they were called out to deal with an incident of off-road disturbance happening in the Canal park in Butetown. That shows the many challenges and the many directions in which not only our police officers but our PCSOs are taken.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): As a fellow Welsh MP and an MP who is also involved in tackling drug trafficking, may I welcome this motion to approve the police grant report, which will increase funding for extra officers throughout England and Wales? For North Wales police, this means a 10.4% increase, which equates to an additional £10.8 million. North Wales police is a force to be reckoned with, and it has been tackling drug rings on Ynys Môn and the surrounding area, but it needs our support. I would also like to thank the Minister for Crime, Policing and the Fire Service for meeting me recently to hear feedback from my meeting with a police chief inspector at Llangefni police station. My hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) mentioned co-operation—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Interventions should by their very nature be brief, so could the hon. Lady just bring her remarks to a close, please?

Virginia Crosbie: I would like to conclude by thanking the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) for allowing me to make this intervention.

Stephen Doughty: Having been through these experiences myself in the past, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will show the hon. Lady some generosity of spirit. Of course, we all welcome more resources for the police in Wales, whether that is in south Wales or north Wales, but it is important—I want to come on to this—to put those in context.

I raised this with the Minister during his remarks earlier, but the reality is that while new resource has been granted to Wales, we have seen a decline in the number of police officers from 3,400 to 2,800 since 2011, yet the increase promised in this new uplift is just 136. The Minister talked a lot in his speech about levelling up and remarks made by Conservative Members have been about levelling up, but I would like to see some levelling up when it comes to Cardiff, the capital city of Wales. This is an issue that I, the chief constable of South Wales police and our police and crime commissioner, Alun Michael, have regularly raised with Ministers in private, and I hope the Minister will take it on board.

The reality is that Cardiff, as a capital city, does not receive the same funding that Edinburgh, London or Belfast receives. Yet, it is a seat of government and increasingly a seat of major national events—from the Champions League final to major concerts and other major events—and, quite rightly, we want to ensure that those events are safe and can take place, and that they bring in extra resources and extra tourism to south Wales, which is absolutely fantastic. We are all behind that, but the reality is that they often create pressures and demands on our day-to-day policing that, for a capital city and a city location, are significant.

I say that having seen some of the real demands, whether it is dealing with extremism from different ends of the spectrum, county lines, knife crime or serious violence, and of course the challenges we all face across the country, whether it is domestic violence, hate crime or violence against individuals from particular communities. The reality is that there is often a lag or a hang-over effect from dealing with major events in Cardiff, and I urge Ministers constantly to look again at the funding formula for Cardiff and at why Cardiff is losing out compared with other capital cities across the UK.

It is a fact that the South Wales police grant has actually been cut by a third since 2011, which is the highest cash reduction in Wales when we compare it with other centrally funded public services. We have not seen the covering of other costs in this settlement today—I am thinking, for example, of the end of the police transformation fund and the fact that we used to get £3 million a year for capital costs, which are of course significant in a city location, and which this year is down to just £0.26 million. The capital city underfunding sees us short-changed by about £4 million. I urge Ministers to look at that and to look at the context of the particular challenges that we face.

I want to come on to just three areas in particular, which have wider ramifications, and not just for my own area. First, I welcome today's decision by the Home Office to proscribe two serious extreme-right organisations, Sonnenkrieg Division and System Resistance Network. That is something that I and others have been campaigning

on in both public and private for some time given the risk that these neo-Nazi, sick, twisted organisations pose to citizens up and down the country—I have also had activities locally in my own patch. I welcome what the Minister had to say about extra resources for counter-terrorism, but we must see this in the round. We need to have the dedicated officers on the ground to provide that crucial intelligence and those crucial community relations, which are needed to ensure that these groups do not have an impact, but that if events do happen—as they did, regrettably, in Grangetown in my constituency where some sick, neo-Nazi, racist graffiti poured all around the south of Cardiff—the police are able to get out there and reassure communities. So we must look at this as requiring both specialist officers—I have worked closely with and am full of praise for them—and the wider policing family that sits around them. It also needs the Home Office backing them up. When concerns are being raised within the police, and by myself, others and external organisations, the Home Office needs to act quickly on these organisations; they must not linger, allowing them time to potentially commit further offences.

My second point is on serious violence and knife crime, which I have spoken about many times not only in the Chamber but also in Westminster Hall and the Home Affairs Committee. We have seen some very tragic events in south Wales recently—not on the scale that we have seen in London and elsewhere, but certainly not of a character that we would have seen in our communities some years ago. We have all united as a community to speak out against those who would carry knives or other weapons and engage in serious violence locally, but again that requires a holistic approach. It requires not just those crucial police officers on the ground, which we want the Home Office to be funding, but that wraparound, too. When the funding to Wales has been cut, resulting in cuts to, for example, our youth services, that has an impact. I am full of praise for what Cardiff Council has done, particularly on this front and also the fact that we have taken a public health approach locally and are working to develop a violence reduction unit locally with the Home Office. Those are important steps forward, but we cannot just look at these things in isolation. They require interventions across a wide range of services to ensure that we are not only dealing with the consequences when they happen, but also getting upstream and preventing young people from being caught up in drug dealing and serious violence.

Related to that, I have a particular concern regarding the online, or digital, world. The Minister made some light-hearted remarks earlier about the internet, but there is a very serious side to this. He will no doubt be aware that there have been some disgusting videos glamorising knife violence and drug dealing and the disposal of evidence by young people, filmed in my own constituency, which organisations such as YouTube have refused to remove, instead justifying it on the basis of artistic expression. I am sorry to say that I have found yet more of those videos in recent weeks, which I have raised with both the local police and YouTube, but I have yet to see them taken down. I would like to see both the action taken as recommended in the “Online harms” White Paper and resourcing and training made available for police to enable them to deal with the increasing challenge that is posed by this material online, which is radicalising and grooming our young people in the same way that we have seen some of the extremist

organisations doing so tragically in the past. Unfortunately, this is only going to become a larger area of work, and we need to ensure that both police and the wider judicial system are informed and trained and able to respond to that type of incident, because that is dragging our young people into some pretty horrific circumstances and glamorising that type of lifestyle.

The Minister for crime, the hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle, is in the Chamber and she will know that we have spoken about this issue both in the Chamber and outside it, but I want to highlight the particular challenges around hate crime. She knows that I have raised particular concerns about hate crime directed at the LGBT+ community. There have been some pretty shocking increases in that. It is not just due to an increase in reporting; it is a real rise in those crimes. What steps are Ministers going to take to ensure that the police not only have the resources but the training and the back-up to be able to ensure that there are successful prosecutions. Sometimes we are seeing things being reported and not followed through to the conclusion, whether that is crime directed against the LGBT community or against other protected characteristics? These things can often have life-changing consequences for individuals and in the very worst cases lead to very serious incidents of violence.

I want to see action in a whole series of areas from this Government, and no doubt we on the Home Affairs Committee and others will continue to hold them to account. This does require that core resourcing, however. The Welsh Labour Government invested in PCSOs, whose numbers have been cut elsewhere in the country, including in England. There is close partnership-working between the commissioner, the Welsh Government, our local councils, our health boards and others to ensure that we are all working together to tackle these challenges, but that needs to be backed up with resources from the UK Government and from the Home Office, because without that, we will, particularly as a capital city, lag behind and struggle to meet some of the challenges we face.

Finally, I would not normally bring up this sort of thing, but it has concerned me. I am fully respectful of the right of the royal couple, Harry and Meghan, to choose a different path for themselves, but I understand that there are some quite serious concerns being raised about the costs of policing and protection for them, which could apparently be spiralling to tens or hundreds of millions of pounds. I find that deeply concerning, because when we look at some of the challenges facing our own communities people will rightly ask, “Where’s the money for our police officers? Should we be funding that security overseas?” I think that is a very reasonable question to be asking.

7.36 pm

Julie Marson (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): It is a very special moment for me to be making my maiden speech exactly 100 years after Lady Astor made hers. I would first and foremost like to thank the people of Hertford and Stortford for their huge trust and the great responsibility they have given me, putting me here to serve them; it is truly the honour of my life. It is also a huge pleasure to be able to pay tribute to my predecessor, Mark Prisk. He was a dedicated Member of Parliament and a great public servant who represented constituency

[Julie Marson]

and country with diligence and dignity for 18 years. He served in Government as a business and enterprise Minister and as Minister for Housing, and was our trade envoy to the Nordic and Baltic nations and Brazil. He was also a stalwart of the parliamentary choir—one achievement that, fortunately for anyone who appreciates music, I will not be trying to emulate. Mark will be missed both in the constituency and in this place, and I am sure the whole House will join me in wishing him and Lesley all the very best in the future.

I am incredibly privileged to represent Hertford and Stortford, a mix of beautiful countryside and market towns and villages—a special place which manages both to be ancient yet contemporary, vibrant yet tranquil, and traditional yet progressive and which has a deep, deep sense of community. We have historic Hertford whose castle once hosted our very own Parliament in 1563 when London was seized by plague, and which boasts the country's largest, and unquestionably most magnificent, toothbrush collection; and we have beautiful Bishop's Stortford, an ancient staging post and centre of agriculture and beer making. Wonderful Ware is a famed coaching town and home of the eponymous great bed of Ware, one of the V&A's greatest treasures—and big enough, reputedly, to accommodate at least four couples. And we must not forget stunning Sawbridgeworth, mentioned in the Domesday Book and once home to Anne Boleyn.

With great transport links to London and, thanks to nearby Stansted airport, to the world, we are an integral part of the London-Stansted-Cambridge corridor, bursting with talent and creativity, home to the globally renowned Henry Moore Foundation and successful businesses large and small. But, in the beautiful words of Rudyard Kipling:

“Our England is a garden, and such gardens are not made
By singing—‘Oh, how beautiful!’ and sitting in the shade”.

We must work to preserve what we cherish. I will be a strong voice for our farmers and our rural heartland, and for the residents of our towns and villages who are experiencing and facing unprecedented development. I am adamant that if we must build, we must build beautifully. We must build in an environmentally sustainable way, and in a way that means all my constituents continue to benefit from outstanding public services and infrastructure.

This responsibility I undertake proudly and with a certain sense of wonderment, because my family has made a journey from workhouse to this place. My great-grandmother was born in a workhouse. My grandad was a docker in the east end of London. My dad was a policeman. I went to a grammar school and became the first member of my family to go to university when I won a place to read history at Cambridge. My parents are my inspiration. I know they are proud of me, but I do not know if they know how proud I am of them and how very grateful. If you will indulge me, Mr Deputy Speaker, I want to say thank you Ivan Ford and thank you Mary Ford. Now you are in *Hansard* forever and that is my tribute to you. I would also like to thank, from the bottom of my heart, my lovely husband Chris and my wonderful son Matthew, because without their love and support I could not do any of this.

I am the proud daughter of a policeman who was on duty during the coronation procession, who was outside the Iranian embassy when the SAS burst in, and who has his own bravery award, so it is a particular pleasure to speak in this debate. It will come as a surprise to absolutely nobody that I greatly welcome the Government's commitments to police numbers and funding, in particular the £15.9 million additional funding for Hertfordshire police. I know from experience that our police officers face challenges and dangers that most of us cannot begin to imagine, and they need and deserve our support. One of my first priorities as a Member of Parliament was the restoration of a police station in Ware and I am delighted that that is going to happen. It is great news for our wonderful local police and for our local residents.

After a 17-year career in finance and business, I took a career break to look after my son. During that time, I served as a magistrate. On my very first day, a boy walked in making his first ever appearance in an adult court. He was 18 but he was tiny, as he had been malnourished since he was a baby. He was grey and haggard, as he had regularly been given heroin by his parents to keep him quiet at night. By then, of course, he was himself a drug addict. He changed me and he inspired me. I am here to make a difference to people like him: the boy whose name I do not remember, but whose face I cannot forget. I want to be a champion for social impact bonds. I have seen them in action and I know that they can change lives: getting young people into work and education, getting people off the streets and improving children's social care.

In Hertford and Stortford, we have a strong Quaker history, with a tradition of philanthropy and belief in our communities. Social impact bonds honour that tradition. I believe capitalism is a force for good and that businesses across our nation want to and do contribute to the communities of which they are a part. We can harness that force, while at the same time empowering the families, communities, charities and social networks that make up civil society, what Edmund Burke called the “little platoons”, to enable them to help themselves and to help each other. This is just one of many things I would like to do while I am here, and I have things to say about a lot of other things, but if I can make even a small contribution to my wonderful constituency and our great country, my time in this place will be well spent.

7.44 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): May I start by paying tribute to two very fine maiden speeches we have heard tonight? The hon. Member for Newbury (Laura Farris) captured in poetic terms the beauty of her constituency. She also captured the tragedy of Hungerford. I know parts of her constituency well. For many years I represented, in the old Transport and General Workers Union, the workers at the Atomic Weapons Establishment. All I would say is that her dad would be very proud of her. Likewise, the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Julie Marson) captured the beauty of her constituency with references to Rudyard Kipling. She came from a modest beginning and battled adversity to come here to the House of Commons. Her mum and her dad must be very proud of her.

The first duty of any Government is the safety and security of their citizens. I have to say that the record of this Government over 10 years has been one of lamentable failure. In the West Midlands, we have seen: £175 million

cut from the police budget; 2,100 police officers go; remorseless pressure to cut costs over a 10-year period; and some of the finest officers in the police service I have ever met forced out under the A19 regulations, having served for 30 years, at the age of 50, 51 or 52. The statistics are stark—knife crime up 17%, violence against the person up 29%, possession of weapons up 28% and sexual crime up 15%—and the human consequences are tragic.

Like all Members I have seen the consequences in my constituency. In the Frances Road area of Stockland Green, I will never forget meeting 70 residents in the street who were terrified in the community in which they had grown up: the rapid growth of houses in multiple occupation in their community; rising crime; antisocial behaviour; and rising drug crime. One woman said, “Jack, my great-great-great-grandparents bought the house in which I live. Now, I am afraid to go out at night.” Her young daughter added, “If I want to go during the day down to Slade Road to get a bus, I won’t go by myself. I ask my mum and dad to take me.” Erdington High Street has seen a growth in aggressive begging, drug crime and shoplifting. In Perry Common, a restaurant was attacked by machete-wielding gang of 30. Three sixth-formers from St Edmund Campion School have been attacked outside the school, including one by a machete. In the Castle Vale area, there has been a rapid increase in car theft. At its most tragic, there have been shootings and killings. A young man was shot dead in Church Road. Another young man was shot dead in Goosemoor Lane.

In Erdington and Birmingham, we are blessed with some outstanding police officers. I pay the warmest of tributes to the work that they do, often in the most difficult of circumstances. For example, in the Slade Road area Sergeant Jim Reid and Helena McKeon are police officers of the very best: deeply popular in their community, growing up in that tradition of neighbourhood policing. There is our local leadership in the form of Chief Superintendent Matt Shaw and Inspector Haroon, or “Harry” for short. Together, David Jamieson, our police and crime commissioner, and David Thompson, our chief constable, do a great job in difficult circumstances, but theirs is an unenviable task, because the pressures have mounted remorselessly. As numbers have fallen, demand has increased. That has taken a very heavy toll on the police service, including sickness and breakdown.

I say to the Policing Minister that one would have hoped for some recognition of what 10 years has meant to communities such as Erdington, but there is not an ounce of contrition. Instead, the Policing Minister says, “Rejoice!” I invite him to come to tell the people of Erdington, who are facing that wave of rising crime, to rejoice. They would ask, “What planet does he live on?” Neither is it true that somehow the wrongs of the last 10 years are about to be put right. An announcement has been made about putting in excess of 2,000 police officers back into the service and on the beat in the West Midlands. If we look at the statistics, however, it is not 2,000 or 2,100. We will be 900 police officers short. The simple reality is that even at the end of this three-year period, we will be 900 police officers down on where we were back in 2010.

I also hope that the Government recognise that what took years to build will take years to rebuild. Neighbourhood policing in our country was the creation of the police

service and—forgive me for saying—of a then Labour Government. The notion of neighbourhood policing involves police officers rooted in their community, not just tackling crime, but diverting people from it and gathering intelligence, including on serious wrongdoing. That has been done terrible damage by the sheer scale of the cuts that have been imposed on the police service.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): The hon. Gentleman does know, does he not, that when we came to power, as widely advertised, there was “no money” left? Does he have any sympathy at all for the fact that we had to clear up that terrible mess?

Jack Dromey: Under the hon. Gentleman’s Government, national debt has doubled, but it also comes down to this simple reality: ultimately, political choices were made back in 2010. Choices were made about cutting the police that should never, ever have been made. I stress again what I said at the start: the first duty of any Government is the safety and security of their citizens. Is the hon. Gentleman seriously defending a cut to the police service of 20,000, which has had such catastrophic consequences for our country? I hope he is not.

It will take years to rebuild, but rebuild we must, because those relationships of trust and confidence are absolutely key. It will be necessary too, in the spirit of neighbourhood policing, that we see, for example, the rebuilding of youth services in cities such as Birmingham. We have had 43 youth centres closed in the city. That used to be an absolutely key part of working with the police to divert young people from crime.

Neighbourhood policing is key for one other reason. I remember that Mark Rowley, the former head of counter-terrorism, made an outstanding speech where he said that it is not just, for example, the security services, but intelligence gathering that is crucial to counter-terrorism. It is about relationships of trust and confidence in communities, whereby people come forward and say, “I think it’s him who is engaged in acts of terrorism.” We are talking about not just acts of Islamist terrorism, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) said, the rise in right-wing terrorism in our country. I stress again that the rebuilding of neighbourhood policing will be absolutely key, and that is not just about more police officers.

In conclusion, of course it is true that any increase in the number of police officers is welcome, but—forgive me for saying this—the Government need to reflect on the consequences of their actions. As a result of what has happened over the last 10 years, many, many people in my constituency, in Birmingham and throughout the country have paid a very heavy price. That is why I finish with what I said at the start: the Government have failed in the first duty of any Government, and that is the safety and security of their citizens.

7.53 pm

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): I pay tribute to the Thames Valley police force for its tireless work in keeping our streets safe and thank the Minister for increasing our funding—we will be putting it to good use. I thank my friends and long-suffering family who are here tonight and my colleagues and hon. Friends in the House who are sitting beside me as I make my maiden speech.

Many of my hon. Friends have referred to the fact that today is the day that American-born—[Laughter.]

[Joy Morrissey]

I thought I would mention that—Nancy Astor gave her maiden speech, and I am delighted that it has only taken 100 years for an American accent to once again become moderately acceptable within the Chamber. Nancy Astor was famous for her quick wit and her ability to break down class barriers. She would work across the House to fight for social justice issues and I hope to do the same. Like Lady Astor, I have a shared passion for reform of our criminal justice system, particularly prisons, and breaking the cycle of reoffending and crime that so many young offenders find themselves in. I also want to fight for our veterans and police—men and women who have risked their lives to keep us safe and free.

Someone who was also a determined fighter is my predecessor, the right hon. Dominic Grieve. I pay tribute to his life of public service, his time as Attorney General and his devotion to his family, church and personal beliefs. I would like to thank him for his 22 years of service to the people of Beaconsfield and to this House. I hope that we can now begin to heal the divide and work for the good not just of the few, not just of the many, but of everyone who wants to live in a truly United Kingdom.

I will be working for the good of everyone, but I will of course be working for the good of Beaconsfield just a little bit more. With its amazing towns and villages, who could ask for more? It showcases all aspects of British life, whether it is the picturesque market towns of Marlow and Beaconsfield; or the historic villages that date back to the Domesday Book, like Taplow, Denham, Hedgerley and Burnham; or the iron-age hill fort in Gerrards Cross; or the rich history of the three—count them, three—distinct villages within the Ivers.

Beaconsfield has been home to influential thinkers, artists and entrepreneurs of the day, from William Penn, the founder of Pennsylvania—I thought we would do an American theme today; why not?—whose estate sits within picturesque Stoke Poges; to Barry Gibb, lead singer of the Bee Gees; to Pinewood Studios, a global leader in the creative arts.

I should mention that Beaconsfield has always voted to elect a Conservative Member of Parliament. Not only are the people of Beaconsfield incredibly sound in their voting choices, but some of the greatest Conservative minds have lived there, from Edmund Burke to Benjamin Disraeli. It is because of the way that a one nation Conservative party is constantly embracing the future that an immigrant working mum with a foreign, strange accent has now been given the glorious opportunity of representing the best constituency in the country.

7.57 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I congratulate the three Members who have given their maiden speeches today, including, lastly, the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey)—100 years later, another American made a very good contribution. Her predecessor was much respected across the House and I am sure from her contribution that she will be too.

We have seen the Government again trumpet that this is the best police settlement for a decade, which, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) quite rightly pointed

out, is extremely rich, given that this is the decade when the Conservative party has been in power and has brought us some of the most drastic police cuts that we have seen.

In Gwent, which is similar to other forces across Wales, council tax payers are paying almost half the budget of Gwent police through the policing precept. No local force or police and crime commissioner wants to ask local taxpayers to pay more, but there has been little choice during the 10 years of Tory austerity. I have said this before, but it needs emphasising: Gwent police has seen its budget cut by a staggering 40% over the last decade. As my right hon. Friend rightly said, even with the extra cash, the damage of the last decade will not be reversed by the settlement. In Gwent, Operation Uplift will take officer levels only back to where they were in 2010, if that.

As well as the loss of officers over the past decade, most forces have had to reduce their support departments, facilities and other functions that are absolutely vital to the successful training and deployment of police officers. As my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) said, the loss of expertise, long service, skills and talent is keenly felt.

Today Gwent police, like other forces across the country, are still faced with uncertainty over their funding, particularly the long-term funding of new police officers under Operation Uplift. The 2020-21 settlement apparently includes the consequential costs of the programme—things such as cars, body armour, information and communications technology and uniforms—but provides no clarity about how this vital equipment will be funded in future years. This is a crucial omission, especially given that the bulk of the new officers will not be recruited until years two and three of the scheme.

We need clarity about the training for new officers and how it will be funded after the first year, and answers on the apprenticeship levy for Welsh forces. Gwent police and other Welsh police forces have paid in excess of £2 million towards the apprenticeship levy each year since it was introduced in 2017. After pressure from the police and crime commissioners in Wales, including our local PCC, Jeff Cuthbert, the Home Office advised it would provide Welsh forces directly with their share of the levy from 2019, but Welsh forces have yet to see any of that money. I ask again: please will Ministers look into this and tell us what is going on?

I would also like the Government to provide more detail on the funding for police community support officers, who play such a vital and often unsung role. Across England and Wales, the number of PCSOs fell by almost 7,000 between 2010 and 2018. In Wales, their numbers would have been even harder hit, had not the Welsh Labour Government, who have no responsibility for policing, stepped in to fund 500 PCSOs. This is most welcome but it is yet another case of others having to step in to plug the gap left by the Home Office.

The Government still need to address the pensions issue, which others have raised. John Apter, the national chair of the Police Federation, has highlighted that the police funding formula needs to be revisited for future years to ensure a fairer allocation of officers across all forces. The underlying issue is that behind the headline announcements, the Government still have not produced a long-term plan for funding our police. Yes, we need more officers on the beat, but, as my right hon. Friend

the Member for North Durham pointed out, we also need investment in police control rooms and custody suites, the Crown Prosecution Service, the courts, victims services and, crucially, the diversionary activities and targeted intervention to prevent people from committing crime in the first place. We also need to acknowledge the increasingly complex nature of policing, given the scale and complexity of new criminality, a lot of work on which goes unseen.

In the recent Opposition day debate on police, I cited the example of Gwent's early action together team, which has transformed the way the force responds to children and vulnerable people. It has trained more than 1,300 officers to deal with complex vulnerability issues and offer families help and support at the earliest opportunity. It is the sort of scheme I am sure the Home Office would want to get behind, yet the police transformation fund, which has paid for that work, is to be cut. I urge Ministers to reconsider this decision for the sake of the vulnerable people whom this fund is potentially helping to turn away from crime and antisocial behaviour. This focused early potential should be funded at a national level.

Any increase in funding for our police forces is welcome—of course I welcome any increase in police resources—but this settlement does not go far enough and is defined by short-termism. The Government now need to concentrate their efforts on devising a long-term strategy for police funding. Like other hon. Members, I pay tribute to Gwent's officers and admin staff, as well as Chief Constable Pam Kelly and PCC Jeff Cuthbert, both of whom were in Newport East on Friday, for the amazing, often unseen work they do, day in, day out and under great pressure, in order to keep us safe. I spoke at much greater length in a debate a few weeks ago about their work on serious and organised crime in Newport East. Let us never forget, though, the impact of the Government's cuts over the last decade on the stress levels and workload of existing police staff. That should never be underestimated.

8.4 pm

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): We have had three excellent maiden speeches this evening from my hon. Friends the Members for Hertford and Stortford (Julie Marson), for Newbury (Laura Farris) and for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey). I am sure they will work hard, both inside and outside the House, for their constituencies, and I look forward to working with them.

I welcome this motion to approve the police grant report, which will increase funding for extra officers throughout England and Wales. For North Wales police, this means a 10.4% increase, which equates to an extra £10.8 million. North Wales police are a force to be reckoned with, tackling drug rings on Ynys Môn and in the surrounding area, but they need our support. Their drugs raids are targeted and effective, and these brave officers have risked their lives many times to protect others. A constituent of mine was telling the story of a local man who was tragically found dead because of drug and alcohol abuse, and while we must get to the root causes—the lack of work and the hopelessness felt by many—we must also equip the police to do their job. That is not just about safety and security; it is about saving precious lives. It is also about alleviating the

burden on our A&E departments by setting up facilities for drug and alcohol abuse so that our hard-working nurses and doctors can focus on emergencies.

I would like to thank the Minister for Crime and Policing for meeting me recently to hear the feedback from my visit with the police chief inspector and inspector at Llangefni police station on Ynys Môn. I look forward to welcoming him to my beautiful island. When we met, we agreed we needed maximum collaboration between law enforcement agencies across borders. Unity is key in the fight against this devastating trade. Last week, I had the privilege of meeting the group Prison! Me! No Way! which came to speak to students in Holyhead and Llangefni. It is an excellent initiative between Anglesey Youth Service, North Wales police and the Welsh Guards.

I want to make sure that North Wales police recruit many more new officers as part of the nationwide recruitment drive. I also welcome the Government's commitment to giving greater support to the safer streets fund. As a mother, I can relate to all those parents who worry about where their children are at night, especially where there are no community venues to keep them amused and off the streets. In many ways, police officers are picking up the pieces of a loss of social cohesion and a lack of provision for our young people. As the new MP for Ynys Môn, I have witnessed wonderful community spirit at first hand. From helping my family to settle into a new home, to helping to set up my new office in Holyhead, neighbours have offered advice and friendship. My whole team has felt the warmth of the community, and the support of our local police has been invaluable.

I am determined to make life better for young people and for working people trying to do their best for their families, and I want to work together with the police on the island and beyond to help protect our young people and our communities. I am delighted to support this motion, which will have a positive impact on frontline policing on Ynys Môn and across north Wales.

8.7 pm

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): I join others in paying tribute to the three excellent maiden speeches we have heard this evening, but particularly that from the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Julie Marson). As a fellow daughter of a police officer, I was particularly moved by her speech, and I look forward to working with her on all matters relating to policing over the coming months and years. I also join others in paying tribute to our incredibly dedicated and brave police officers and police staff across the country, not least in West Yorkshire, under Chief Constable John Robins. They work incredibly hard to keep us and all our communities safe, and I pay tribute to them for the work they do.

The uplift in funding is incredibly welcome, not least because it is essential. Since 2010, West Yorkshire police has lost 1,200 frontline officers and 800 members of staff, which has undeniably had an impact on their ability to do the basics, let alone respond to the increased complexity of crime and the social challenges that are now the responsibility of the police. I have spoken at length in this Chamber about my experiences of being out with officers in my constituency and how one particularly harrowing experience led to the Protect the Protectors campaign. I welcome the investment in

[*Holly Lynch*]

technology and advances in forensics that stand to make the police more effective, but I know that in almost every aspect of policing the number of boots on the ground really does matter.

West Yorkshire police is the fourth largest force in the country, taking in Leeds, Bradford, Calderdale, Kirklees and Wakefield districts. The Leeds district alone is bigger than 12 other police forces. As part of the police parliamentary scheme, I spent Friday night policing Leeds city centre, an area that regularly welcomes over 100,000 people on a night out, and I again pay tribute to the work that officers do there to keep us safe and maintain law and order over the course of a night. We have diverse communities and an awful lot to offer, but, sadly, that sometimes presents challenges with which many of us will be familiar. Our district encompasses a number of Prevent priority areas, and its socioeconomic characteristics and pockets of deprivation increase policing needs. It includes urban areas such as Leeds and Bradford, but also covers some of the sweeping rural areas that straddle the Pennines. The police grant must recognise the pressures that result from complex, evolving crimes such as cyber-crime and human trafficking, and the demands involved in preventing the sexual and criminal exploitation of children and conducting missing persons inquiries. That is why the review of the police funding formula will be so important. It was due in 2019, and the Minister said in his opening speech that it would take place in “years to come”. I urge him to get on with the process as quickly as possible.

In West Yorkshire, we also face challenges relating to firearms and serious and organised crime. Policing priorities have rightly changed to reflect increased awareness of exploitation in all its ugly forms, from child sexual exploitation—of which nearly 6,500 instances were recorded last year—to human trafficking and child criminal exploitation, but although the resources allocated to such exploitation have also increased, they have not yet increased sufficiently to meet the demand.

As we have heard from Members on both sides of the House this evening, a great many of the challenges facing the police relate directly to the pressures caused by cuts in other services. For example, West Yorkshire police responded to more than 20,000 cases of missing people in 2017, which is staggering and completely unsustainable. We have had a self-funded safeguarding uplift to meet that demand, but those officers have come from neighbourhood policing, so the numbers are down in all the vital neighbourhood policing teams with which I work so closely in my role as an MP—as we all do.

Like my hon. Friend and neighbour the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) and my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden), I have been taking part in the police service parliamentary scheme, which is an incredibly insightful experience—especially as we look forward to debating, I hope imminently, the police powers and protection Bill—and I urge all MPs to do the same. During the recess last week I participated in two night shifts, one with PC Andy Barron, who deals with road policing in West Yorkshire, and one with Inspector Katie Woodmason, when I saw how people on a night out in Leeds city centre are kept safe.

I am sorry to say that the rhetoric in the Minister’s statements seems a world away from the reality of the conversations and experiences that I have had on the frontline. When I shadowed out-of-hours mental health service workers, I spent all night with two police officers who were unable to leave someone who had been detained under the Mental Health Act 1983. They could not leave a young nurse on her own with a gentleman who did not agree that he should have been detained, and who was becoming increasingly aggressive. West Yorkshire police saw a 33% increase in the number of mental health-related incidents in 2018, which meant that they were required to respond to an additional 5,000 incidents.

Having started the Protect the Protectors campaign after shadowing single-crew police officers, I know that reduced numbers mean that officers themselves are particularly vulnerable to assaults when they are out on their own. I hope that the Minister is revisiting some of the resulting legislation, and will consider using any or all measures in the police powers and protections Bill to ensure that officers are kept safe. I also hope that the Minister who sums up the debate will tell us when we can expect the introduction of that Bill.

I know that the Government are looking into a number of complicated police pension issues that have been mentioned this evening. Perversely, owing to the changes in the thresholds at which public sector workers start to pay tax on their pension contributions, some senior officers are beginning to receive annual tax bills that are greater than their annual salaries. Unlike doctors, police officers cannot reduce their hours or withdraw their service to mitigate the impact of such bills. I understand that the Treasury is conducting a review of the issue with a view to shaping the next Budget. I ask the Policing Minister to look specifically at how those perverse tax disincentives can be reformed, not least because it seems that police forces themselves are paying tax bills for individuals, who are reimbursed by the Home Office, which is reimbursed by the Treasury, to square off contributions to HMRC. In order to pay back the money in the long term, officers are realistically having to hand significant chunks of their pensions back on retirement in order to settle all the accumulated annual allowance taxes. There must be a better way of structuring police pensions to avoid that financial merry-go-round.

Police pension arrangements need to be much clearer, both for officers themselves and for the public purse. More importantly, we need to ensure that we do not haemorrhage experience and leadership in policing at a time when we can least afford it if we are to reach anything like the recruitment targets set by the Government.

The uplift in numbers reflected in this grant is incredibly welcome, but the settlement is for just one year, and does not reflect the increased complexity of crime in areas such as West Yorkshire. The grant provides for no inflationary increases, and core funding has increased only by the uplift funding. Therefore, all pay rises and non-pay inflation must be met by existing budgets. With that in mind, I hope very much that we will see the review of the police funding formula sooner rather and later, so that our police officers can do what they do best—keeping us and our communities safe.

8.15 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I congratulate the four Members who have made maiden speeches this evening: my hon. Friends the Members for Newbury (Laura Farris), for Hertford and Stortford (Julie Marson), for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey) and for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie). They do not only follow Nancy Astor; they follow in the footsteps of four very distinguished former Members of Parliament, and I am sure that they will fill their shoes with aplomb.

When we look at the settlement for Suffolk on a year-by-year basis, comparing like with like, we see that it is reasonable: an increase of £9.2 million, from £125.7 million to £134.9 million. I shall therefore support the motion. However, the current basis on which the annual settlements are calculated short-changes Suffolk, and is in urgent need of review.

Tom Hunt *rose*—

Peter Aldous: I will give way to my fellow Suffolk MP.

Tom Hunt: First, let me compliment my hon. Friend on his Ipswich Town socks, which are brilliant. On a serious note, however, let me say that on Saturday night there was a potentially fatal attack in St Matthew's Street in Ipswich. Does my hon. Friend agree that if the funding formula is reviewed, there should be a clear understanding in the Government that it is not sleepy, rural Suffolk, and that in Suffolk we have some real issues and urban areas where we need to get on top of crime, and we need the funding to do so?

Peter Aldous: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I am about to set out the case for why Suffolk needs a far better funding settlement than it has at present.

Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary's value for money profiles show that Suffolk has the third lowest staffing numbers per 1,000 of the population. Despite that, the county's latest PEEL report reveals that it puts a higher proportion of its workforce into neighbourhood policing than the national average, that £152 per head of population is spent on policing in Suffolk compared with the national average of £192, and that 43% of Suffolk's policing budget comes from local taxation. That is one of the highest percentages in the country.

There is indeed the challenge of rurality to contend with. Moreover, Suffolk has a high percentage of elderly residents, with approximately 13,000 people currently diagnosed with dementia. That creates additional safeguarding issues, and hence added pressure on the police. There are deprived neighbourhoods in Lowestoft in my constituency, and also in Ipswich, in my hon. Friend's constituency, and they too need more support.

Suffolk has a long and porous coastline with 31 ports and marinas, and has for many years been a target for organised crime gangs involved in illegal immigration and the illegal drugs trade. The presence of the UK's largest container port at Felixstowe, and the policing of the A12 and A14 routes to London and the midlands and north respectively, attract no additional support or funding.

Quite rightly, Suffolk constabulary has been collaborating with its neighbours in Norfolk in order to save money and reduce backroom costs. This collaboration, which began in 2010, has been successful and has yielded savings for Suffolk of £19 million. There is now very

limited scope for making further significant changes. If Suffolk received the national average funding, the police budget would increase by nearly £30 million. If we received the same level of Home Office funding as neighbouring Norfolk, our collaborating partners, Suffolk's grant would be £4 million higher. The case for reviewing the funding formula is strong. The Government have been promising a review since 2015, and I understand that at present it is intended that this should not take place until after the comprehensive spending review. I ask the Minister to provide, in her summing up, a more precise and, if possible, earlier timetable for carrying out this review. It is long overdue and Suffolk people are currently losing out.

8.20 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the three excellent maiden speeches that have been made today, on the centenary of Nancy Astor's maiden speech, and to hear such strong new female MPs speaking so powerfully about their constituencies. I concur with what my colleagues have said, particularly about the hon. Members for Newbury (Laura Farris) and for Hertford and Stortford (Julie Marson)—how proud their parents will have been of them and how touching it was to hear them speak about their parents' public service.

We have had a series of greatest hits from the Opposition Benches today, including from several of my colleagues who are well known for their contributions to policing debates. I sometimes feel as though I could do their speeches for them, as this is the fourth police grant debate that I have had the privilege of responding to. I am pleased to have had so many excellent speakers on our side contributing so powerfully.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) spoke about the role of police staff and about how disappointing it was not to see any commitment to funding the reversal of the cut in their numbers. He mentioned how they contributed to victim support and how their loss has meant that the police have been forced to switch to a reactive mode of policing over the past 10 years, which has particularly destroyed neighbourhood and community policing. That refrain has been common among the contributions to the debate today, and we have really felt the loss of those people in our communities.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) once again made the plea for Cardiff to have capital city status. It is baffling that it does not have it, when London, Edinburgh and Belfast all have that status and receive the funding that is attached to it. I hope the Minister will address that issue in her wind-up remarks. My hon. Friend also mentioned the proscription of two far-right groups that the Government have announced today. That is welcome, but it should be noted that far-right activity and terrorism have already moved on significantly from when those complaints were first made by the police. I concur with my hon. Friend that the Government need to be much swifter in responding to concerns raised about far-right activity.

I know the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) well, having visited it on several occasions to see the impact of the

[*Louise Haigh*]

loss of policing and to meet some of his excellent local police officers, as well as former officers who have been forced out by the Government's changes in the past 10 years. He talked powerfully about the increased demand and the heavy toll that it takes, not just on the police and their ability to respond but on sickness rates and the mental health of the officers involved. He asked, very fairly, what planet the Minister must be on in asking us to be grateful for today's announcement. This is something that has been raised constantly: the idea that we should be pleased that the Government are rolling back even some of the cuts that have been made over the past 10 years, and the ridiculous claim that this is the largest investment made in a decade.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) paid tribute to the work of the Welsh Labour Government and their investment in PCSOs. She made an important point, which I do not think the Minister has addressed in previous debates, about the lack of clarity on funding for equipment such as cars, body armour and—the Policing Minister will appreciate this—lockers. She said that the settlement was defined by short-termism, and she is absolutely right. Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) spoke about the pressures of complex crime, from missing persons to child sexual exploitation. Like many Members in the debate today, she made the case powerfully for the reform of the funding formula.

I will come back to the funding formula later in my remarks, but it was telling to note the comments of the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), who has repeatedly spoken out on behalf of his Suffolk force and described the unfair consequences of the funding formula. That also applies to Devon and Cornwall, and I have visited the local police force of the hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) myself. I have heard about the digital dogs, and when I talk about them to other police forces they are really jealous about the innovation that has been made in Devon and Cornwall. However, it is quite clear that the funding formula needs to recognise the particular pressures of tourism on forces such as Devon and Cornwall, just as it needs to recognise the demand presented by serious organised criminality that is often masked by supposedly sleepy communities in areas such as Suffolk. In short, the funding formula must follow demand and not the complicated, obscure factors that currently play into it. As has already been said, the Opposition welcome the resources that have been announced today. The Minister knows that, although we have our concerns, which I will touch on shortly, will not be opposing today's police grant proposals.

I want to start by talking about two opportunities that this announcement presents. The recruitment drive is a generational opportunity to change the make-up and composition of policing. We meet on the 21st anniversary of the publication of the Macpherson report, which was a searing account of how institutions had become divorced from the communities they served. Its publication served as a watershed moment in British policing. The report set targets for the police to reach 7% of the workforce being from the BME community within a decade, but 11 years on from that timeline, we still have not reached that target. Today the BME population in

this country is almost 15% and the so-called race gap is now more pronounced than it was when Macpherson was first published. There is not a single chief constable in the country from a BME community, and at this rate of change it will take the Met 100 years to become truly representative. During the last major recruitment drive under the Labour Government, diversity increased, but not fast enough, and the fear is that that will happen again. We cannot wait a century for our police to reflect our society, so I urge the Home Office to use this opportunity of police recruitment to ensure that we see the necessary dramatic change within the next three years. That will happen only if the law is changed and targets are set.

As I have said, this is the fourth police grant debate that I have responded to, and over the past decade too much needless damage has been done. Political choices have led to police-recorded violent crime more than doubling in recent years, and to the loss of 21,000 police officers—far more than under any other Government since the war. Those choices have also led to the loss of 16,000 police staff—the people who keep the police service functioning, who go to the scene to help with investigations and who help to put evidence into a fit state for trial—and of nearly 7,000 PCSOs. The PCSOs are the eyes and ears of community policing, and they are integral to the voluntary intelligence at the core of UK policing. Economic crime is allowed to flourish unchecked.

The recent conversion of the Government to the recruitment of officers has come far too late, and it is pathetic to talk about this being the largest increase in 10 years. The needless damage simply cannot be reversed, and the experience of lost officers is gone for good. Analysis carried out by Labour shows that even if all 20,000 officers announced as part of this settlement were allocated, more than half of police forces—22 out of the 43 police forces in England and Wales—would still have a net loss of officers compared with 2010. In the far more likely scenario that around 13,000 officers will be allocated to the frontline, 60% of our forces would still be down on 2010, with large urban forces such as Manchester, Merseyside and the West Midlands losing out substantially.

That will be exacerbated by the funding formula used to allocate that funding. Everyone knows that the formula is unfair, including the Minister, who set that out again today. It will create the perverse outcome that the forces struggling with the most serious violent crime will see the least recruitment. Greater Manchester is down 1,000 since 2010, Hampshire is down 700, Merseyside 600, Staffordshire 400, and the West Midlands 1,100. Surrey, by contrast, will see an increase of more than 240 on 2010 levels. That cannot be right. Again, today's announcement should have presented an opportunity for the Home Office to revise the funding formula to ensure that it led to an equitable settlement.

What is more, Ministers have decided to stump up just £153 million of the £360 million police pension costs for 2020-21. This black hole is the equivalent of more than 3,000 officers, and if action is not taken, it is almost certain that police recruitment plans will suffer or that cutbacks will have to be made elsewhere, to police staff and capital. Will the Minister provide certainty to forces today, address the pensions black hole and ensure that the costs are not imposed on police forces?

The change in the Government's approach today is undoubtedly welcome. Although they are not prepared to accept responsibility for the damage they have done, perhaps they can help address some of the consequences for police officers. Over the past 10 years, and in some of the most unimaginably difficult circumstances, our officers have fought hard to keep our communities safe, but it has taken its toll. In 2019, 2,175 officers voluntarily resigned from the police—the highest number since comparable records began in 1998—hampering police efforts to strengthen forces after nine years of austerity.

Last year, the police cancelled over a quarter of a million rest days, fuelling concerns of a mental health crisis in the police. The Police Federation's most recent survey found that almost 80% of officers have experienced stress in the past 12 months, with almost half viewing their job as extremely stressful. A recent study found that one in five officers suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder—equivalent to 24,000 officers in England and Wales. For many, policing is coming at the expense of their mental wellbeing, safety and quality of life, and that cannot be right. I ask the Minister to commit to using the forthcoming police powers and protections Bill to tackle the mental health and wellbeing crisis in our police.

This has been among the most difficult decades for policing since the modern police force was founded. We can assure the Government that in the coming years we will be mindful of the promises they have made and determined to see that they are held to them.

8.31 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): I thank all Members on both sides of the House for their heartfelt contributions to today's debate. We have heard stories of the terrible impact of crime on constituencies across the country—stories that remind us that crime is a story not of statistics but of human suffering. There have also been unanimous expressions of support for our police forces from Members on both sides of the House, and colleagues will not be surprised to learn that I agree with each and every one of them.

Indeed, in my previous career prosecuting criminals, I saw for myself the dedication, professionalism and bravery of our officers. Home Office Ministers see that each day as well. Every day, officers face more danger than most of us will see in a lifetime. In every situation, they act selflessly to protect the public and tackle criminality in all its ugly forms, and that is one of the many reasons why, as has been mentioned by the hon. Members for Halifax (Holly Lynch) and for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), looking after our police forces is so important. The introduction of the wellbeing service and, in due course, the police covenant will hopefully meet with the approval of the House as a whole.

As has been acknowledged today, the nature of criminality is changing. Our forces face new challenges, with new technology ushering in a new generation of crime, but our police forces are rising to the challenge. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) how her local constabulary has a dedicated drone team and, indeed, the country's first digital search dogs team. As the owner of a puppy who seems to be obsessed with my remote controls, I look forward to visiting that team to see its work.

At a time when criminal activity is increasingly complex and when the scourge of serious violence threatens more and more communities across the country, we have a duty to ensure that the police have the resources they need to keep our people and our country safe. However, police funding is about more than material resources. We want to send a clear message to our police that this Government support them. This historic increase in police funding sends that message. Our unprecedented recruitment drive, the largest in decades, sends that message. And our clear commitment to combating the rise in serious violence sends that message.

As a female Minister responding to my opposite number who also happens to be a woman—with a female shadow Home Secretary, I am afraid the Minister for Crime, Policing and the Fire Service, my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), is the odd one out—I am delighted that we have all had the chance to speak in this great Chamber on the centenary of the first speech by the first woman to take her seat in this place. We have had the benefit of two female Deputy Speakers during this debate, too.

I am also delighted that, in marking that important moment in this place's history, we have heard three new female colleagues give their maiden speech. I look forward to them making their mark in this century. We heard delightful tributes to their immediate predecessors, Richard Benyon, Mark Prisk and the right hon. and learned Dominic Grieve, who are remembered fondly and with respect on both sides of the House.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Laura Farris), however, went one better and paid an even more personal tribute to a certain predecessor: her own father. It was very moving to listen to the example he set her, and I have no doubt that she will burnish her family's proud record in this place and do him proud. She also raised the topic of flexible working, which the Metropolitan police are piloting to encourage a more diverse workforce and to recruit the best talent. This is an interesting challenge not just to those with childcare responsibilities but to the wider policing family, including those who have finished their 30 years' service. I welcome the contribution she will inevitably make on this important topic.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Julie Marson) mentioned the famous toothbrush collection in her constituency and the enormous bed of Ware, which can apparently accommodate four couples at one time—there is a joke there somewhere, but I will not tread there.

My hon. Friend talked very movingly of her family's journey from the workhouse to this House, and she put her parents and her husband on the record. It was an incredibly moving speech. She also told us of her experience as a magistrate and, in particular, of a poor young, emaciated, grey boy who had been injected with heroin by those who were supposed to love and care for him and whom she met as he appeared in the adult magistrates court for the first time. She made the point that such cases haunt those of us who have worked in the criminal justice system, so I very much look forward to working with her on this Government's exciting journey of creating opportunity for all.

My hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey) said it has taken a mere 100 years for a “moderately acceptable” American accent to be heard

[Victoria Atkins]

in the Chamber—I think it is much more acceptable than that. Her message of unifying our country draws not just on the present day but on the great history of her constituency. It is a great history not simply because the good people of Beaconsfield have only ever voted for a Conservative Member of Parliament but because of her more distant predecessors, Edmund Burke and Benjamin Disraeli.

That ties in neatly with the fact that this one nation Government are working for the whole country, as demonstrated by this very good funding settlement. This is the second year that the Government have issued a record-breaking increase to police funding levels through a police settlement that shows our commitment to giving the police the resources they need to fight crime and keep the public safe.

The total funding being made available to the policing system next year will increase by more than £1.1 billion, with the help of police and crime commissioners using council tax. This increase will enable the police to bear down on criminals who are terrorising our towns and to reduce the number of victims of crime. It will provide £150 million in funding to fight organised crime and to continue cracking down on online child abuse. Tackling serious violence will be backed with £39 million, including £20 million for tackling county lines drug dealing. My hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie) spoke so eloquently about that and about the charity in her constituency, Prison! Me! No Way!, which does so much to tackle it.

Mr Kevan Jones: Why is the Minister not just honest with the public? There is this idea that the Government are giving the record sums that she is mentioning, but that is just not the case. They are doing exactly what they did last year. Yes, extra funding is coming nationally, but she is asking my constituents and everybody else to pay more through their local precept. As I explained in my contribution, that means that areas such as mine will be at a disadvantage in terms of the amount of money they can raise compared with others. I just ask her to be honest with the public.

Victoria Atkins: I am happy to explain again the way in which the funding formula has been worked out. The Government grant to police and crime commissioners will be more than £701 million and the money raised by precept, should PCCs take full advantage, will be £248 million. I know that this is one of the great debates between our two parties, but I make the point gently: there is no such thing as a magic money tree. This is taxpayers' money; there is no Government money.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Victoria Atkins: I am going to move on.

This funding settlement is a good deal for the police and our law-abiding citizens, and a bad deal for criminals. It means the police will have increased resources to employ more officers to tackle serious and organised crime, and protect the public from terrorism. One way in which this battle is to be fought is with the recruitment of 20,000 additional officers over the next three years. The additional £750 million for the recruitment of officers means that £700 million will be made available

to PCCs for the recruitment of an additional 6,000 officers by the end of March next year. I wish to clarify one point. The shadow Home Secretary made a point about the Prime Minister's record in London. Police numbers in London were almost 1,000 higher when he left office as Mayor than when he began and, importantly, crime fell, particularly murder and youth murder. Surely that is the most important statistic of all.

Stephen Doughty *rose*—

Victoria Atkins: I will move on to the funding formula, if I may, as many colleagues have raised this issue. It is still the most reliable mechanism we have to distribute core grant funding to forces, but we are aware of the concerns about the current formula that have been voiced by the policing sector and in this place, including by my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), and we have stated that the current arrangements are out of date. My hon. Friends the Members for South Dorset (Richard Drax) and for North Devon articulated the particular pressures that tourism brings to their constituencies, and the PCC for Devon and Cornwall has made this point strongly to the Policing Minister. He is, of course, considering that and other points about the future form of the funding formula.

The right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) rightly raised concerns about the criminal justice system as a whole. We have to ensure that the system as a whole works for victims, witnesses and those who are most vulnerable. It is intricately connected as a system, and we were pleased to announce in our manifesto not only the royal commission looking at the criminal justice system as a whole, but more funding for the Crown Prosecution Service and up to £2.5 billion on further prison places to ensure that those criminals who are prosecuted and convicted serve time, thus keeping our constituencies safe.

Mr Kevan Jones: Will the Minister give way?

Victoria Atkins: If I may, I will move on to the point about Cardiff, because the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) raised the point about Cardiff capital city grant funding. South Wales police will receive £312.4 million next year, if they utilise their full precept flexibility, which is an increase of £21.1 million. We recognise the impact that serious violence has had in south Wales, which is why we have given the force £1.2 million of additional funding this year from the serious violence fund. The Policing Minister is happy to meet him and other colleagues to discuss this generous settlement for South Wales if that meets with his approval.

The subject of serious violence has rightly been raised by hon. Members from across the House. We are determined to crack down on this crime, which is why we are changing the law so that the police, councils and health authorities are legally required to work together to prevent and tackle serious violence, to ensure a whole-system response to this pernicious problem. To support that effort, the Home Secretary announced in December that 18 police and crime commissioners will receive an additional £35 million to continue to fund violence reduction units, which are specialist teams that tackle violent crime in their local areas. We are also improving stop-and-search powers, giving more than 8,000 police officers enhanced powers to crack down on

violent crime. We all want it to stop and through the various measures I have mentioned we will enable that to happen.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset and the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) raised the issue of fraud, which we are absolutely committed to doing more to combat. We have pledged to strengthen the National Crime Agency so that it can tackle the threats that we face from fraud, county lines gangs, child sexual abuse, illicit finance, modern slavery and people trafficking. We are moving at pace to recruit the 20,000 extra officers to fight all forms of crime, and an ongoing review of serious and organised crime is under way to consider the powers, capabilities, governance and funding required to bolster our response to today's threats, including fraud.

In conclusion, I thank Members again for their contributions to the debate. This settlement shows our comprehensive commitment to all areas of policing. Every police force in England and Wales will see a significant increase in funding. We are tackling serious violence, fighting serious and organised crime and delivering the largest expansion in police numbers in a generation. There can be no doubt that this settlement represents the start of a golden era for policing and a dark day for crime.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Police Grant Report (England and Wales) for 2020–21 (HC 51), which was laid before this House on 22 January, be approved.

Local Government Finance (England)

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): We now come to the three motions on local government finance, which will be debated together.

8.47 pm

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Robert Jenrick): I beg to move,

That the Local Government Finance Report (England) for 2020–21 (HC 68), which was laid before this House on 6 February, be approved.

It is my pleasure to follow the successful passage of the police settlement and to speak after a number of brilliant maiden speeches, to which I had the pleasure to listen. I gently say that although today is the 100th anniversary of Nancy Astor's first speech as the first female MP, the first five female councillors were elected more than 10 years before that, in 1907, after the passing of the Act allowing female ratepayers to stand for local councils. It is always local government that gets there first.

It is my privilege as Local Government Secretary to work closely with public servants throughout the country who day in, day out deliver the local public services that we all rely on. These are the people who are improving people's lives, ensuring access to vital services and helping some of the most vulnerable in our society. I saw this again in the past fortnight, with those who responded to the storms, just as they did during November's floods. I am immensely grateful for their efforts and delighted to be backing them and their communities today.

Mrs Heather Wheeler (South Derbyshire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend congratulate the parish councils on the really important work that they do to look after flood victims? In Coton in the Elms, Willington, Egginton—goodness me, I need to say so many more—Repton and Barrow upon Trent they worked so hard to help their neighbours in the very difficult times during the recent floods.

Robert Jenrick: I am absolutely delighted to agree with my hon. Friend. Serving on a parish council is an important role in local democracy. I give my praise, along with hers, to all those who serve on parish councils—including in my own constituency, where a number of communities were flooded very seriously over the past week—for the work that they have done to support their local communities as they begin to recover from the very serious floods.

It is because those individuals and the communities they represent matter to this country that today we are backing them with the best local government funding settlement for a decade. The settlement delivers a 4.4% real-terms increase in spending power for councils—£2.9 billion extra. It has been widely welcomed by the sector. It injects significant new resources into adult and children's social care. It places councils on a stronger financial footing from which to build. It achieves all of that while protecting people from excessive council tax rises—the kind of regressive tax increases that we saw hurting working people year after year under the last Labour Government, during whose time in office council tax doubled.

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I am staggered, to be honest, because I think that council tax is a regressive tax. Each adult in Newham has lost 50% of the grant

[Ms Lyn Brown]

that was given by the Government, in an area where more than 50% of our children live in poverty, in order to give to the Tory shires. Does the Secretary of State honestly think that is a fair settlement?

Robert Jenrick: If the hon. Lady is concerned about funding for local public services, she will join me and my colleagues in supporting the best local government settlement we have seen for a decade. She says that council tax is regressive, so what happened under the last Labour Government, when council tax doubled? Under this Government council tax has fallen by 6% in real terms, while we have continued to deliver important public services.

I was determined to champion local government in September's spending review. I want to thank those who responded so constructively to the two consultations we ran at the end of last year. We can be proud of what we have achieved, and particularly of how the settlement delivers for the most vulnerable in society. It secures £1 billion of new Government funding for social care, alongside the extra £410 million that we invested last year. That is a major new injection of funding that will help local authorities to meet the undoubted rising pressures on the care system, which we all see in our communities and in our own lives.

We will also be maintaining all funding going into the improved better care fund, at the same time as the NHS contribution to the better care fund rises by 3.4% above inflation to over £4 billion, in line with the broader NHS settlement. Alongside this, I am allowing local authorities responsible for adult social care to raise council tax by an additional 2% above the core referendum principle. That is a necessary step that is specifically targeted to meet demand and ensure that vulnerable people are supported.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): Councils such as Durham County Council are being disadvantaged, because even if they increase their council tax by 2% to cover that element, it will raise far less than could be raised by some councils in the south, which have larger council tax bases. The demands on Durham County Council are far greater than those on councils in Surrey, for example, because we have fewer self-funders, so how can that be fair?

Robert Jenrick: I will turn now to the specifics for the right hon. Gentleman's constituency. This settlement will see a 7.1% increase in core spending power, and the additional social care grant for next year will be £12.8 million, which is a very significant increase. For the reasons he has just set out, we decided to apply an equalisation to the social care precept, which will ensure that those areas of the country with the lowest tax base will see more funding flow to them, in a redistribution of funding from those areas elsewhere in the country that, as he rightly says, have higher tax bases. We chose to do that at £150 million, which is more than has been done in previous settlements, precisely to answer the point he makes.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Local authorities in the top quartile of deprivation are seeing increases averaging £12.3 million next year. Does my right hon.

Friend agree that this demonstrates that the Government have listened to the concerns of those local authorities that have been most hard-pressed in recent years?

Robert Jenrick: That is absolutely right. My hon. Friend's own local authority will see a 6.6% increase in its core spending power next year, as a result of this settlement.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Robert Jenrick: Let me make some progress.

Taken together, these measures mean that the Government are making almost £6 billion available next year across adult and children's social care. I appreciate that this is only the start. Fixing social care is one of the defining issues of our generation, which is why this Government will be commencing cross-party talks on social care very soon to get this right once and for all. We welcome hon. Members from all parts of this House to participate in those talks and to do so in a spirit of finding a consensus and of moving forward as a country.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I cannot help but feel concerned that, in spite of what the Secretary of State is saying, the reality around both planned cuts and cuts that will result from the so-called fair funding review will actually make my local authority more than £8 million worse off, when it has already had £200 million cut since 2010. What will that mean to the people—both adults and children—who rely on social care?

Robert Jenrick: I do not doubt the hon. Lady's sincerity in raising the question, but I do warn against unnecessary scaremongering. The reports that we saw in the press on the fair funding review were put out by the Labour party's local government press office. They were not based on any actual numbers created by my Department. We have not even published the consultation yet, and so I would disregard them. In fact, the Local Government Association itself later went on to say that these figures are not reliable and are not something on which local councils should make spending decisions. We will proceed with the fair funding review, and I will come on to speak more about that in a moment. We think that it is right that we update what is undoubtedly an antiquated formula and that we base the funding of local public services more closely on the needs of local communities.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): I am glad to hear that the Secretary of State is considering fairer funding. Getting fairer funding, as he will know, is very close to our heart in Leicestershire as we are near the bottom end of the table. One of the interesting things about Leicestershire is its sparsity and rurality. When it comes to making a new equation, will he be considering the fact that it may take a social worker, or some other service, up to an hour to move from Hinckley to, say, Twycross? Will that factor be included in future plans?

Robert Jenrick: It will be, yes, and that is absolutely right. It is important that the new formula, when we bring it forward, takes account of sparsity, the cost of delivering public services in rural settings and the fact that there is deprivation to be found in shire counties, as

there is in other parts of the country. I say that as a representative of the county of Nottinghamshire, with long-standing pockets of deprivation in former coalfield communities, all of which needs to be taken into consideration as we bring forward a better updated formula.

Another priority on which not just social care but so many other vital services rest is ensuring that councils have the stability that they need to plan ahead, and I believe that this settlement will help them to do that. It maintains all the grants from 2019-20 and increases core funding in line with inflation. Today, I am announcing a £40 million boost for the sector from the business rates levy account—extra funding that I know will be very welcome by the sector. I recognise that this is a one-year settlement, and I will be leading another push at the comprehensive spending review later this year to ensure that local services get the long-term funding that they need. This stability also gives authorities a platform from which to drive efficiencies and learn from the very best practice of councils across the country, and will act as a spur to improvement.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): One of the ways in which the Secretary of State could give multi-year, almost permanent, guarantees about levels of funding is through a much more ambitious programme of devolution. Is it not time for an English devolution Bill, so that all councils have the fiscal powers that they need to meet the needs of their communities?

Robert Jenrick: If the hon. Gentleman will give me a few minutes, I will come on to our ambitious plans for devolution. He will have seen in the Queen's Speech that later this year we will bring forward a White Paper on English devolution, which we hope will build on the very good work done in recent years, including to establish Mayors across the country.

Today's settlement is good news on many counts; it provides more money and more stability for councils, but above all, it is good news for local people. We are delivering the best settlement for a decade while keeping people's council tax bills low. Under the Conservatives, council tax in England is 6% lower in real terms than in 2010. The average council tax bill increase in 2020-21 is projected to be below 4%. That compares to an average increase of 5.8% between 1997 and 2010. It was a Conservative-led Government who ultimately made sure that local people had the final say on their council tax bills, following years of tax rises under Labour.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The Secretary of State says that council tax bills are 6% lower than in 2010, but does he accept the figures produced by the Institute for Fiscal Studies, which show that in real terms, local government spending per head of the population has fallen by 20% since 2010?

Robert Jenrick: I am not familiar with those figures, but I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will welcome the fact that through this settlement, we are providing a 4.4% real-terms increase in spending for councils, while keeping council tax as low as we can.

I am putting forward a controlled package of council tax referendum principles based around a core increase of 2%, with a flexibility of up to £5 for shire district

councils. This strikes the right balance between giving local authorities flexibility to meet the needs of their local area and empowering local residents to veto excessive increases.

As we have heard in a number of interventions, we are also fundamentally changing how we allocate council funding, to deliver a fairer, more up-to-date, more transparent way of allocating taxpayers' money. It must be right to explore how we can bring the increasingly convoluted and outdated funding formula into the 21st century, and how we can better link the funding of public services to the needs of individual local authorities. There is no question but that the fair funding review is a substantial piece of work. There are many different views on the way forward, which raise challenging questions that we will need to work through in the months ahead. We plan to consult widely on our proposals this spring, and to listen to the views that we receive. In that spirit, I hope that we in the House can work together to build consensus, and move forward to a better funding formula.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for mentioning the pockets of deprivation in shire counties; I could certainly take him to some in High Wycombe. He talks about fair funding; those of us on the fringes of our major cities have additional pressures, as people who need additional services come to live in our area. Together with the Chancellor, will he consider how we can ensure that the fringes of not just London, but all our major cities, are equipped to deal with the extra pressures that they face?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Knowing something of his constituency, I think it is the perfect example of a part of the country where there is great affluence, but also significant pockets of deprivation. We need to ensure that funding for local authorities that provide public services is based on the actual needs of the community, not a formula dreamed up many years ago.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Forty-one per cent. of children in Birmingham are growing up in poverty. Nearly half a million Birmingham citizens live in some of the most deprived areas of Britain. Birmingham is on track for £784 million of cuts to its budget. Its workforce has been cut in half. Children's centres and youth centres are closing, with catastrophic consequences for the city. The Secretary of State referred to the Local Government Association's assessment of the fair funding review on social care funding. Is it not the case that its assessment is that the current direction of travel will see money channelled from high-need areas such as Birmingham to lower-need areas like Surrey and Buckinghamshire?

Robert Jenrick: That is not the view of the LGA. After the Labour party issued a press release suggesting something along those lines, the LGA gave the clarification that it is impossible to speculate because we have not published the figures; we have not published our consultation. So with great respect to the hon. Gentleman, he will have to wait until—*[Interruption.]* Well, it was the Labour group on the LGA. I am not going to base my views on the press releases of the LGA's Labour politicians; I am going to base them on the reality of what we intend to bring forward in future.

[Robert Jenrick]

On the serious point that the hon. Gentleman raises, we will be consulting in the spring, and that will address issues important issues such as that. I hope that he, Birmingham City Council and others who take an interest in these matters will participate in that consultation. We will of course listen to his views as we bring forward a better settlement that attempts to work for all parts of the country. The settlement that we are voting on today is a good settlement for Birmingham. It provides a 6.4% increase in funding, or £27 million additional funding, for social care.

Gary Sambrook (Birmingham, Northfield) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the problem in Birmingham is that the Labour administration simply cannot control a budget or deliver services properly? For instance, it spent £15 million on resolving the bin dispute, we have a budget for a bus depot that has gone from £2 million to £15 million, and £100 million for all three phases of the Paradise development was spent in the first phase. The problem is that Labour councillors cannot manage a budget.

Robert Jenrick: What a refreshing change it is to have my hon. Friend in the House representing Birmingham in the way he does. He is absolutely right that Birmingham City Council has a lamentable record of delivering public services. It cannot even manage the bins in Birmingham. That is why we were forced to bring independent non-executive directors into the council to monitor its performance. I want to see it improved in the years ahead, and I am sure that he will be holding it to account very robustly in this House.

Let me turn to the broader agenda that we will be pursuing in this Parliament. A new approach to funding is an important moment for local government, but this is just the beginning of our ambitions for local democracy. I want to work with councils on the overriding mission of this Government, which is to level up all parts of the country. That means, at every level of government, from Whitehall to town halls, delivering on the priorities of the British people. It means building on the success of the devolution revolution that we pursued in the last Parliament with our regional Mayors, who already cover one third of the population of England and 50% of the population of the north.

I want us to secure more devolution deals like the ones raised by the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas). We have already made progress since the general election in Sheffield. That deal is now, I hope, unlocked, and we will see the Mayor there assuming the full powers as soon as possible. We have also made progress with other important parts of the country, including Leeds and West Yorkshire—I sincerely hope that those deals will proceed at pace—and we are opening discussions with several other areas. Some seek the powers and responsibilities of the proven mayoral model to emulate the impact of great Mayors such as Andy Street and Ben Houchen. Others seek the greater ability to plan and to deliver strategically that comes with a combined authority or a unitary authority. We will support, encourage and incentivise each of those reforms in any part of the country that shares our determination to move forward.

Mr Betts: I thank the Secretary of State for giving way again. I very much welcome the Sheffield city region deal, and I want to pay credit to the previous Northern Powerhouse Minister, the right hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry), for the perseverance he showed in trying to get all the authorities in the city region together to do that deal. Does the Secretary of State agree that any powers that other mayors have must now be made available to my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), Mayor of the Sheffield city region?

Robert Jenrick: I happily join the hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen and others in this House, including the hon. Gentleman, who have persevered with that devolution deal, which at times seemed a forlorn cause but now appears finally on course to being fully implemented. We have made it clear that we will be offering all existing mayors the full suite of powers that are available to Andy Burnham as the Mayor of Greater Manchester, with the exception of the health powers that he exercises—I think there is widespread agreement that a degree of further thought is required before we roll out those powers in other parts of the country, but we are certainly not opposed to doing so once we have given that more time and consideration.

Our English devolution White Paper will look to spread the benefits of greater control to all parts of the country, and this is the right time to do it. At the start of a new Administration and at a moment of national renewal, we must seize the opportunity to reform local government and give more powers back to the public.

Levelling up means firing up our towns through our £3.6 billion towns fund, so that they can be engines of opportunity and growth. From St Ives to Stocksbridge, towns and their local councils are engaging actively in that, using the towns fund to attract private investment and invest in transport, skills, culture and technology.

It means pulling out all the stops to deliver 1 million homes over this Parliament and nurturing places that inspire pride and a strong sense of belonging. I firmly believe that we can build the houses that our country needs—houses of all types, including more affordable homes—while also building safer, greener, more beautiful homes in communities that foster neighbourliness and a true sense of identity. We will be asking a lot of councils. We will be asking them to deliver the housing need of their communities, and in some cases, to do so without encouraging needless urban sprawl or the ruination of the countryside and a loss of the green belt. That will mean that they will have to be ambitious and to develop brownfield land aggressively, as we are seeing in some of the best parts of the country. It will mean reimagining town centres and building upwards with gentle density.

No one can abdicate responsibility for meeting the acute housing needs of our country, and some councils are already leading the way in doing that. Last week, I wrote to councils that are exceeding the housing need of their communities to thank and praise them. I hope that more councils will follow their example, and we will support and incentivise councils in the years ahead to do so.

The investment that we make today is part of a wider picture of investment to renew communities and to address the priorities of the public, which we promised to do in the general election and for which we were lent the support of millions of people across the country, and we now need to repay the trust that they placed in us. We heard about some of that investment earlier today, with the recruitment of 20,000 extra police officers over the next three years.

It also means investing over £14 billion more in our schools between now and 2022—an extra £150 million a week and the largest cash boost in a generation. It means putting more money into our buses, with an extra £220 million in our national bus strategy and £5 billion for buses, cycling and walking, which will play an important part in the lives of all our constituents. It means upgrading our local roads, backed by £28 billion of investment, and more money for potholes. It means committing to fund the Leeds-to-Manchester route as the first stop on our journey to deliver Northern Powerhouse Rail. It means committing to High Speed 2—the spine of the country’s transport network—alongside radical improvements to local transport networks all across the country. It means investing £500 million in new youth clubs and services, and creating a £250 million cultural investment fund to support local libraries, museums and social and cultural capital in our communities.

Thanks to the almost £3 billion of extra investment that we are providing, this settlement will see constituencies in every corner of England getting more money next year, while protecting taxpayers. That means more money for the most vulnerable and the key public services on which we all depend, and a sound basis on which local government can build for the future with confidence. Let us get behind this settlement and allow that good work to begin today.

9.14 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): First, I want to thank our dedicated council staff, officers and our local councillors of all political persuasions and none, who over the past decade have had to contend with year-on-year budget cuts and a Government who have failed to take any meaningful action on the largest issues they face—the crises in children’s services and in adult social care. Yet our councils have ploughed on, and they have continued to innovate. They continue to provide good services for many of our local communities, because councils are the linchpin of our communities. They ensure the delivery of proper, cohesive, joined-up services with other agencies—whether housing associations, the police, leisure services or youth services—but it is crucial that our councils and our councillors are given the resources that they need, and that we do not cost-shunt from one area of the public sector to another.

As the Secretary of State will know, the finance settlement is one of the most important events in the local government calendar, so it was disappointing that the settlement this year was subject to delay and a degree of uncertainty because of the general election. It was also disappointing that the Secretary of State did not deliver the provisional settlement by way of the usual oral statement before Christmas, especially considering the cancellation of Housing, Communities and Local Government questions for almost six months.

It is at least pleasing to see the Secretary of State in his place today, after he survived the reshuffle before the recess we have just returned from. Reshuffles can be a tough business—a sigh of relief from the two survivors on the Front Bench facing me, but brutal for those who are moved or dropped. Who knows what will happen after 4 April on this side of the House, so in the spirit of solidarity, I want to pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Tatton (Esther McVey), the former Housing Minister, for all that she did in pushing for greater investment in social housing, in particular. I would also like to thank the right hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry), the former Northern Powerhouse Minister. We certainly had a fair few run-ins over the years, but I never doubted his commitment to the job of representing a rejuvenated north of England in Government, and I would like to thank him for his work. I sincerely welcome the new team on the Government Front Bench, as I did earlier today before Housing, Communities and Local Government questions.

I am happy to recognise a local government finance settlement today that at last begins to move in the right direction and provides an overall uplift in spending power. This is an uplift, though, with some big provisos and assumptions. It must be considered in the overall context. Councils are at a low base after 10 years of reductions and cuts, and local authorities still face very significant pressures that this settlement does not address nearly enough.

Today the Secretary of State has offered what the Local Government Association has referred to as the “least worst” financial settlement since 2010. To be honest, after a decade of disappointment, it is easily done. In the past decade, funding for local government has fallen by 43%; since 2015 alone, it has fallen by 32%; and if we look at the Government’s preferred measurement, and include today’s settlement in full, we see that overall spending power is still 11% lower than it was in 2010. That is 11% less funding for our local public services, while residents continue to pay more every year for council tax and services are being cut. *[Interruption.]* The Secretary of State says it is a reduction; if council tax goes up every year, it is not a reduction for those people. Let me just say to him that the average band D council tax in England in 2010 was £1,439, in 2015 it was £1,484, in 2019-20 it was £1,750, and it is going up again this year too; those are increases in council tax however he tries to spin it.

We know that the cuts have not fallen equally across England. Labour-run authorities have seen their spending power fall on average by 14%, almost twice on average as much as the cuts forced on Tory-run authorities. I do not say that this is all political; it is a fact of geography, because areas like these are also often some of the more deprived areas that have the greatest needs in adult social care and children’s services, that have the greatest health inequalities, and that are more grant-dependent to fund services, because the property types in those areas mean that their council tax base is low, and that cannot be changed quickly or easily. But the difference between the figures for funding and spending power is also revealing, because it shows how much the Government have pushed the burden for funding local services away from the centre and on to local taxpayers.

In an ideal world of localism that is not a bad thing, but the playing field is not level and nor is the game currently fair. We are now in the bizarre situation where

[Andrew Gwynne]

people are paying more for less, and that is unsustainable for the long-term viability of the local government sector, something I cherish, having been a councillor for 12 years before entering this House.

In order to achieve the Community Secretary's stated 4.4% increase in spending power, residents will once again be forced to bear the burden of inflation-busting council tax increases. The Government's plans are entirely predicated on this increase happening in every town and county hall—and that in itself is not a certainty—and so the “best settlement in a decade” boast from the Secretary of State depends on this happening, or the 4.4% that he quotes will not be reached.

Mr Kevan Jones: Not only do we have a system that has been deliberately skewed to benefit certain parts of the country, but there are added pressures on certain councils, such as Durham and other northern councils, in terms of social care and looked-after children. With social care, we have fewer self-funders, and there are over 900 looked-after children in Durham, which should be compared with the figures for some other areas. That means that 60% of the budget is now being spent in just those two areas, and in some places—such as Hartlepool, I think—it is about 65%.

Andrew Gwynne: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right, because the people-based services—children's services and adult social care—are services that most of our constituents never have to use and where they do not see the money being spent, but the things that they care about and think these inflation-busting council tax increases are going towards, the neighbourhood services, are the things that over the past 10 years have been squeezed and squeezed, and in some cases have disappeared altogether.

Let us be clear: I do not expect churlishness or hypocrisy from Ministers or Members of the governing party in the upcoming local elections if councils increase their council tax and the social care levy by the maximum amount, because this finance settlement that we are agreeing tonight requires these increases to happen in full in every town and county hall in the country, to meet the 4.4% claim that is being made. What we know is that one third of this year's growth would come directly from the general council tax increases of the maximum of 2.99%, with an additional one-fifth of the whole figure of growth coming from the social care levy being charged at the maximum of 2%. That is over 50% of the funding growth that has been lauded tonight coming from local taxation, not Government. As we know, its spread is very unequal, so we do not expect to see Ministers boasting about this settlement and then criticising councils for putting up council tax in the same breath. This settlement also fails to move beyond the sticking-plaster solutions that have been offered in recent years.

Solace's local government finance spokesman, Martin Reeves, has criticised the Government's approach, saying: “the constraints placed on these pots usually means the money is spent on dealing with existing demand, demand that is itself often a symptom of structural (and often longstanding) funding shortfalls elsewhere in the system.”

Rather than this reactionary approach to funding, we need to be dealing with a system that is at breaking point, proactively investing in reforms to improve outcomes,

particularly for the more vulnerable people in our communities. The National Audit Office has warned that a continuation could

“undermine strategic planning and create risks to value for money.”

I trust that the Secretary of State is working closely with the NAO on its review.

What I am speaking of today should not be any surprise to the Communities Secretary, because I am not the first person to raise concerns over the Government's funding plans. Indeed, over one in 10 who responded to the Government's consultation on the financial settlement objected to the way that the Government are increasingly using council tax to address the funding pressures the Government themselves have created, arguing that that would transfer the burden to local taxpayers. They argue, and they are right, that additional council tax flexibilities can have an uneven distributional effect, benefiting areas with larger tax bases while those with smaller tax bases continue to see gaps in their budgets grow.

Unfortunately, those same areas are often the ones that face the largest pressures on adult and children's social care. For example, while Wigan has the potential to raise around £4.5 million from the council tax changes, Buckinghamshire can raise £12 million. For Wigan, that would barely let it break even on last year's overspend as it managed increasing demand on care services, particularly caused by pressures in children's services. Growth in demand is not slowing down, but the money to ensure that these essential services are in place is not coming from the Government and cannot be sufficiently raised in many parts of the country with the greatest call on these services.

A quarter of people who responded to the Government's consultation were concerned, stating that the additional flexibility on council tax was not enough to meet the growing pressures on children's services. One in five raised that concern in relation to adult social care. In 2018, the Local Government Association warned that the funding gap for adult social care alone will grow by £3.5 billion by 2025. Today it reported that over the past five years pressures on children's services have pushed overspending to £3.2 billion. The number of children in care has grown by 28% in the past decade, and the number of children at risk of physical, emotional or sexual abuse or neglect has increased by 53%. I do not say that to make a political point. It should shame each and every one of us, on whichever side of the House we sit, that those most vulnerable children are being let down by a system that is broken.

The LGA has also warned that the funding promised in the finance settlement will not even be enough to cover the increase in costs from the rise in the national living wage from April. Even though demand continues to grow, councils will be forced to cut back on these services. This is not sustainable. I appreciate that there are no quick fixes. The Secretary of State knows my concern about the so-called fair funding review, but the figures that were used by the Local Government Association Labour Group were produced by the Tory-led LGA, whether he likes it or not. His Ministry was asked for clarification of whether or not those were in line with Government trends and thinking, and it gave its acknowledgement that they were.

I repeat my offer to the Secretary of State: we in the Opposition are willing to work with anyone who genuinely wants to fix our outdated and broken local government

finance system, but it has to be genuinely fair and based on real needs. It needs to reflect the circumstances facing each local authority, including their ability to raise income, and it must properly take account of all kinds of need, including deprivation and health inequalities.

After a decade of decline and neglect, there is little surprise that the promise today of an uptick in spending power has largely been welcomed by the sector, and indeed, by us. We will not oppose the local government settlement. We will not oppose councils receiving any additional funding in today's settlement, but let us be honest: this settlement, while welcome for a limited uplift, does not solve the financial crises faced by our town and county halls. It does not fix the two cost and demand-led services of adult and children's social care, and it does not ease the squeeze on our hard-pressed neighbourhood services—all the things that our constituents think that their ever-increasing council tax bills go towards: the parks, the road repairs, the ground maintenance, community centres, street cleaning, libraries, street lighting and bins. There are also the contributions that are less tangible, such as the sense of place, community and local identity—the things that make us proud, or sometimes not proud, of where we live. All these things will continue to be cut or squeezed until or unless the funding crisis in children's and adult social care is properly addressed and councils can start to rebuild our neighbourhood services again. Once we get to that place, that will be the time to welcome what is happening in local government. That will be the time to cheer. We will support the Secretary of State tonight, but let us get local government back to where it always should have been—at the heart of rebuilding our communities.

9.33 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I am grateful to you for calling me to speak so early in this debate, Mr Speaker. For many years, local government in Suffolk has got a raw deal, with funding from national Government not taking proper account of the challenges that the county faces: a large and fast-growing elderly population, social deprivation that must be tackled in coastal communities such as Lowestoft, and the cost of delivering services across a large, often sparsely populated area, which includes thousands of miles of roads that have taken a real battering in recent years.

The good news is that this settlement is a step in the right direction, but a lot of work remains to be done to ensure that Suffolk gets a fair deal. County authorities such as Suffolk face a significant funding gap. The settlement reduces the gap, which is now 37% smaller than had been forecast. It buys time while long-term solutions are found to some of the significant challenges that we face and are then put in place. That includes long-term reform of social care for an increasingly elderly population and putting it on a sustainable footing. I acknowledge that this is a very difficult challenge, but in the next few months the Government must finally publish their proposals, and then we must seek a cross-party consensus on the best way forward.

In the short term, we need confirmation of how the £500 million potholes fund and public health funding will be allocated. We also need a review of the new homes bonus—it is welcome that the Government have committed to one. At the forthcoming comprehensive spending review, it is important that the Government

provide long-term certainty to allow councils to plan sensibly and properly. That means funding settlements of at least three years.

Finally, the Government must press ahead with the fair funding review, which should ensure that Suffolk gets a fair deal in future. Research by the County Councils Network has shown that if counties such as Suffolk were funded at the national average, they would receive an additional £3.2 million a year. There has been talk of metropolitan areas losing out as a result of fair funding. For a one nation Government, it would be wrong to pursue such a course, but the CCN's research indicates that when all elements of the fair funding review are considered, councils of all shapes, sizes and political colours should benefit from a fairer distribution of resources.

Local government is on a journey. This settlement is a move in the right direction, but it is only a staging post; it is not the final destination.

9.36 pm

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The Secretary of State is right that the spending review is better for local government and that it gives a spending power increase of just over 2% in real terms—I think that was the figure given—but that has to be put in context: it is actually a 5% reduction from 2015-16 and a 20% reduction per head of population in real-terms spending power since 2010. Those are the figures the IFS has produced. Local government has received bigger spending cuts than any other part of the public sector, and we have all experienced that in our constituencies up and down the country, whether they be urban, rural, large city or small town; they have all been hit disproportionately by those cuts.

At least we have some stability this year, as the financial officers in Sheffield have said. For the first time, they are not facing a package of cuts. They have welcomed the £10 million extra for social care, and the city has tried to maintain spending on social care for the elderly, looked-after children and people with disabilities, as have most councils up and down the country, but we know that this is really a one-year settlement, for obvious reasons, and that next time we will probably be looking at a multi-year settlement. The hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) talked about the fair funding review, but that is not about an increased budget in total; it is just about redistribution. Somebody will lose out, unless the Government put more money in so that everybody gains. That will be the challenge that comes out of the review.

There is also supposedly the retention of up to 75% of business rates, and maybe some impact from the business rates review itself—who knows? These all major changes. The question is: is this year the lull before the storm for many authorities or the beginning of better things to come? That is the test for the Government. Another test is: is austerity really over? That was the question the IFS asked in its comments about the spending review and the figures I quoted from its report. Is austerity really over? What do we even mean by “an end to austerity”? That is an even bigger question. Does it simply mean that local authorities will not have to make any more cuts in overall terms, or does it mean they will have resources to undo some of the cuts they have had to make?

[Mr Clive Betts]

To my mind, the answer has to be the second one. An end to austerity has to mean going back and putting more money into the services that have been so badly cut over the years. As councils have tried to protect social care, other services—my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) very properly went through them—be they buses, leisure, libraries, street repairs or refuse collection, have been cut consistently by up to 50%. We cannot continue to see more cuts in those important services, and, moreover, we cannot continue without some restitution of the services that have already been cut.

I heard what the Secretary of State said about the review of social care and the need for cross-party debate and, hopefully, agreement. I am more than happy to join in with that, and I am sure that the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee will be as well. We dealt with the issue in the last Parliament, and I think that our joint report provided a good basis for progress. Realistically, however, any significant change in social care funding will probably not happen during the current Parliament. What we need is more money put into the current system, at least for the foreseeable future.

Let me identify two areas of concern—apart from social care—that are having a real impact on my constituency and nationally. Like many MPs, I regularly raise road safety issues on behalf of constituents. One concerns the need for yellow lines at the end of Moor Farm Avenue, a road that leads from a private estate to the very busy Mosborough Moor. Those yellow lines would ensure that the corners—the junctions—were kept free of obstruction, so that motorists leaving the estate would have a better sightline to vehicles coming in the opposite direction. What has happened? The council's response is that after years of funding cuts, it cannot satisfy all requests. That scheme is one of 1,600 on a waiting list in the city of Sheffield.

Another issue is the lack of a crossing outside Halfway Nursery Infant School. I have been campaigning for that crossing for 10 years. At present, it is dangerous for children and their parents to cross the road, but the council can fund only a couple of schemes a year in the whole city.

I wonder where the Liberal Democrats are tonight. I do not know whether my eyesight is failing, but I cannot see anyone on the Liberal Democrat Benches. However, they campaign locally, and every scheme is a priority, although when they were in government we experienced the biggest ever year-on-year cuts in local authority spending. But never mind: the point is that these schemes are important, and council funding for them has been cut by more than 50%.

The other day I read an important article in the *Daily Mail*—I am sure that the Secretary of State reads nothing else at his breakfast table. According to that article, the Food Standards Agency has doubled its estimate of the number of intestinal illnesses caused by takeaway and restaurant food each year, and 2.4 million cases of such illnesses are linked to food contamination. That, it says, is connected with the reduced number of local authority environmental health officers who carry out food safety checks. Another important service provided by local authorities has been diminished and run down,

and, again, not making cuts is not enough: we need money for authorities to be able to reinstate those services.

I welcomed the Secretary of State's comments about devolution. I think he has a genuine commitment to and enthusiasm for it. The Select Committee began an inquiry into the issue before the election, and I hope that we will continue that inquiry, because I think that, along with social care, this is an issue on which we can work to secure cross-party agreement.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: The next speaker will be making a maiden speech. This is someone who seems to be very popular at the moment. I am sure that, at this time of night, everyone will be on their best behaviour.

It is a privilege for me to introduce Nickie Aiken to make her maiden speech.

9.43 pm

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am honoured to have been elected to represent not one but two cities as the MP for Cities of London and Westminster. The hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) mentioned that there were no Lib Dems present tonight. Well, they tried their hardest to take my seat with their golden boy. Maybe that is why they are not here tonight.

I would like to begin by paying tribute to my predecessor, Mark Field, who represented the seat for 18 years, serving both his constituents and the nation, particularly recently as Foreign Office Minister for Asia. I pay tribute to his work in the constituency, highlighting issues including policing, as well as in the Foreign Office, where he worked to expose the grave abuses of the Rohingya people by the Myanmar security forces. I would also like to thank Mark for his support for me personally before, during and after the election.

Part of my seat was established in 1298 and I am proud that, in the period of over 700 years since it was established, I am the first woman to represent it. Cities of London and Westminster is home to the monarch, to the head of Government and to Parliament. It is home to the nation's high street, Oxford Street, and to the cultural and entertainment powerhouses of Soho, the west end and Covent Garden. It is also home to the centres of the financial and legal professions in the City and Holborn. But most importantly, it is home to over 130,000 residents, including myself. It has been my home for over 20 years.

My constituency truly is a story of two cities. The City of London, which is in fact the smallest county in the United Kingdom, is home to 8,000 residents, half of whom live in the Barbican, and also to the country's smallest police force. The City's role as one of the world's leading international financial centres is well established. Working alongside the City's administrative arm, the City of London Corporation, I hope to build on the work that it has already achieved to strengthen business ties between the square mile and other prominent financial services hubs across the country, including Birmingham, Leeds, Manchester, Bournemouth, Cardiff, Edinburgh and Belfast. This is all part of the simple recognition that a vibrant, thriving City helps a globally successful UK, and that a globally successful UK helps a vibrant, thriving City.

However, there are some contributions from the City that hon. Members might not have heard about. For example, its City Bridge Trust is London's largest independent grant giver, and it consistently awards over £20 million a year to tackle disadvantage in the capital. The City of London Corporation sponsors or co-sponsors 10 highly successful academies in neighbouring boroughs, runs 12 housing estates across the capital and looks after 18 major green spaces across London and the south-east of England, most notably Hampstead Heath and Epping forest.

Hon. Members may know Westminster, the other city in my constituency, a little better. Westminster is home to many great cultural offerings, including the National Gallery, the National Portrait Gallery, Tate Britain, the Royal Opera House, the Royal Albert Hall and 30 West End theatres. I do hope that hon. Members from across the country will be able to take advantage of some of the cultural offerings in their time off, although I know that we do not get that much time off. *[Interruption.]* Not that I am complaining!

Perhaps the most famous of my predecessors in the Westminster side of the seat was Charles James Fox. Elected to this place in 1768, he held the position of Foreign Secretary three times in six months. He backed the American patriots and battled with the monarch, George III, over the American war of independence. He is said to have been one of the most radical thinkers in this House—a position I hope I can follow. He employed an interesting way to gain support in the 1780 election, encouraging Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, and her sister to secure him votes in exchange for kisses. I am not sure that I will be doing the same in 2024. *[Hon. Members: "Go on!"]* I note that a number of my constituents are in the Chamber.

I came into Parliament to campaign on the issues that most concern my constituents. First among these is rough sleeping. Earlier this month, I welcomed the Government's announcement of increased spending for councils on rough sleeping. My constituency alone has been given an extra £3 million to help more people off the streets. Westminster sees more rough sleepers than the next three boroughs combined, and I am proud of the outstanding work done by its outreach teams every night of the year. This evening, over 500 beds will be available to those on Westminster's streets, and 80% of those whom outreach workers come across do not spend a second night out. However, there is still more to do to persuade the other 20% to take the help and support on offer.

I thank our outstanding outreach workers, with particular thanks to Jenny Travassos, Rob White and Nik Ward of the Westminster City Council team, to Mick Clarke and everyone at The Passage in Victoria, to Petra Salva and the whole team at St Mungo's, and to Dame Louise Casey. All of them have helped to provide me with a better understanding of the causes of entrenched rough sleeping and the possible solutions to improve people's lives. The first step must be to repeal the archaic Vagrancy Act 1824, replacing it with legislation seeking the preservation of life and directly dealing with the main reasons for entrenchment, which we know are mental health and addiction.

Having been a council leader, it is wholly appropriate to make my maiden speech during a local government finance debate, and I remain a sitting councillor. It was

as leader of Westminster that I honed my understanding of local government finance, which in turn led to my frustration at how the system is run and my recognising the need for wholesale reform. The clue is in the name: local government. If we are to ensure that the right and appropriate decisions are made to benefit local communities, we must give local authorities the freedoms and flexibilities they need to succeed.

This country remains far too centralist. Councils across England still depend too much on central Government funding. Our current system is too top-down when it really should be bottom-up, and I am not alone in that thinking. Having spoken to councillors up and down the country through the Local Government Association and sitting on the London Councils executive, I know there is huge appetite for reform. The Conservative leader of Westminster, the Labour members of Tower Hamlets and Hackney, the Labour leaders of Southwark and Camden, and the Lib Dem leader of Sutton are all at one on the issue.

Where to begin? The reform of council tax would be a good place to start. As a council leader, I felt frustrated and constrained by what I consider to be the least progressive and an unfair tax. Increasing council tax means an increase for everyone, no matter what band they fall into, so those on lower incomes pay disproportionately more. That cannot be right. When I became council leader, wealthier residents increasingly asked me, "Why can't we pay a little bit more?" They appreciated that Westminster had the lowest council tax in the country while retaining excellent services, but they were still willing to pay a bit more to help more services. In a borough where more than 2,000 properties are worth over £10 million and where the occupants of, for example, One Hyde Park are charged £1,500 in council tax, compared with in excess of £200,000 in taxes for the Manhattan equivalent, there is a definite need for reform in this area.

Sadly, successive Governments have lacked the appetite for reform, so in 2018 I decided to introduce my own council tax reform and the voluntary Westminster community contribution was born. Band H council tax payers were invited to pay more, and the response was extraordinary, raising an additional £600,000 in the first year alone and nearly £1 million since it was started. We placed the extra money in a charitable trust and asked residents where they wanted it spent, with rough sleeping, tackling loneliness, and more services for children and young people benefiting. Proof, I think, that there is a willingness among those living in higher bands to pay slightly more: not a mansion tax, which I wholly oppose as it fails to address the real issue, but real reform to ensure that council tax is representative, proportionate and progressive.

I welcome this Government's clear intention to support local government, and particularly the renewed emphasis on tackling rough sleeping. Now is the time for brave, bold reforms and for new thinking to ensure that those on the frontline in local government are given the freedoms they need and are calling out for to help their communities to thrive and to grow in a truly open, global Britain.

9.55 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken), who

[Emma Hardy]

made a very thoughtful speech. There is lot of agreement on the Opposition Benches with her comments about supporting the outreach workers who are working with the homeless community and with her calls for the reform of council tax. I look forward to hearing more contributions from her in the very near future.

I did not feel the same joy and gladness on hearing the Secretary of State's initial comments. It appears that, with the picture he paints of the promised extra money, not only are we expected to be grateful for what he is offering but we are expected to ignore the past 10 years of cuts, which is difficult when we see the evidence of it in every part of our community.

One fact I would like the Minister to address in his summing up is that there are now 848 looked-after children in Hull—the number has nearly doubled since 2010. I am sure he is aware, as I am, of the outcomes for children in care and how much lower they are than for children who are not in care. I am sure, therefore, that he will feel as disgusted and outraged as I do that early intervention and support were not available for those children, and I hope he comes to the same conclusion as me that the early intervention and support were not absent because Hull City Council and the social workers did not care but because they did not have the finances needed to fund them.

We have been placed in a situation in which services are left to reach crisis point before there is involvement. All the money is spent at the crisis end, with very little spent at the beginning to develop the early intervention that families and young children desperately need.

It is the same with adult social care. We wait until things get to the most expensive point, when vulnerable adults are left going to A&E services that cost society a lot more than providing the services and support from the beginning. That is because of the Government's decision to pull money away from our local government.

We do not always acknowledge how local government has been at the front of the cuts under both this and the previous Government. Local government has had to face the brunt. It has had to face the complaints from people who are angry about the roads not being repaired in the way they want, about bins not being collected in the way they want and about problems with recycling. Local government sits there and takes the blame for problems that are not of its making; problems that have come from this building and this Government's decision to pull away its funding.

The Government want us to be grateful, and they want us to thank them for offering us a little more money. Maybe that would be easier if they showed a little remorse for what they have done for the past 10 years and if they acknowledged that they made a mistake, that they cut too hard and too fast and that the outcome has been those 848 children who are now in crisis and being looked after because some of them did not get the support they needed earlier in life.

I hope the Secretary of State is sincere in wanting to develop a truly fair funding formula and is sincere about working with Opposition Members, because I fear that, if the Government continue down the path they already seem to be taking, we will see more cuts to areas with the greatest need as the Tory shires seem to get more.

I would like the Minister to answer questions on how this will be weighted. Indeed, I raised this with him at a recent all-party parliamentary group meeting, so it should not come as a surprise that I wish to raise it with him again. How will the need for adult social care be weighted in the fair funding formula? How will the need for children's services be weighted? Will it take into account the number of adults who can self-finance? In Hull, only 11% of adults can finance their own adult social care. That is one of the lowest levels in the country. Is that going to be taken into consideration when the Government develop this fair funding model? We have to look at more than just what business rates are coming into the area; we need to look at the need as well. When working out the new funding formula, is any assessment going to be made of how dire some of the services have become because of the past 10 years of cuts? How are the Government going to work with the different council leaders up and down the country in developing this fairer funding formula? How are the Government going to work with other Members of Parliament, if they actually want to get this right and move forward together?

On that point of getting this right and moving forward together, the other thing I wish to spend a couple of moments talking about is devolution. The Secretary of State knows, because, again, I raised this with him personally, that I am concerned about what is going to happen to Hull City Council on the issue of devolution. He spoke about the fact that South Yorkshire has signed its deal off, and that the Leeds city deal is under development, but I ask him again: what is going to happen to Hull? He talked about the need for a strong economic and geographical area. If he is looking for a strong economic area, he would be looking at Hull City Council, East Riding of Yorkshire Council, North East Lincolnshire Council and North Lincolnshire Council as part of a Humber devolution deal, because it is one. If the Government want to make this into a political decision, different boundaries would be drawn. I want to know from the Government what the priorities are, because it appeared that the previous northern powerhouse Minister accepted the argument for that strong economic area and that that was his deciding factor when making decisions. What is the Government's deciding factor? Is it the wishes of local leaders in the area or is it the needs of the economy in the area? What is going to take priority when those devolution deals are signed off?

Mention has been made of having different levels of power going to different devolved areas, but will that not partly depend on geography? How many powers would be devolved in a very small devolution deal, with an area comprising just Hull City Council and East Riding of Yorkshire Council, compared with something as huge as the Manchester area? What conversations have been had about that? What happens if this involves a local authority with no partners? How is that going to work? If the Government are looking at a greater Lincolnshire model, they will find that it is not a strong economic geographical area. I want to know what the priorities are: keeping council leaders happy or solving the economic problems facing our country? I would like to know about that.

In conclusion, there are things on which the Government can start to work more effectively with Members from across the House. One of them is devolution, because we have one chance to get this right. If we do not get it

right this time, it will take a long time to sort this out. We had this problem with Humberside, years and years ago, as that did not work. That is probably why we have ended up in the situation we are in now. We have got to get this right and to do so we need to be looking at more than just the wishes of local council leaders. We need to be looking at the economy and what works for that particular area. The same applies in respect of the fair funding formula. If the Government are serious about levelling up across different parts of the country, they should work with the Opposition parties to develop a formula that takes into account the needs of each individual area. Otherwise, those 848 children that I mentioned at the beginning of this speech are only going to increase in number.

10.3 pm

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): With a 7.1% increase for County Durham today in the local government finance settlement and a 7.9% increase in police funding, both above the national average, I am delighted that the Opposition are not voting against these measures, especially given that the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) wrote a letter to me just a few weeks ago saying that actually we were going to be facing cuts. It looks like quite the opposite is the case. I am looking forward to his letter outlining the increases we will be facing and welcoming the Government's approach, especially given that Labour-controlled Durham County Council is still spending more than £50 million building a council headquarters on a floodplain, although this is a massively opposed by local people. I want quickly to declare an interest in respect of the one point I would like to make in this debate.

Mr Kevan Jones: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Holden: I am going to be very quick today. I wish to declare an interest, in that I am co-chair of the all-party group on local democracy. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken), who said that she wants the most bottom-up approach possible when it comes to councils. As such, I urge my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to reintroduce the Bill to exclude public lavatories from business rates. That is exactly what most local councils want. It would save Wolsingham parish council in my constituency £750 a year, and it would save local councils throughout the country more than £8 million a year.

In conclusion, I welcome what I hope is the start of levelling up, from both the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and from the Home Office in the form of the police settlement. I hope this is the start of things to come.

10.5 pm

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Coming from Harrow, where the local authority has seen its grant from the Government reduced by some 97% in eight years, it is pretty difficult for me to find much to cheer in the report. Harrow's core spending power per head this financial year is estimated to be £170 lower than the London average and £75 lower than the average for the rest of England. In short, we are one of the lowest-funded boroughs in London and nationally.

Despite No. 10's talk of levelling up, there do not yet appear to be any grounds for optimism that the Chancellor's Budget or future spending reviews are likely to lift Harrow up to a level of spending power similar to our neighbours in Hillingdon, Hertfordshire and Barnet. To be fair to those neighbours and, indeed, to other councils throughout the rest of England, it is not as if any of them are hugely well funded either. Councils in England face an £8 billion funding gap by 2025. Inevitably, more and more councils are struggling to balance the books and more and more councils are using reserves to plug budget holes.

Tory Northamptonshire has become the poster boy for troubled councils everywhere. It is true that incompetence and an over-zealous approach to privatisation were two particular local factors that drove the bankruptcy there, but the reality is that all councils are having to divert money away from youth services, public health, parks and libraries to fund the most basic services, such as street cleaning, social care and homelessness, and even those services are stripped down to the bone. In the long term, that is not only a false economy but affects our constituents' wellbeing and sense of contentment with life in modern Britain. It means that some of the most vulnerable—those who are desperately in need of care or skilled specialist support in schools—will not get the back-up that they need. In the 21st century, in one of the richest nations in the world, it is difficult to fathom why Ministers are so comfortable about that situation.

If we are really to give the towns and villages of England, and the counties and communities of our great country, the control and transformation of fortunes that so many are desperate to see, the revitalisation of local councils and devolution of more power more consistently, even to the least fashionable of our town halls, is a first essential step. That great slogan "Take back control", which spoke to so many, did not for most, I suspect, mean taking back powers from Brussels merely to allow Whitehall and Downing Street to continue to lord it over the rest of the country even more.

In recent years, the pace of devolution in England has slowed. The term "northern powerhouse" was a wonderfully evocative turn of phrase, but the lack of funding that followed its invention rightly generated much scepticism. A new surge of energy, with real financial power being devolved to northern councils, seems overdue, even from my distant southern viewpoint. If that is what the Department's White Paper is set to offer, that would seem to be some progress, but London and the London councils need the same and more, as steps towards a genuine transfer of direct power back to the people. We need a new settlement of powers to help London tackle its major challenges, such as growing inequality, ever-increasing poverty, the skills shortage, the climate and housing crises and even violent crime. All require the mayor, the Assembly and, crucially, local councils to have access to greater powers to create London-specific solutions to London's problems.

London generates more wealth for Britain's people and contains more of our citizens than any other part of the UK. Indeed, London generated a third of the UK's total GDP in 2018, yet we still do not have full control over skills or even benefits budgets.

I do not question the need for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland to continue to benefit from the Barnett formula, but I do think that the people of Barnet, and

[Gareth Thomas]

indeed the whole of London, should have our own funding formula too. London is the most expensive place to live and work in the UK, yet our Mayor and Assembly do not have the power to legislate on such crucial issues here, whereas Scotland can do so through Holyrood. In any future constitutional settlement, the UK's southern powerhouse—its capital city—should be given the same powers as our national friends in Holyrood, the Senedd and Stormont.

For example, why can London not have the same powers now as the Scottish Parliament? Clearly there is not the same national issue driving the debate about where power best lies, but I would argue that the size of our capital's population and the scale of the challenges it faces demands similar treatment. Why not give London, through our Assembly and Mayor, the right to legislate on all housing and planning matters? Why not have the same income tax-varying powers that Scotland has? Why do Londoners have to beg Whitehall for action to tackle air pollution, when the Mayor and city hall should be given full control to put in place a joined-up strategy to tackle all the various triggers of the pollution challenge in London? Too many of the powers they need are still locked up tight in the great Departments of state just down the road from here.

Why can London not have more control over how our water and sewerage services are delivered and what we pay for them? There are more people living in absolute poverty in London than anywhere else in the UK, yet London's local politicians in the Assembly and in the form of the Mayor are not allowed to determine the London living wage. The right to greater devolution is one that all England deserves, but London is the southern powerhouse of our United Kingdom, and its continued success will be even more essential post Brexit.

I recognise that with Rory Stewart's sleeping bag having more cut-through than Shaun Bailey at the moment, there will not be much immediate enthusiasm in No. 10 for shifting more power to city hall, but London's success benefits the whole country. The home counties, in particular, benefit from London's city state success. All those Tory shires benefit from Labour London, and vice versa. When London grows, so too does the rest of the country. The reverse is also true; when London's problems inhibit our potential, in the end it is not just Londoners who suffer. It took more than 40 years to start building work on Crossrail. Given the demands on our public transport system, we cannot afford to waste another 40 years before work on Crossrail 2 gets under way.

Levelling up, city deals and the northern powerhouse are all indicators of the slow dance, in our own very British way, towards federalism. London has an essential role to play with the nations of the UK in recasting the Union for the 21st century. For too long our country has been seen as comprising England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. I have always thought that we needed to empower the towns and cities of England alongside Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales, and London. There is growing recognition that, in order to secure the Union, the United Kingdom will have to reform and change. London cannot be ignored on that journey, and neither can the rest of England's town and cities.

A better funding settlement than today's shabby offering is long overdue, but a Government who want to defend the Union should also set out clearly and soon a package of legislative and fiscal devolution to turbo-charge the federal journey that our country needs to undertake.

10.13 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): The Secretary of State opened the debate by announcing that this is the best local government funding settlement for a decade. That would not take much beating when we consider what has happened over the past 10 years. In the previous debate, on police funding, I referred to the year-zero approach, because it is as though anything that happened before December 2019 was someone else's fault and had nothing at all to do with this Government; as though they are a new Administration who are coming in to put everything right. But most of the Ministers now on the Front Bench voted for the austerity of the past 10 years, so it is with some chutzpah that they are now trying to convince us that they had nothing to do with it.

We also now have a key in-word, which we will hear a lot more of. The hon. Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden) mentioned it when he talked about "levelling up". Well, it will take a hell of a lot of levelling up. I will come on to answer his points about Durham County Council in a minute, because he is clearly going to try to play dog-whistle politics, which does not surprise me at all. He welcomes this statement as though it means extra money for the county council. Yes, this settlement is for this year—it is a one-year settlement. I hope that when the council and the police commissioner put up the local government tax, he does not blame Durham County Council. To do that would be to abnegate his responsibilities, as he would be welcoming it in this place, but saying another thing in County Durham. I look forward to him supporting whatever difficult decision the police commissioner and Durham County Council have to make on the local council tax precept. No doubt, he will try to say something different locally.

This is a one-year settlement. We now have the so-called new fairer funding formula coming in, but we need to remind ourselves about what has gone on previously. Durham County Council has lost 40% of its budget in the past 10 years. That is £232 million. In the early days, when we had Eric Pickles as Secretary of State, this could all be done by cutting back on pot plants and getting rid of chief officers. Well, I am sorry, but I defy anybody who says that we can get 40% efficiencies out of an organisation and still deliver the same services, because we clearly cannot.

What we have had today is the Secretary of State saying that we will have a fairer funding settlement that respects need. That is not what the Government have been doing over the past 10 years. On every indication, the funding formula is seeing money being moved from areas of deprivation to areas of affluence. The National Audit Office has identified that. While Durham County Council has taken huge cuts, places such as Surrey and Wokingham have had increases in their core spending budget. We get to a ridiculous situation now where, if we look at 2019-20, core spending per dwelling for Durham is £1,727, whereas for Surrey it is £2,004. People might ask what difference it makes. It comes back to what we have heard for the past 10 years, which

is not only that austerity is needed, but that, somehow, everywhere in the country is the same in terms of delivering services—whether in Surrey, in an inner-city metropolitan area or in County Durham. The two main drivers that are swallowing up most of the budget of counties such as Durham are adult social care and looked-after children.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is being very generous. He is making a terrific speech as usual. Does he agree that this issue, as he is describing it, is actually compounded by the deceit that, as part of the devolution of power and fiscal responsibility, these authorities would be able to retain more business rates, but the reality is that the Government do not want increases in business rates, and neither do businesses, because they cannot afford them? The reality is that those authorities will not be given those moneys in any event.

Mr Jones: I will come on to business rates in a minute. I will give an explanation as to why, for example, Durham County Council is doing what it is doing with its headquarters. I would argue that it is a response to Government policy.

If we look at adult social care in Durham, we see that there are 3,295 people in home care, 3,151 in residential care, 736 in supported living schemes, and another 763 receiving direct payments. The difference between Durham and places such as Surrey is that we have a higher proportion of people requiring council support. As my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) identified, we do not have a large package of support. We actually self-finance, and that makes a big difference in terms of the pressures on local councils.

The same is true if we consider looked-after children not just in Durham, but across the north-east. In Durham, we have 900 children in local authority care. As was said earlier, the number of looked-after children has increased by 20% in the last decade, but in the north-east it increased by 72% in the same period. Two councils in the north-east, Hartlepool Borough Council and Middlesbrough Council, have more than twice the national average number, and five times more looked-after children than Wokingham Borough Council. The new funding formula has to take that need into account. The idea that everywhere is the same is complete and utter nonsense.

The bigger debate, which has not really been had, is about the Government's direction of travel over the past 10 years, which has been to reduce the amount of central Government funding to local authorities and to push the burden on to the local council tax base. Again, County Durham is at a disadvantage. More than 50% of our properties are in band A, so an increase of 1% in Durham raises very little compared to such an increase in more affluent areas with large numbers of higher-band properties. That will have to be taken into consideration. For true levelling up, there will have to be a complete reversal of what has happened over the past 10 years. If we get to a situation in which what a local authority requires is raised locally, councils such as mine will be at a huge disadvantage, certainly given the increase in the number of looked-after children and individuals in care in the area.

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): My right hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does he agree that the Government have to stop running councils into the ground with their cuts, and should instead invest properly to halt and reverse the real-world implications of their ideologically driven austerity policy?

Mr Jones: That has to be what we want local government to do. The Chairman of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), said that, too. It is no good deluding people if, locally, more than 60% of the budget has been taken up by two areas. As my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) said, most people do not have any visibility of that. When they pay their council tax, they see their bins emptied and environmental improvements, but if 60-odd per cent. of a council's budget—I think the figure is higher for some councils—is going on two sectors, that will be difficult to explain to people.

A decision has to be taken about what proposals will be put forward on business rate retention. If it is not, the lack of the clarity that local government needs will create real problems for councils such as Durham County Council. There is an opportunity to grow the business rate. I will explain to the hon. Member for North West Durham why Durham County Council decided to downsize its headquarters and move to the centre of the city: to open up an area for investment and create up to 7,000 jobs in order to grow the council tax base. It is doing exactly what the Government want. In addition, it has moved jobs away from County Hall to places such as Crook in his constituency. I do not hear him arguing against moving county jobs to his constituency. Dog-whistle politics is fine, but he needs to look at the facts first.

Mr Holden: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way, as he is attacking me directly?

Mr Jones: In a minute. If he wants to say that he does not welcome county council jobs to Crook, that is fine; I will have them in Chester-le-Street.

Mr Holden: I would be very happy if the county council was just downsizing its current office; what I do not understand is why the Labour-controlled county council is spending £50 million building a brand new centre on a floodplain. Why not just make better use of the current site?

Mr Jones: If the hon. Gentleman has been in the current building, he will know that large sections of it are empty.

Mr Holden: Exactly!

Mr Jones: Wait a minute. It was built in the 1960s, it is full of asbestos and it is very energy-inefficient. If he wants to put capital—public money—into it, fine, but it will not happen, because the money is not there, and what he suggests would cost a lot more than what has been proposed. In addition to that, the council is going to save somewhere in the region of £300,000 a year in running costs. In terms of trying to grow our council tax base in County Durham, that is what the Government want us to do. That is a good, prudent way in which the

[Mr Kevan Jones]

council is operating. As I say, if the hon. Gentleman is against jobs going to his constituency, please redirect them to mine, because I will have them. [Interruption.] Well, I just ask him to learn his facts. If he wants dog-whistle politics, which he obviously does, then fine, but let us see what is to the benefit—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. If the hon. Member wants to intervene, he should intervene. I am not having continuous noise across the Chamber.

Mr Jones: I am sorry, Mr Speaker—I never had this problem with the hon. Gentleman's predecessor.

The Secretary of State referred to the grants on public health. Again, this issue needs to be addressed, because it is a driver of inequalities. In the police precept debate earlier, we talked about mental health and support for the most vulnerable in our community. The Advisory Committee on Resource Allocation came forward with a formula that meant that from April 2020 County Durham would have lost £19 million whereas Surrey would have gained £14 million. I say in a spirit of genuine co-operation with the hon. Member for North West Durham that I hope he is going to argue, and lobby his Government, to ensure that this inequality, which has been there for the past 10 years, will not continue.

Let me turn to the new homes bonus, which, again, disadvantages not only Durham but other councils. The top-slicing of the new homes bonus leads to a situation where, again, southern councils are gaining from this allocation and Durham and others are losing. That cannot be fair in any type of system. I therefore look forward to the new, radical approach that has been announced by the Secretary of State in arguing that we will level up these grants and the new formula will recognise need, because if it does genuinely recognise need, then the likes of County Durham will gain through this process. It is not acceptable to say that we can wash away the past 10 years as though they did not happen; they did happen. Without the fundamental question about what we want local government to do and how we want to fund it—

Mr Holden: If the right hon. Gentleman wants to talk about a year zero starting last year, I wonder whether he would like to talk about a year zero starting in 2010—as if nothing was a problem then, when this country was borrowing £1 in every £4 it was spending due to the policies he had voted for since 2001.

Mr Jones: I do not want to get off the subject, but the hon. Gentleman will have to try better than that, because I was a Member then, and I remember, for example, the investment in Sure Start in County Durham, in my constituency and his constituency. I remember the six new schools, two new hospitals and three new doctors surgeries that were built in my constituency—all that investment. With regard to this nonsense that Labour spent too much, he should look back to just before the crash. What were David Cameron and George Osborne, and their Front Benchers, doing then? They were not just matching our spending—they were calling for more expenditure. So if we were profligate, then they, frankly, were completely reckless. When I was a Defence Minister, if I had followed what they wanted to do then, we

would have increased the defence budget by billions. What did they do when they first came in in 2010? They slashed it by 16%. So I shall take no lessons from anyone on the Conservative Benches about Labour spending too much, because the Conservative party at the time was calling for more. I was going to —[Interruption.] I will carry on if those on the Front Bench want me to.

The hon. Member for North West Durham cannot ignore the fact that his party, in coalition and in government, has been in power for 10 years. Decisions being taken now are affecting the lives of his and my constituents, and we must put those right. I am prepared to work with him to argue for more money for Durham County Council and others, but I will not get into the petty dog-whistle politics of his portrayal of Durham County Council.

I genuinely think that there is an opportunity here. If the Government get this right and follow through on a fairer funding formula, they will have my full support, but it must be fairer. There was a time when I was in local government that it was not only a proud achievement for many Labour politicians but it was something that the Conservative party was proud of too.

10.30 pm

Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) on her maiden speech, and I look forward to working with her in standing up for local government.

I am pleased to speak in this important debate, particularly given my long-standing commitment to this issue, after 14 years' experience working in local government prior to entering the House—and what experience those 14 years, particularly the last 10, have given me, because since the Conservatives entered government in 2010, our local councils have been attacked and attacked.

A huge chunk of the austerity that started under George Osborne and continues to this day has fallen on local government, but let us be clear about why that has happened. It was not just because the Conservatives are ideologically wedded to slimming down the size of our state and stripping away our frontline public services in the process. It was also one of the most scandalous outsourcing exercises that this country has ever seen. Ministers knew that the services used by many local residents in their daily lives are more likely to be those invested in by their local council, rather than by central Government. That is why we have seen cuts hitting Labour councils the hardest—so that the Conservative party is able to point the finger of blame for the cuts that they have been relentlessly imposing on those of us who have steadfastly opposed them.

Every household that Enfield Council serves now receives the equivalent of £800 less than they did in 2010. Let us think about that figure—£800 per head. That money could be going into funding the local services that my constituents in Enfield North rely on and creating new ones as future challenges emerge. Instead, hard-working Labour councillors have been forced to choose between which services are the least worst cut.

After a decade of these attacks, when there is quite simply nothing else left to cut, essential services are at risk. Who does this hurt the most? It is not the people who are bolstered against financial changes; it is the

families on housing waiting lists, and the kids whose youth clubs have had to close. It leads to the abhorrent levels of rough sleeping that we see on our streets.

But it is not just about the amount of funding allocated; it is about the way that money is reaching our areas too. Let us take public health funding, for example. Public health challenges are sometimes unpredictable, numerous and difficult to respond to. That is why it is vital that the funding received by local authorities to meet specific challenges fits the needs of our area at any one time—and yet the baseline public health funding for Enfield Council was set way back in 2013, which means that the amount of funding we receive completely ignores the demographic changes we have seen, our rising health needs and the worsening poverty under this Tory Government.

This is not merely symptomatic of a Government who are asleep at the wheel when it comes to the challenges that our communities face. It highlights Ministers' willingness to flatly ignore these challenges and keep funding at a totally inadequate level to save money. While the Prime Minister plans spending splurges on bridges to Northern Ireland, communities like mine are left wanting, with community centres forced to close, social care on the brink and people begging on our streets. Those things happen as a result of political choices—the political choices of this Government. It is time that communities like mine in Enfield North got a fair deal, so that we can finally start properly addressing the immeasurable damage that has been done by this Government since 2010.

10.35 pm

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): First, may I congratulate the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) on what I thought was a really thoughtful maiden speech? It is quite telling when councillors come into this place. The experience and insight they bring, regardless of party affiliation, means that we are actually at one when it comes to the need for reform of local government. I very much welcome her contribution on that point.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), who is the Chair of the Select Committee, for the contribution he made and the insight he brings to this debate. He made it very clear, from information from the IFS, that we have now seen a 20% reduction in spending power since 2010. He asked the question that we all ask: if austerity is over, what does that mean in practice? Does it mean just that the funding cuts stop today, or does it mean that we will begin to rebuild what has been taken from many of our local communities since 2010?

My hon. Friend also laid out a statistic that was new to me—I was surprised by this, but perhaps I should not be so surprised—which is that 2.4 million cases have been linked to food contamination. No doubt a reduction in the number of our public health officials has played a part in that, but in England we are behind. In Wales, a takeaway has to display its food hygiene ratings on the door of the premises, as it does on online ordering platforms, in a way that a takeaway in England does not have to do. In addition to the need to rebuild our public health functions, we need to move forward and make sure we have mandatory food hygiene ratings so that people can make an informed choice about where they buy food.

As always, my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) gave a real insight into the impact of cuts and austerity on her community. There are a staggering 848 looked-after children—almost doubling since 2010—with council services left at crisis point. There is a real tension: the Government have of course reduced the central grant and council tax is going up all the time, but the very councillors who are working to protect their community and their council often face the most criticism from local people for the very difficult decisions they have to make. That is a very difficult task for many.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas), as always, gave a London insight, painting a picture that we are not always used to hearing about in this place. We very much hear the story that London is thriving and the rest of England is really struggling, but we see real pockets of deprivation in this great capital that should shame us all. We are seeing every local authority really struggling to make ends meet and demand for services really going through the roof.

My hon. Friend also made the case, and I absolutely support this, for saying that we cannot believe that devolution in London has finished. The problem with devolution in England is that we look to London, and we discount it for the rest of England, believing that the job here is done, and it absolutely is not. If we look at devolution in our major cities around the world—New York, Tokyo and other places—we see real fiscal devolution and real law-making powers devolved to a local level, in a way that leaves London in the shadows. When we talk about levelling up, there is a need not just to talk about redistributing finance and capital investment, but about the powers needed across all our major towns and cities in this country to make sure that every community has the right to determine their own future.

My right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) was absolutely blunt in his assessment. It was interesting to hear the exchange across the Chamber on parts of that, but we can understand why tempers are so frayed on this fraught issue. How can it be right that 40% of a council's budget—£232 million—has been taken away from local public services? In the midst of all that, when my right hon. Friend raises those issues and the impact on his community and reflects on the local authority's difficulty in trying to balance the books, we have people who for reasons of cynical political game playing decide to make the local council the target, instead of laying the blame where it thoroughly deserves to be, which is of course with the Government who are pushing through those cuts.

My hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Feryal Clark), a councillor for 14 years, is also adding real quality to this place. We need more councillors coming here—maybe it should be a prerequisite of coming to this place, as perhaps then we would have a better quality of debate. The figure of £800 per person cut from that local authority is absolutely eye-watering. Although we bat around the numbers, as they are important, what this really means is that those essential services that make a place a decent place to live have been affected: the community centre is not open any longer; the library is now closed; the Sure Start centre that gave young kids the real start in life that they need is no longer there. A startling report today says that life expectancy is going backwards for women and is stalling

[*Jim McMahon*]

for men. How can that be right? We are seeing a decrease that this country has not seen for 120 years. Why? It is because of the lost decade of Tory austerity. That cannot be right.

May I just place on record, as my boss my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) did, a tribute to the right hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry) for the work he did as the Northern Powerhouse Minister? One thing that I enjoyed about the right hon. Gentleman was that he knew how to take a good rebuttal, and the exchanges that we had were fun and in good spirit and were a good challenge. He worked hard behind the scenes to try to make progress on devolution, and I hope that continues.

My final point is that we cannot afford to continue this pressure on council tax. We all know that council tax is out of date, and maybe next April, when council tax revaluations turn 30, we can have a big party and crack open the sausage rolls, the prawn cocktails could come out and maybe a bit of fizzy orange, or perhaps we should look back and recognise that there has been a collective failure on council tax revaluation and the need to modernise. Governments duck this because it is not popular, but we now have a system that is very unfair.

How can it be right that over the last five years we have seen council tax increase by a third in England? That is not right. What would happen if income tax was increased by a third in the same period? What would happen if national insurance was increased by a third in the same period? What would happen if VAT was increased by a third in the same period? What would happen if fuel duty was increased by a third in the same period? And, God forbid, what would happen if beer duty was increased by a third in the same period? There would be a riot in the Strangers' Bar as we speak. But of course there is not a riot over the council tax increase. Why? Because we can defer blame down to local councils, but it is just not good enough. Today we see that low-income families have 8% of their household income taken for council tax while that figure is only 1% for higher earners. That cannot be right. It is hugely regressive and it is getting worse with every year that passes.

If the Government really want to address this, it requires maturity. It requires a forward view and it requires a clear strategy that has to be more progressive and up to date, and must reflect geographical variations. It must also recognise that council tax has its limitations. Of course property tax is very important, but it cannot take the burden of adult social care and children's services, and it cannot be right that our ability to receive adult social care in older age is determined by a house value 29 years ago, any more than whether a child gets the care that they need to protect them from harm is determined by the same measure.

We need to grow up on this; we need to tackle it, and we need a solution that puts councils in the right place for the long term.

Mr Betts: I agree with my hon. Friend. We need a separate funding stream for adult social care, as the two Select Committees recommended in the last Parliament. Also, my Select Committee recommended a review of council tax very much along the lines that the hon.

Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) recommended, but the Government just dismissed it in their response and said they were not minded to do a review of any kind. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is disappointing?

Jim McMahon: It is disappointing, but is inevitable in a way, because there would be winners and losers—and, let's be honest, the winners would be the poorest who have less agency to mount a campaign and the losers would be the wealthiest, the people with agency who can mount a campaign in objection to it, and the major right-wing newspapers will also mount a campaign against it. It will be called the garden tax, the conservatory tax, the porch tax, or the driveway tax, but it will never be a tax that is actually deemed to be fair. But that is what this country needs; it cannot be right in England that we carry on with such an unfair tax system.

If the Government want to be mature—if they want to look long-term, if they genuinely want to take the politics out of this, which is probably what is needed—I am sure our side would be looking to contribute to that, but if they want to wilfully ignore the impact on low-income families and on many local authorities now not able to fund decent local services, I am afraid they can expect strong opposition on this side.

10.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Luke Hall): I thank Members from across the House for their contributions to the debate. Everybody here represents a constituency and a community that they are passionate about. We have heard many examples of public servants working hard to give back to the communities we represent. I know that many Members are proud of the services that local government provides, and I hope that this evening will be a chance for us all to back those words up with action. That means backing this settlement, which will give councils up and down the country the certainty they want and need. That is what today's debate is about.

This is the best settlement for a decade. It puts a game-changing £2.9 billion back into the sector overall. It focuses on the priority area of social care, in which we are providing unprecedented investment. That means putting £1 billion of new funding into a social care grant, as well as continuing to provide the £410 million we invested last year and maintaining funding going into the improved better care fund. At the same time, we are allowing local authorities responsible for adult social care to raise council tax by an additional 2% above the core referendum principle to meet rising demand. That means the Government are making almost £6 billion available next year across adult and children's social care, which is a measure of our commitment to the most vulnerable in our society. Outside of social care, we are giving local authorities stability for the year ahead by maintaining all grants from 2019-20, while increasing core funding in line with inflation. Today, the Secretary of State announced a £40 million boost to the sector from the business rates levy account.

We are proud that our settlement delivers on all those fronts, while keeping council tax low and giving people the final say on their monthly bills and the services they want to see delivered. The council tax referendum principles we have put forward today are expected to result in the

lowest average increase in council tax since 2016, protecting taxpayers from unaffordable and unwarranted hikes to their monthly bills. This is a great package of support for local government and one that starts to deliver on the promise to level up services across the country.

It is not just through the settlement that we are investing in local services to deliver on this agenda. We have pledged £3.6 billion to level up 100 communities across the country through the towns fund; committed £250 million in funding for vital infrastructure that will unlock over 20,000 homes; created a £500 million youth investment fund to pay for top-quality facilities for young people; and pledged a crucial £2 billion to back-fill potholes and make our roads safer. That is what this Government are delivering—a new programme of investment and renewal in our infrastructure and our public services.

A number of Members from across the House raised adult social care. The hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), the Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, raised a number of important points. We were grateful for his comments about the Select Committee's willingness to work with us in the months ahead to develop a cross-party solution.

My hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) talked about the pressures on social care. We are acutely aware of the significant pressures councils face in the delivery of adult social care. We are hearing about that personally from councillors and council leaders up and down the country. The settlement put before the House today is a clear indication that the Government have not just heard those concerns but are acting decisively on them. For the coming financial year, we have given authorities access to almost £6 billion of dedicated funding. That includes £1 billion of grant funding for adult and children's social care, on top of continuing existing social care grants.

The grant funding should not be viewed in isolation, however. As all Members know, councils pay for services in their area through locally raised revenue. That is why we have proposed a 2% adult social care precept, enabling councils to raise a further £500 million. That recognises the vital role that social care plays in supporting the most vulnerable people in society, while helping local authorities to meet the challenges posed by rising demand and pressures. In addition, the NHS's contribution to the better care fund, which aims to increase health and social care integration, will increase by 3.4% in real terms, in line with the additional investment in the NHS in 2020-21.

The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) talked about the pressures on children's social care and the need to work together on the new funding formula for local government. We can give her the commitment that we will work across the House on those issues. We will shortly start to release some of the figures to working groups, including council leaders. I am very happy to meet her and her neighbouring MPs to discuss the implementation of the formula to make sure that we do our best by the 848 children she spoke so passionately about. We announced the £1 billion for next year for adults and children, which can be decided according to local need, ensuring that councils under the most acute pressure receive additional funding and support.

Of course, the best way to improve outcomes for children is to remove the need for them to enter the care sector in the first place, which is why we have committed to a further year of funding for the troubled families programme. We are clear that that essential programme continues to provide intensive support for some of the most vulnerable families in our society. One of the Government's first announcements was to confirm the £165 million to extend the programme for an extra year, so that more families can get access to early practical and co-ordinated help to transform lives for the better. This will provide intensive support for some of the most vulnerable families and place the programme on a stable footing for the future.

Anyone who has worked with the families and key workers on the troubled families programme will be aware of the incredible relationship that some of those key workers build with the families in helping them to turn their lives around. In the last five years, over 300,000 families have reported real improvements since joining the programme and around 28,000 people have moved off welfare and into work as a result of it. The multimillion-pound funding that we are providing will enable local authorities across the country to achieve even more in the year to come by helping up to 92,000 additional families.

One of the Government's first announcements after being returned in December was to confirm the £263 million for local authorities to prevent and relieve homelessness in their areas through the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 and this Department's flexible homelessness support grant.

We had an absolutely incredible maiden speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken). She started by praising her predecessor, Mark Field, for the work that he did—I join her in that—and told her story about how she was the first woman to represent the seat. She is clearly going to do an incredible job. She outlined the incredible historical, cultural, economic and heritage contribution of her seat and the incredible work of the City Bridge Trust, and she talked hugely passionately about the work that she has already been involved in on rough sleeping. It is already clear from my meetings with her and her contribution in the House today that she will be hot on this topic and on holding us to account as we look to end rough sleeping for good by the end of this Parliament. She also talked passionately about local government finance reforms. I know that we will be working closely with her to develop the review of relative needs and resources in the weeks and months to come.

On rough sleeping, of course it is unacceptable that anybody should be sleeping on the streets in modern Britain. That is why we have brought forward our commitment to end rough sleeping for good by the end of this Parliament from the previous commitment of 2027, and why we have committed £437 million next year to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping—an 18% increase on last year. Our rough sleeping initiative is working, with a 32% reduction in rough sleeping compared with what it would have been had the initiative not been in place, and a 19% direct reduction, but we know how much more there is to do. That is why we are investing £112 million in the rough sleeping initiative in the year to come to continue giving people the support

[*Luke Hall*]

that they need. That will fund over 6,000 beds and 2,500 staff to support some of the most vulnerable people to move off the streets for good.

The right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) made the pun of the day in talking about the bottoms-up approach to rate relief on public toilets. The Non-Domestic Rating (Public Lavatories) Bill would have enabled this, but the Bill fell when Parliament was dissolved. We will of course consider reintroducing the measure in due course and keep him updated on that.

Jim McMahon: This point has been made at the Dispatch Box before, but a number of important, non-controversial Bills fell when the election was called. If the Government want to work cross-party on bringing those non-controversial Bills forward, we will be happy to support them.

Luke Hall: Of course we are very happy to do that. We will be bringing the Bill forward at the earliest possible opportunity, and we are happy to continue to have those discussions.

Members also touched on the importance of supporting rural communities in the settlement. The rural services delivery grant, at £81 million this coming year is, again, the highest paid out to date. We completely understand the importance of supporting rural communities, which is why in the review of relative need and resources we have proposed the crucial area cost adjustment, which will include an adjustment for the additional service costs associated with sparsity, isolation and market size. All those factors will be accounted for in a robust manner.

As positive as this settlement is, we are well aware that it does not solve all the complex challenges that councils face or relieve all the financial burdens they are shouldering, but it will help local government to address the pressures that have arisen over time, and it will give us the chance to look at the system again and make long-lasting, far-reaching reforms that will better serve communities up and down the country. Next year, we will deliver those far-reaching reforms: we will publish our devolution White Paper and set out our plans to unleash the potential of every region and to further level up opportunity; we will hold cross-party talks on social care to get this crucial issue right once and for all; we will implement the fair funding review to find a fairer, more up-to-date, more transparent and simpler

way of sharing out taxpayers' money; we will review the future of business rates, involving local government and colleagues in the House every step of the way; and we will look again at how we incentivise councils to build the homes we need.

Alongside all of this, there will be the spending review, at which we will settle the resources for local government. We intend to return to a multi-year settlement process. There will be different opinions about the way forward on all these matters, but this new and reinvigorated Government will be bolder than ever with our reforms. Deciding the future direction for local government finance will be a collaborative effort, which is why we will shortly consult on projects such as the fair funding review. We are determined to work across party lines to fix the social care challenges we have heard so much about today from Members across the House. I look forward to working with Members, many of whom spoke with eloquence and passion about the importance of solving this matter in a bipartisan spirit, to find a way forward.

That said, today is not about the fair funding review, the future of business rates or the new homes bonus; it is about giving councils the confidence and stability they need to plan for the year ahead. Today we are voting on next year's package. I hope that every Member who wants to see local government access this game-changing £2.9 billion; every Member who wants to see this 4.4% real-terms increase in core spending power and £1 billion of new funding for social care; and every Member who wants to give local authorities the certainty and stability they need will vote for the motions tonight.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Local Government Finance Report (England) for 2020–21 (HC 68), which was laid before this House on 6 February, be approved.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT FINANCE (ENGLAND)

Resolved,

That the Report on Referendums Relating to Council Tax Increases (Alternative Notional Amounts) (England) 2020–21 (HC 69), which was laid before this House on 6 February, be approved.—(*David T. C. Davies.*)

Resolved,

That the Report on Referendums Relating to Council Tax Increases (Principles) (England) Report 2020–21 (HC 70), which was laid before this House on 6 February, be approved.—(*David T. C. Davies.*)

Social Security Benefits: Claimant Deaths

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Michael Tomlinson.)

10.59 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for granting an Adjournment debate on such an important issue.

The first duty of any Government is to keep its citizens safe, particularly the most vulnerable among us. This evening, I want to discuss the deaths of vulnerable social security claimants since 2014. That those deaths have been linked to the actions of the Department for Work and Pensions is a matter of grave concern. It shows abject failure on the part of not only the Department, but the Government. Ministers set policy and the Department implements it, so both are culpable. However, this is not just about what policies are implemented but about how they are delivered, and that relates to the culture in the Department. *[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. May we have a little bit of quiet? We cannot hear what the hon. Lady is saying.

Debbie Abrahams: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I shall speak up.

As I was saying, the leadership determines the culture in an organisation. In a Department, that culture is determined by Ministers. It is a question not just of the policies and their implementation, but of the tone and culture that are related to their delivery.

We know that the Government's health assessment process and sanctions regime leave sick and disabled people in fear and dread as they wait for the inevitable envelope to drop on their doormat inviting them to participate in a work capability assessment or a personal independence payment assessment, or possibly both. More than three quarters of claimants who appeal against assessment decisions telling them that they are fit for work have those decisions overturned, and that is because these are poorly people. We also know that in 2013 the death rates among people on incapacity benefit or employment and support allowance were 4.3 times higher than those in the general population, an increase from 3.6 times higher in 2003. That showed the level of sickness and ill health in that group of people.

Peer-reviewed research published in the *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* estimated that, between 2010 and 2013, work capability assessments were independently associated with an additional 590 suicides, 280,000 cases of self-reported mental health problems, and 725,000 antidepressant scripts. Not only are those assessments not fit for purpose; they are actually doing harm.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on her assiduity. She has made a name for herself in the House not only on behalf of her constituents, but on behalf of everyone affected by this issue. Does she agree that, in this day and age, for anyone to die in stress while awaiting rightful help and aid from the Government should be deemed nothing short of obscene and disgraceful, that the shame of it has an impact on every person who takes a seat in this place, and that what we need is an urgent change in the present system?

Debbie Abrahams: I could not agree more with the hon. Gentleman. He is absolutely right. This shames us all. These are the most vulnerable in our society, and, as I shall go on to show, evidence is revealing that policies driven by the Government are having this impact.

Over the last 10 years, five reviews of the work capability assessment have repeatedly raised issues relating to the assessment process, from the loss of medical records to blatant lies in assessment reports. Nearly 3,500 individuals shared their experiences for the purpose of the Work and Pensions Committee's 2018 reports on ESA and PIP assessments, which was an unprecedented public response to a departmental Select Committee inquiry. Tonight, however, I want to raise a number of cases which have been in the public domain, and in which the Department's processes to safeguard vulnerable claimants have been an abject failure.

On 23 January this year, Disability News Service brought to public attention the death of Errol Graham in 2018. Weighing just 4½ stone, Errol's body was found eight months after his employment and support allowance had been stopped. He was 57 years old. His social security support was cut off in October 2017, just weeks after he failed to attend an appointment for a DWP fit-for-work assessment. He had been on incapacity benefit since 2003, after his father—whom he had cared for—died. He was reassessed as unfit for work in 2013, and was on ESA when the DWP called him for a retest in 2017, as, according to a letter from the Department, "the claimed level of disability was unclear".

The inquest heard that it was standard DWP procedure to stop the benefits of a claimant marked on the system as vulnerable after two failed safeguarding visits. It made two visits, on 16 and 17 October. Errol's ESA payment, due on 17 October, was stopped on the same day. There was no formal requirement for DWP staff to seek more information about Errol's health—for example, from his GP—or about how he was functioning before ceasing his benefits, and the inquest heard that they had not done so.

The coroner's report into Errol's death found that the "safety net that should surround vulnerable people like Errol in our society had holes within it".

Furthermore, she said:

"He needed the DWP to obtain more evidence"—
from his GP—

"at the time his ESA was stopped, to make a more informed decision about him, particularly following the failed safeguarding visits."

A consultant psychiatrist told the inquest that

"Errol was vulnerable to life stressors",

and that it was

"likely that this loss of income, and housing, were the final and devastating stressors that had a significant effect on his mental health".

Errol's daughter-in-law, Alison, has been scathing, telling me of the anger she and her husband Lee feel. She said that it was particularly shocking that the QC acting on behalf of the Government in the inquest tried to intimidate not just the family but others, shouting at the police officer who found Errol's body about what else he had seen. In particular, they were deeply offended that the police officer was asked whether he had found any takeaway menus or cartons. It was clear at that

[Debbie Abrahams]

inquest that the Government were far from being in listening mode or trying to learn from this. Rather, they were seeking to blame, which is absolutely unforgivable.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. It is now more than 18 months since Errol Graham starved to death and more than eight months since the inquest into his death. At that inquest, the coroner asked for robust policy and guidance for DWP staff to prevent future deaths, yet the Department's serious case panel is not even expected to consider the systemic issue identified in Errol's case until next month. Does my hon. Friend agree that this inaction makes it hard to believe the Secretary of State when she tells me that the Department took Errol's tragic death very seriously?

Debbie Abrahams: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. I shall go on to show that this has been going on for years now, and that nobody has responded. Systematic errors are coming out in repeated coroners' reports and other reports, yet there is still no action.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I commend the determined way in which my hon. Friend has pursued this issue consistently over a long time. She has talked about the coroners getting in touch with the Department. Does she share my concern that, as was shown in the National Audit Office's recent report, there is no systematic way at the moment of compiling what coroners say about suicides and other cases that they report to the Department on?

Debbie Abrahams: My right hon. Friend hits the nail on the head. There are systemic failures within the Department and they have to be addressed. This is just not good enough.

Jodey Whiting, who was from Stockton, died on 21 February 2017. She was a vulnerable woman with multiple physical and mental health illnesses, which left her housebound and requiring 23 tablets a day. That meant that she was entirely reliant on social security support. In late 2016, the DWP began to reassess Jodey's entitlement to ESA. Jodey requested a home visit as she rarely left the house due to her health, and she had made it clear in her reply that she had

"suicidal thoughts a lot of the time and could not cope with work or looking for work".

Despite this, the DWP decided that Jodey should attend a work capability assessment in January 2017. Unfortunately, Jodey missed that appointment and, on 6 February, the DWP decided to stop the fortnightly ESA payments that Jodey relied on. She was immensely distressed to learn that her last payment would be made on 17 February. With the help of her family, Jodey wrote to the DWP to explain the severity of her health conditions and to ask the Department to reconsider the decision to terminate her ESA, but that did not happen until after her death. She also received letters informing her that her housing benefit and council tax benefit would be stopped because they are linked to ESA. She told her mum, Joy, "Mam, I can't walk out of the house,

I can't breathe, how am I going to work?" Jodey took her own life just three days after her last ESA payment on 21 February.

The Independent Case Examiner concluded that the DWP was guilty of "multiple" and "significant" failings in handling Jodey Whiting's case and found that the DWP failed to follow its own safeguarding rules five times in the weeks leading up to the suicide. In addition, a report by psychiatrist Dr Trevor Turner says that Jodey Whiting's mental state was likely to have been "substantially affected" by the DWP's decision to remove her out-of-work benefits for missing a work capability assessment that she did not know about. The case is now the subject of an appeal to the Attorney General for a new inquest, and I know from speaking to Jodey's family today that they are desperate to know when they may hear from the Attorney General.

Then there is Stephen Smith. Last April, we learned that Stephen, the Liverpool man many people remember from the front pages of various newspapers and whose emaciated body was more reminiscent of someone from a concentration camp than 21st-century Britain, had died of multiple organ failure after being found fit for work. But there are many, many more cases of DWP claimants dying, some of which I raised in last year's Westminster Hall debate.

Jimmy Ballentine took his own life in 2018 after being found fit for work. Amy Nice also took her own life in 2018 after being found fit for work. Kevin Dooley committed suicide in 2018 after losing ESA. Brian Bailey died in July 2018, again taking his own life after being found fit for work. Elaine Morrall died in November 2017, taking her own life. Daniella Obeng died in December 2017, again taking her own life. Brian Sycamore died in September 2017, taking his own life after leaving a note blaming the DWP after failing his work capability assessment.

Mark Scholfield, who died in July 2017, was a terminal cancer patient who did not receive any UC before he died in spite of his illness. Chris Gold, who died in October 2017, was found fit for work following a stroke and was facing foreclosure when he died because he could not work. Lawrence Bond collapsed and died in the street in January 2017 after being found fit for work. Julia Kelly died in 2015, taking her own life after losing ESA for a third time. Ben McDonald took his own life in March 2015 after being found fit for work. Chris Smith, who died in 2015, had cancer and was found fit for work despite a terminal diagnosis.

David Clapson could not afford to power his fridge to store his insulin and died as a result in July 2014. Michael Connolly took his own life on his birthday in 2014 after losing his ESA. George from Chesterfield died of a heart attack in May 2014, eight months after being found fit for work despite having had three previous heart attacks. Robert Barlow died of cancer in April 2014 after losing his ESA. David Barr died in September 2014, taking his own life after losing ESA. Trevor Drakard took his own life in 2014. Shaun Pilkington—

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady is referring to a number of names. When someone comes to my office or to the office of another MP talking about anxiety, depression or suicide, we always say to ourselves, "These people need help." Is it not time for the Government to instruct

office staff that action must be taken when they hear someone threatening suicide or meet someone who has tried to commit suicide?

Debbie Abrahams: Absolutely. I thank the hon. Gentleman.

This is unforgivable. These are people's family members and we are failing them. We must not let this continue.

Stephen Timms: My hon. Friend will probably have seen, as I did, the comment in the recent National Audit Office report on suicides that internal process reviews, which are perhaps not carried out as frequently as they should be, are often carried out when a claimant takes their own life, but the Department does not know whether the lessons from those reviews are implemented. Does that not point to another dramatic change that is required here?

Debbie Abrahams: My right hon. Friend is spot on. There are so many learning points that we should have already picked up on, and I will go through them in a minute.

I will finish the list if I can. Shaun Pilkington died in January 2014, and Terry McGarvey died in February 2014. This is not an exhaustive list, but it shames us all. This inaction shames the Government. I have raised this so many times over the past five years, and there has been no change whatsoever.

For years now, there have been warnings that the Department's safeguarding policies are not working. In 2014-15, as a member of the Select Committee on Work and Pensions, I asked for an inquiry on sanctions policy. From this inquiry, the Committee recommended:

"DWP should seek to establish a body modelled on the Independent Police Complaints Commission, to conduct reviews, at the request of relatives, or automatically where no living relative remains, in all instances where an individual on an out-of-work working-age benefit dies whilst in receipt of that benefit. Such a model, operated within the purview of the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman, should ensure that the role of all publicly-funded agencies involved in the provision of services or benefits to the individual is scrutinised, so that a learning document can be produced setting out how policy, and the service delivery pathway, can be improved at every stage."

In their formal response—*[Interruption.]* Would the Minister like to intervene? I believe there is something he finds amusing about this.

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Justin Tomlinson): No, there is not.

Debbie Abrahams: Okay. I just saw a bit of a smirk.

Justin Tomlinson: It was not.

Debbie Abrahams: I hope it was not.

In the Government's formal response, there was no recognition or acknowledgment of the recommendation, which was completely rejected by the Government.

In 2014, the Disability News Service asked, via a freedom of information request, for the Department to publish 49 internal peer reviews into deaths. After nearly two years, and following an information rights tribunal, redacted versions were published. It was clear from the limited information available that Ministers were repeatedly

—repeatedly—warned by their own civil servants that their policies to assess people for out-of-work disability benefits were putting the lives of vulnerable claimants at risk.

More recently, as my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) mentioned, on 7 February 2020, following a request from the former Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, the NAO published a briefing report setting out the findings of its inquiries with the Department on the information it holds on benefit claimants who ended their life by suicide.

The NAO found:

"The Department has received nine contacts from coroners via its official coroner focal point relating to suicide since March 2016...received four Prevention of Future Death (PFD) reports from coroners since 2013, of which two were related to suicide...investigated 69 suicides of benefit claimants since 2014-15... It is highly unlikely that the 69 cases the Department has investigated represents the number of cases it could have investigated in the past six years".

In other words, this is just the tip of the iceberg. We do not even know the actual number of people who have taken their own life as a result of what they went through.

The report continues:

"The Department does not have a robust record of all contact from coroners."

How can that be? This is a Government Department, for heaven's sake.

"The Department accepts that not all its staff are aware of the IPR guidance."

What is the point of doing them if they are not aware?

"We also found that the Department's guidance does not necessarily reflect the full scope of issues that could trigger an IPR."

That just beggars belief. The report continues:

"the Department told us that there is no tracking or monitoring of the status of these recommendations. As a result, the Department does not know whether the suggested improvements are implemented."

Do Ministers not feel ashamed? The report also said that

"the Department does not categorise IPR outputs to identify larger trends or themes from within the outputs, and so systemic issues which might be brought to light through these reviews could be missed."

The NAO report found similar conclusions to those found by the Select Committee five years earlier: that lessons have not been learned. This is absolutely damning. I hope that the Ministers here take on board these results. Not only that, but because this is rarely covered in the media I hope that everyone in the Press Gallery is going to be reporting on this. It is a scandal: British citizens are dying as a result of policies implemented by this Government. Everybody should be taking note. I have asked for a full and independent inquiry, given the serious failures that are clear just from the speech I have given. I appreciate that the Minister needs to consult others, but I would like a response by the end of this week. This is too serious to be ignored.

The Department stated that there will be a new system of serious case reviews, so who will sit on the panel? Will there be independent panel members, not just DWP employees and contractors? Will they have medical expertise? Will there be a commitment to publishing

[Debbie Abrahams]

the panel's membership and terms of reference? How will the trends or themes to be investigated be identified? How will the recommendations made by the panel be tracked? Will the Department undertake to review its safeguarding policies in the round, including the training of staff? In the light of the NAO's findings, how will the Department ensure that its guidance reflects the full scope of issues that could trigger an internal process serious case review and that all its staff are well aware of the relevant guidance?

The death of any person as a result of Government policy is nothing less than a scandal. It is clear that from the cases that I have talked about, and from the NAO report and others, that this is just the tip of the iceberg. We do not know what is going on. For too long, the Department has failed to address the effects of its policies. It must now act. Enough is enough.

11.22 pm

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Justin Tomlinson): I am conscious that I have not got long to respond to this very important and serious subject. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), who has clearly demonstrated her genuine passion on this incredibly important subject. Not only that, but she has been a long-standing campaigner in this area, highlighting, through her work on the Work and Pensions Committee, in various debates in Parliament and in work within the media, the plight of some of the most vulnerable people in society. I pay tribute to and we take very seriously all the points that have been raised. As I said, I am conscious of time, and if we do not cover all the things now, there will be further opportunities to do so.

Day in, day out, the DWP interacts with many people; it interacts with about 20 million people each year, and a number of them are among the most vulnerable in our society. In the vast majority of interactions with these people, we get it right. The wellbeing of everyone who interacts with the DWP is of the utmost importance. That is why we improve support and guidance to staff on how best to support vulnerable people, and why we are constantly looking at our processes, striving for continuous improvement. However, we can see that there are cases where we have not got it right, for which we apologise. When that happens, we want to ensure that the Department learns, so that in the future we can deliver the right outcomes first time, respond effectively to the needs of the most vulnerable, and reform our service so that we can continually improve and are more responsive to feedback—that was a clear theme of the points presented in the hon. Member's speech.

Through our work with some of the most vulnerable in society, there is an opportunity for us to make a difference. Both myself and the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince), who is responsible for welfare delivery, are passionate about that. We are passionate about identifying vulnerable claimants; making sure that there is personalised and tailored support; making sure that we are signposting or working in partnership with other organisations, to give the best possible support; and, crucially, where things are not right, learning lessons.

I am conscious that reference has been made in interventions and speeches to the very important work of the NAO. It has produced a note relating to the DWP and the information held on deaths by suicide of benefit claimants. The Department rightly fully co-operated with the NAO during the creation of this new note, also providing a summary of how we were already working to improve processes in a number of areas. For instance, in 2016 the Department set up the coroners focal point, and is now working to improve it by developing better communication between DWP and the coroner's office. That includes informing the coroner of the circumstances in which they should report a death to the Department.

The Department is also carrying out a review focusing on strengthening the internal process review processes and the Department's response to serious cases and suicides. We are clarifying the circumstances in which the DWP should carry out an IPR and improving our internal guidance and communication to ensure that all colleagues are aware of and understand the processes for reporting a suicide. It is important to note that the IPRs look in detail at specific claimant cases that often contain information that is very sensitive and should thus be treated with care. Via the coroner, the families of deceased claimants are able to access information from IPRs; if they then choose to release that information, that is their choice, but as a Department it would be inappropriate to comment on the findings of individual case reviews as it is their private information. We are strengthening the analysis of IPR reports and recommendations to ensure that the Department is aware of any systematic themes and issues and is able to act and put in place effective corresponding improvements.

We are also developing a centralised customer experienced team to co-ordinate all improvement activity, including monitoring the occurrence of issues and delivery of improvements to reduce the risk of issues occurring again. The team will provide a centralised point to support local and regional customer case reviews to identify and act on systematic issues.

We have developed the serious case panel, which will consider the most serious systematic issues that have been identified. That will enable the Department to learn from the issues experienced by ensuring that there is a forum to make recommendations for improvements across the Department as necessary. I know that the Secretary of State personally takes that very seriously. Going forward, the serious case panel will meet quarterly and any recommendations from it will be taken forward by senior members of the Department to ensure that when an issue has been identified, we will learn and take appropriate action.

We recognise that throughout the country we have fantastic, hard-working and compassionate staff. They are always looking at how they can improve, whether that is through training, increased knowledge or awareness. We will work with other organisations. For example, on mental health, to improve our awareness and our ability to support claimants we have worked with Mental Health Matters, which has helped to deliver our improved training, and we have mental health champions in assessment centres. Last year, we did very detailed work on helping to identify and support domestic abuse victims. We did that work with Women's Aid and Refuge, utilising their expertise. We worked with Autism Alliance to develop the Disability Confident autism and

neurodiversity toolkit for work coaches and the disability passport to encourage disabled claimants to disclose their disability or health condition early in the process so that we can improve communication support and ensure that reasonable adjustments are in place.

There is still much more to do on identifying all vulnerable claimants, but through things such as universal credit we have an opportunity to provide personalised and tailored support and also to look at where we can identify suitable advocates so that where the system is not working, there are other people, independent of us, who can help us to make sure that the claimant continues to engage and gets the support that they need.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP) *rose*—

Justin Tomlinson: I have only seconds left, I am afraid, so I cannot take an intervention.

There is a real commitment from the Department to learn the lessons and to continue to improve the support that we provide to people who often have very complex

and difficult needs, whether that is with mental health or dealing with drug and alcohol dependency. We work across the Government and utilise all the ways to provide wraparound support, building on initiatives such as the duty to refer, which is so integral in helping to avoid people becoming homeless. We are working in the prison system, where we have work coaches in place to have the support ready before people come back out. We are doing everything that we possibly can. There is still more to learn and later this year we will have an opportunity through the Green Paper, which will look at claimant experience, assessment and trust in the system. The national disability strategy, which is personally supported by the Prime Minister, will also help.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 24 February 2020

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Domestic Burning of Solid Fuels and Wood

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): The Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs published the Government response to the consultation on cleaner domestic burning of solid fuels and wood on Friday 21 February. This consultation ran between August and October 2018.

Wood burning stoves and coal fires are the single largest source of the pollutant PM_{2.5} (fine particulate matter), emitting twice the contribution of industrial combustion and three times the contribution of road transport. This form of pollution consists of tiny particles which penetrate deeply into body tissues, including the lungs and blood. Long-term exposure can cause cardiovascular disease, strokes, asthma and lung cancer, shortening lifespans. It has been identified by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as the most serious air pollutant for human health. The WHO has stated that coal is a known carcinogen and strongly recommended against its use in domestic burning.

These proposals are in line with our clean air strategy, which sets out our strong commitment to achieve our national emissions ceiling targets. We have legally binding commitments to reach specified emissions ceilings for 2020 and 2030 for five key emissions—nitrous oxides (NO_x), sulphur dioxide (SO₂), fine particulate matter (PM_{2.5}), ammonia (NH₃) and volatile organic compounds (VOCs). With domestic combustion identified as the single largest contributor of PM_{2.5} emissions, it is essential to make changes in this area to make progress towards achieving these emissions targets. This announcement comes after statistics released on 14 February showed the significant progress that the Government have made in tackling air pollution, with nitrogen oxide, sulphur dioxide, particulate matter, and non-methane volatile organic compounds all down significantly since 2010. However, the statistics also highlighted the impact of the increased popularity of domestic burning on PM_{2.5} pollution, emphasising the importance of these measures.

The consultation response sets out our intention to phase out the sale of house (bituminous) coal and wet wood for use in domestic burning to improve the health of millions by encouraging burners to use cleaner fuels. Wet wood is wood that has not been adequately seasoned and contains high levels of sap. Burning wet wood can result in at least twice the amount of smoke emissions than that produced when seasoned or dry wood is burned. When wet wood is burned, the heat output is significantly reduced, and chemicals build up on the inside of the stove and chimney, which increases the risk of chimney fires.

The accompanying impact assessment shows that the benefits accruing from the expected reduction in PM_{2.5} and sulphur dioxide from these proposals will reach in

excess of £7 billion over the period 2020 to 2030, with the cost to business over the same time period being less than £125 million.

Furthermore, concerns raised about the impact of these policies on those in or at risk of being in fuel poverty have been taken on board and additional research was carried out to review the cost and efficiency of a range of solid fuels (house coal, wood and manufactured solid fuels). This research shows that manufactured solid fuels are more efficient on an energy density basis which means they are cheaper to burn than coal. The full report has been published alongside the Government response.

In the light of the consultation and the evidence available, it is proposed to end the sale of wet wood and house (bituminous) coal in a phased approach between 2021 and 2023, giving both the public and suppliers time to move to cleaner alternatives such as dry wood or manufactured solid fuels. These proposals will come into effect in several stages:

Wood sold in volumes of less than 2m³ will be required to be certified to show that the moisture content is 20% or less from February 2021.

Wood sold in volumes over 2m³ will need to be sold with guidance on drying and advice on the issues of burning wet wood from February 2021.

Small foresters will be allowed a further 12 months to become compliant with the legislation. They will need to be compliant with the 20% or less moisture content and be certified by February 2022.

Manufactured solid fuels will need to be certified to confirm that they have a sulphur content below 2% and do not emit more than 5g of smoke per hour from February 2021.

Bags of traditional house (bituminous) coal will no longer be available for sale from February 2021.

Sales of loose coal via approved coal merchants will be phased out by February 2023.

[HCWS117]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Licensing Hours: 75th Anniversary of Victory over Japan Day

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 decided to consult on a proposal to make an order relaxing licensing hours in England and Wales to mark the 75th anniversary of Victory over Japan (VJ) Day. The proposed order will extend licensed opening hours from 11pm on Saturday 15 August 2020 until 1am the following morning on Sunday 16 August 2020, for premises licensed for the sale of alcohol for consumption on the premises and premises licensed for the provision of regulated entertainment.

An extension to licensing hours to mark this occasion will be subject to a short consultation with selected partners including representatives of licensing authorities, the police, residents' groups, veterans' groups, the licensed trade and the Welsh Government. The consultation will

focus on the scope of the order including the dates, times, geographical extent and licensable activities to which it should apply.

[HCWS118]

Ministerial Correction

Monday 24 February 2020

TREASURY

Topical Questions

The following is an extract from Treasury Questions on 11 February 2020.

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): Creditor enforcement action can greatly exacerbate the problems that people going through mental health crises can experience. May I commend the Chancellor and the Economic Secretary for the breathing space initiative, which will help to ease the pressure on those people and so many more?

John Glen: I thank my right hon. Friend for his comments, and I am very pleased that the breathing space scheme is moving forward. We published the impact

assessment last week, and 700,000 people will benefit from the scheme next year when it comes into force. That number will rise to 1 million **in the following year.**

[Official Report, 11 February 2020, Vol. 671, c. 707.]

Letter of correction from the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, the hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen).

An error has been identified in the response I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds).

The correct response should have been:

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): I thank my right hon. Friend for his comments, and I am very pleased that the breathing space scheme is moving forward. We published the impact assessment last week, and 700,000 people will benefit from the scheme next year when it comes into force. That number will rise to 1 million **in following years.**

ORAL ANSWERS

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MINISTERIAL CORRECTION

Monday 24 February 2020

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Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
