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**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES**

**(HANSARD)**

**Thursday 10 December 2009**

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# House of Commons

*Thursday 10 December 2009*

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

## PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

## BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

### LEEDS CITY COUNCIL BILL

*Motion made*, That the Bill, as amended, be now considered.

**Hon. Members:** Object.

*Bill to be considered on Thursday 7 January.*

### READING BOROUGH COUNCIL BILL

*Motion made*, That the Bill, as amended, be now considered.

**Hon. Members:** Object.

*Bill to be considered on Thursday 7 January.*

## Oral Answers to Questions

### ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

*The Secretary of State was asked—*

#### Nuclear Power Station (Bradwell)

1. **Mr. Bernard Jenkin** (North Essex) (Con): What representations he has received from English Nature on the environmental effects of proposals for a new nuclear power station at Bradwell, Essex. [305573]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Huw Irranca-Davies):** The Government requested and received comments from Natural England—formerly English Nature—on the appraisal of sustainability and habitats regulations assessment reports on the site at Bradwell, which was nominated in the Government's strategic siting assessment process.

**Mr. Jenkin:** I thank the Minister for his response but, even though I am an enthusiast for new nuclear power stations, may I draw his attention to the serious concern expressed to me, particularly by local fishermen and oystermen, that the volume of the outfall from a new power station is likely to be four times greater than that from the previous power station, thus causing serious continuing damage to the ecology of the Blackwater estuary? Can he assure me that that will be addressed, perhaps by ensuring that the intake and outfalls will be sufficiently far away?

**Huw Irranca-Davies:** The hon. Gentleman has been assiduous in representing the interests of local fishermen and people who are concerned about the impacts on the environment. I can confirm that Natural England's response suggested that there was insufficient evidence that a development at Bradwell could have no adverse impacts on the Natura 2000 sites and associated features. The Government took that on board during the assessment, and the conclusions in the habitats regulations assessment reflect that. Natural England has suggested that further assessment is needed, not least in relation to climate change and rising sea levels, of which he will be aware. I can assure him that I will keep a close eye on the matter, as will Natural England, to ensure that the pertinent factors he raises are taken into account.

#### Climate Change (Forestry)

2. **Mr. Jim Cunningham** (Coventry, South) (Lab): When he expects to respond to the recent report of the Forestry Commission on forestry and climate change. [305574]

**The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Hilary Benn):** The Government welcome the Read report, which sets out clearly how forestry in the UK can contribute to tackling climate change. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Forestry Commission are considering the report in detail and we will use its findings to develop our policy. We will outline next steps in DEFRA's climate change plan in the spring.

**Mr. Cunningham:** Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is important to increase tree planting in this country by 40 per cent., given the climatic change problems facing us? What consultations will he engage in with various organisations before reaching a decision on the matter?

**Hilary Benn:** The Read report has only just been published. I spoke at an event for its launch, where many of the people who would express a view on the subject were present. I agree that we should seek to achieve the objective that my hon. Friend mentions, not least because the Read report points out that if we managed to achieve it, that would contribute a significant proportion of the reduction in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions that this nation needs to achieve by 2050.

**Mr. James Gray** (North Wiltshire) (Con): North Wiltshire and Wiltshire more widely boast some of the most ancient and natural woodlands anywhere in England, in Bradon forest, Savernake and elsewhere. However, large parts of our oak population are threatened by oak decline syndrome, and a number of similar pathogens threaten our ancient woodlands. What does the Secretary of State intend to do about that?

**Hilary Benn:** We have a research programme that is examining a number of the diseases that have emerged, including the one to which the hon. Gentleman refers. Their emergence may indeed be a consequence of climate change. We have a very big programme examining phytophthora and I was able to see some of that work in a visit to the south-west in August. I am happy to write to him to provide more information about the specific issue that he has raised.

**Jessica Morden** (Newport, East) (Lab): The report is very welcome. What discussions is the Secretary of State having with the Welsh Assembly Government about what Wales could contribute to increasing woodland cover to 16 per cent.?

**Hilary Benn:** I will certainly have discussions with all those who could contribute to ensuring that we achieve that objective. I should point out to the House that, in the 90 years since the establishment of the Forestry Commission, there has been a significant increase in forest and woodland cover in the country, after our having got to the point where we had chopped down almost all the trees that we had.

**Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The Forestry Commission report states that, in the next 10 years, the capacity of the UK's forests to absorb carbon could be reduced by up to 70 per cent. Will the Secretary of State therefore look to the capacity of Britain's uplands as a complementary source of carbon sequestration? Given that the average hill farm income last year was just £5,000, does he acknowledge that he must act quickly to restructure farm payments, to ensure that the upland stewards of our carbon sinks are fairly rewarded and are kept in business?

**Hilary Benn:** As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, we have changed the system. We will introduce the uplands entry level scheme, which we consulted on widely and which was welcomed at the time. The truth is that those who farm and those who manage the land have a real opportunity here not only to contribute to sustainability and to the management of the landscape, but to reduce carbon emissions both through peat bogs—the national parks want to play a role in that—and by planting trees where we can to soak up carbon.

**Dr. Gavin Strang** (Edinburgh, East) (Lab): I accept that the report is just out, but does my right hon. Friend agree that forestry has the potential to make a highly significant contribution to our emissions reduction targets? Indeed, with an increase of 4 per cent. in woodland cover over the next 40 years, we could, by the 2050s, achieve a reduction equivalent to 10 per cent. of greenhouse gas emissions.

**Hilary Benn:** I do indeed agree with my right hon. Friend. Trees are wonderful carbon-eating machines.

#### Carbon Footprint (Copenhagen Summit)

4. **Mr. Peter Bone** (Wellingborough) (Con): What estimate he has made of the average carbon footprint generated by his Department's representatives in attending the Copenhagen climate change summit. [305576]

**The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Hilary Benn):** I and three officials from DEFRA will attend the Copenhagen climate change summit, where we will push for an ambitious agreement on forests and the protection of our oceans. The CO<sub>2</sub> footprint of these flights will be 1.54 tonnes. We will offset that by buying certified emission reduction credits, as we do for all flights.

**Mr. Bone:** Trees are very good "carbon-eating machines". Does the Secretary of State agree with me that 202,500 trees will have to be planted just to cover the CO<sub>2</sub> emissions of the Copenhagen jamboree?

**Hilary Benn:** I do not regard the Copenhagen summit as a jamboree. I am sorry that some Opposition Members seem to think that there is not a problem with climate change. I suspect that that is an embarrassment to those on their Front Bench. Frankly, I cannot think of a more important meeting, because the consequence of failing to get an agreement would be very serious for our planet, for our climate and for biodiversity.

**Mr. Richard Benyon** (Newbury) (Con): Given the importance of getting a deal on carbon emissions at Copenhagen, DEFRA should be leading from the front. Eighteen months ago, the Government announced a new body, the centre of expertise in sustainable procurement—a quango within a quango—to assist, among other things, in cutting emissions from the Government's own estate. We now know that the Government estate will miss its 2010-11 carbon targets by some margin. Is the Secretary of State, who leads on sustainability issues in the Government, embarrassed by that fact, and if so, what is he going to do about it?

**Hilary Benn:** In 2007-08, across the Government office estate, we achieved a 6.3 per cent. reduction in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. In the DEFRA office estate, we have already achieved the 2010-11 target of a 12.5 per cent. reduction against the 1999-2000 figures.

#### Roadside Litter

5. **David Taylor** (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op): What recent progress his Department has made on initiatives designed to reduce the amount of roadside litter. [305577]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dan Norris):** This summer, DEFRA's grant-aided delivery partner, Keep Britain Tidy, carried out a major vehicle litter awareness campaign that resulted in a 25 per cent. reduction in litter in locations monitored by local authorities throughout England. DEFRA continues to work alongside the Highways Agency and local authorities in keeping the roads under their responsibility clear of litter.

**David Taylor:** The most recent local environmental quality survey states that litter on verges and landscaping alongside rural roads is now a significant problem. When does the Minister intend to introduce measures to give local authorities greater powers to fine registered vehicle keepers or other responsible people when litter is thrown from vehicles, especially fast-food detritus, which is particularly obnoxious?

**Dan Norris:** Those who litter from vehicles are subject to the same laws that apply to anybody else on the street. Although it can be difficult to identify an offender, especially in a vehicle moving at speed, 65 fixed penalty notices were issued during a recent vehicle litter campaign. The Government are examining the matter very closely and if a compelling case can be made, legislation might be forthcoming. We will certainly give that serious consideration.

**Mr. Nigel Dodds** (Belfast, North) (DUP): In the light of the fact that surveys done in my own city, Belfast, show that the people who are responsible for most littering are those who eat fast food, smokers, the 18-to-35 age group and those who chew gum, is there a need to target initiatives to reach people who are particularly culpable?

**Dan Norris:** The most important challenge is changing behaviour. DEFRA provides a grant funding of £25 million a year to Keep Britain Tidy, and about £1.2 million each year goes specifically toward behaviour-changing campaigns, which are clearly targeted, as appropriate. That has raised awareness of traffic litter, resulting in a 25 per cent. reduction in litter from vehicles.

**Mr. David Drew** (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): A significant amount of the litter on our streets, especially that thrown from cars, is cigarette material, particularly butts. What is the Department doing to get tough on the cigarette manufacturers? It is about time that they put something forward for clearing up the mess to which they contribute.

**Dan Norris:** Obviously, we have discussions with a wide range of people who manufacture items that contribute to litter. In truth, it comes back to behaviour change. Education, above all else, is what changes behaviour, and behaviour change is needed to deal with litter.

**Miss Anne McIntosh** (Vale of York) (Con): There does not seem to be much evidence of behaviour change. Will the Minister applaud the work on that aspect of Bill Bryson and the Campaign to Protect Rural England? Roadside and pavement litter especially are made up of cigarette butts and chewing gum, but as there is little evidence of behaviour change, what more can the Government do? What is the take-up of the Minister's grants?

**Dan Norris:** There is keen take-up of the grants. A number of local authorities have taken up various offers of grants to work towards reducing litter. The Government have made important powers available to local authorities, if they wish to use them. When those powers are applied, they have a good record of working effectively.

### Food Labelling

6. **Andrew Selous** (South-West Bedfordshire) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with ministerial colleagues on country of origin food labelling. [305578]

**The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Jim Fitzpatrick):** This is a very popular question this morning. I have regular discussions with ministerial colleagues and the Food Standards Agency to ensure that we have tighter, clearer and more accurate origin labelling.

**Andrew Selous:** Tesco, Morrisons, Sainsbury's, Marks and Spencer and Waitrose are all backing our honest food campaign to stop imported food, which is often produced under lower welfare standards than our own, from being passed off as British food. Why cannot the Government do more to help British consumers and farmers in that regard?

**Jim Fitzpatrick:** The Government have been working on this for some time. We welcome the Opposition's honest food campaign—it would be churlish not to say that it is a good initiative. The Food Standards Agency issued new guidance in 2008. My predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Jane Kennedy), started a campaign in October last year with, I believe, celebrity chef Jamie Oliver. We are working in Europe to try to ensure that food information regulations are as tight as possible, although they will not come in for perhaps another two or three years. We are supporting supermarkets that are labelling food more clearly, so that consumers can buy with greater confidence.

**Mr. Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that many of us have been campaigning on this issue for many years? Will he help us on veal, especially? Veal is a very good thing to eat—the animals are incinerated if they are not eaten—but we must ensure that people eat English or British veal, rather than imported veal, which comes from animals that have much poorer lives than our own animals.

**Jim Fitzpatrick:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who points out that the Government have been working on this for some time. Veal is one of the products whose labelling ought to be clearer under regulations. I hope that he and the whole House are aware that the EU protected food celebration takes place this afternoon at New Covent Garden; we will be launching Cornish sardines as the 40th UK food to achieve that status. I hope that Opposition Front Benchers will join my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and me at the celebration this afternoon, because those products are 40 of the best in Britain and are getting worldwide acclaim because of the protected name status, which we support vigorously.

**John Penrose** (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): Does the Minister accept that clear, honest food labelling is important not just for reasons of being straight with consumers, but because accurate information allows consumers to send a clear message to food producers about what they want to buy and what those producers should produce, which could allow his Department to reduce some of the burden of red tape and regulation on food producers?

**Jim Fitzpatrick:** I agree with the hon. Gentleman. We are encouraging retailers to mark and label countries of origin more clearly. I chaired the latest meeting of the pig meat taskforce earlier this week. We have reached a collective agreement—it ought to be finalised by 1 February—on pig meat, which has suffered because many foreign goods that are imported are claimed to be British bacon or British pork pies. I have no doubt that the agreement and new regulations will be launched on 1 February.

**Dr. Phyllis Starkey** (Milton Keynes, South-West) (Lab): Following my Adjournment debate last week about the labelling of goods from Israeli settlements in the west bank, has the Minister finalised the voluntary guidance that is due to be published for British retailers?

**Jim Fitzpatrick:** I can advise my hon. Friend, who takes a great interest in the plight of the Palestinian people, as do many of us in the House, that my right

hon. Friend the Secretary of State has today laid a written ministerial statement before the House, announcing that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has issued guidance to retailers who wish to respond to consumer demand for greater clarity on the origins of produce from the Palestinian occupied territories. My hon. Friend will be able to obtain that guidance and download it from the DEFRA website.

**Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I spoke yesterday to Peter Thornton, owner of the Cumberland and Westmorland Sausage Co., who like me is appalled that sausages can be processed in this country from imported meat and then labelled as British, even when the animals have been reared under conditions that would be illegal in this country. Does the Minister agree that one of the supermarkets ombudsman's powers should be to enforce both the honest labelling of food and humane animal welfare standards for imported food to match the excellent standards in British farming?

**Jim Fitzpatrick:** There is clearly a consensus in the House that country of origin labelling should be tighter. I think that the Liberal Democrat spokesman is trying to tease from me what the supermarkets ombudsman should or should not do when he knows that we have yet to announce the conclusions on the position of an ombudsman. That might very well be one area in which such an ombudsman, were one to come about, would take an interest.

**Mr. Lindsay Hoyle** (Chorley) (Lab): My hon. Friend should recognise not only the importance of country of origin labelling and welfare standards, but the importance of ensuring that when people purchase goods they know how many food miles that they have travelled to reach this country, and the importance of recognising the quality of UK farming.

**Jim Fitzpatrick:** My hon. Friend makes a very good point. British farmers are spending more on higher welfare standards and they want to be supported in that by British retailers. We believe that the British consumer wants to support them and that we should ensure that country of origin labelling is clearer, so that British farming gets the support it deserves.

**Nick Herbert** (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): When meat can be imported and then labelled as British, it misleads consumers and lets down our farmers. The Secretary of State says that he wants that practice stamped out. In January he said that he was pressing strongly in Europe, and in June he told this House that he was "pushing in Europe". The Minister has just repeated that the Government are working in Europe, so why in European Union negotiations this year did the Government oppose mandatory country of origin labelling?

**Jim Fitzpatrick:** I do not think that that is the case. The hon. Gentleman knows that competency in those matters rests with the European Union. The Italians have already been taken to task for trying to introduce a compulsory labelling system in Italy, and Ireland and Malta have already been told that that is not possible in their countries, either. We are negotiating in Europe to try to get the best deal possible, which, I have to say, is not the same position as that of the Opposition.

**Nick Herbert:** I have here the minutes of the European Council's working party on foodstuffs, dated 31 July. Let me tell the Minister what they record: the Italians, the French and nine other member states supported mandatory country of origin labelling; the UK opposed it. We knew that Ministers had failed to deliver honest labelling, but now we know that they actually argued against it. Is not it a disgrace that, for months, this Government have made cynical promises on food labelling which they have not had the slightest intention of keeping?

**Jim Fitzpatrick:** This is a complex issue, and the position that the hon. Gentleman describes is not that of the Government. We are doing all we can to get more accurate country of origin labelling, and we are working to ensure that the food information regulations, when they are introduced, are as tight as they possibly can be.

### Canal Network

7. **Alun Michael** (Cardiff, South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment he has made of the contribution to the economy of the canal network. [305579]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Huw Irranca-Davies):** My Department is working with the Inland Waterways Advisory Council and the waterways authorities to establish and to quantify the wide range of goods and services delivered by inland waterways. That will build on work undertaken by my Department and IWAC to evaluate those benefits. British Waterways' research estimates that its canals alone deliver public benefits of some £500 million per annum and support more than 20,000 jobs in local economies throughout the country.

**Alun Michael:** I congratulate the Minister on winning the support of the Treasury for ways to maintain the integrity of our invaluable canal network and expand their capacity. Does he agree that, for the future, a third sector model—a sort of National Trust for the canals—would be the best way to harness public enthusiasm for the canals with environmental and economic benefit and the stability that has been achieved in recent years?

**Huw Irranca-Davies:** Indeed. I pay reciprocal tribute to my right hon. Friend and other hon. Friends who are so assiduous in keeping an eye on the future of British Waterways because of the wide benefits involved, and to the Treasury, which listened to the arguments and responded to them. The third sector model has featured in the Government's announcement, and British Waterways sees the potential for this alongside the exploitation of its property portfolio. It is a fascinating way forward designed to tap into the good will towards the waterways around the country, and I am sure that we will explore it further.

**Mr. Michael Jack** (Fylde) (Con): The Minister will know from the reports that the Select Committee has done on our canal network of the importance of the property portfolio in contributing income to maintain the good progress that has been made on the historical infrastructure of the canal network. What assurances can he give me that that property portfolio will not in

any way be degraded under potential new arrangements and put at risk the income needed to maintain the historical infrastructure of our canal system?

**Huw Irranca-Davies:** The real turnaround in the waterways has been to do with the success of the exploitation of the property portfolio under the British Waterways model, and we acknowledge that the third sector model referred to by my right hon. Friend would indeed necessitate the use of that property portfolio. It is also to do with the record investment that this Government have put in, with £800 million in grants over the past decade alone. The current state of our waterways and their maintenance, improvement and restoration, is a tribute to the work of British Waterways but also, I have to say, to the importance that this Government have placed on them.

### Marine Conservation Zones

8. **Ben Chapman** (Wirral, South) (Lab): When his Department plans to establish marine conservation zones; and if he will make a statement. [305581]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Huw Irranca-Davies):** The first marine conservation zones will be established on 12 January 2010, when the two existing marine nature reserves around Lundy and Skomer automatically become MCZs. Advice on potential sites from Natural England and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee is due by autumn 2011. The Secretary of State will then consult on and designate sites in 2012. MCZs, together with other types of sites, will form an ecologically coherent network of marine protected areas.

**Ben Chapman:** I welcome the creation of MCZs, with their rounded approach to conservation and the protection of marine life and wildlife. Can the Minister tell me whether the Dee estuary, which is already an important environmental site and a special area of conservation, will be a prime site to be designated?

**Huw Irranca-Davies:** I am sure that my hon. Friend will join me in welcoming the fact that, today, part of the Dee estuary—one of six sites of community importance in the UK—will be formally designated as a special area of conservation by the Secretary of State. I have written to other hon. Members who will have designations in their areas announced today. The Irish sea conservation zones regional project will consider the conservation potential of various parts of its area, including the River Dee. If there are parts of the Dee that have conservation potential—we already know from designations that there are—that are not already protected by other means, then they will indeed be considered.

### Single Payment Scheme

9. **Mr. Roger Williams** (Brecon and Radnorshire) (LD): How many penalties have been applied in respect of the 2008 single payment scheme; and if he will make a statement. [305582]

**The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Jim Fitzpatrick):** Payment reductions have been made in respect of some 7,748

claims under the 2008 single payment scheme. That represents 7.3 per cent. of the claimant population of 106,500.

**Mr. Williams:** I thank the Minister for that response. The minimum penalty for non-compliance is now 3 per cent. of the total single farm payment for any farmer. One of the most common triggers for a penalty is failure to notify animal movements within three days. That three-day limit is imposed by DEFRA, yet the EU regulation allows up to seven days. Why is the UK gold-plating the European regulations to the disadvantage of our farmers? Why cannot DEFRA allow the EU norm of seven days for notification of animal movements?

**Jim Fitzpatrick:** As the hon. Gentleman indicates, penalties are imposed for a variety of different reasons. These rules are laid down primarily by EU legislation, and the Rural Payments Agency does not have real discretion in applying them. We have recently made some improvements to the scheme relating to the removal of set-aside and the 10-month rule, and we will obviously continue to do what we can to make the system as beneficial to British farmers as we can.

**Nick Herbert** (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): Ministers have announced that 80 per cent. of payments under the single payment scheme have been made to farmers, but given that we have estimated overpayments of more than £20 million and underpayments of more than £38 million in the scheme last year, what guarantees can the Minister give farmers that 2009 payments will be accurate?

**Jim Fitzpatrick:** It is a little churlish of the shadow Secretary of State not to welcome the once again improved performance of the Rural Payments Agency. It has been improving year on year, and this year it managed to pay out £1.3 billion, which is almost twice as much as last year, two weeks earlier than last year to four times as many farmers. From our point of view, that should be complimented and lauded.

### Dairy Farmers

10. **Mr. Nigel Evans** (Ribble Valley) (Con): What estimate he has made of the change in the number of dairy farmers between (a) 2008 and 2009 and (b) 2009 and 2010. [305584]

**The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Jim Fitzpatrick):** Although we do not have official figures on the number of dairy farmers, it is believed that the number of dairy farms in England fell by about 5 per cent. between 2008 and 2009. The source of that figure is the cattle tracing system. The trend in UK dairy production is towards fewer, larger herds.

**Mr. Evans:** The Minister will know that there has been a steep decline over the past 10 years. On Saturday, I was at the Gisburn auction marts to present some certificates to young farmers, who were enthusiastically showing their livestock. Clearly, however, enthusiasm will not be enough to secure the future viability of dairy farming in this country, so what sustainable future can he offer young entrants into dairy farming in the UK?

**Jim Fitzpatrick:** I think the hon. Gentleman knows that, notwithstanding the concern and anxiety of young farmers coming into the industry, the British dairy sector is fundamentally sound and is expected to do very well over the medium to long term, due to efficiency improvements, innovation and investment in new products. We are much better placed than most of our European competitors, and we will do all we can in Europe and the UK to ensure that we support the British dairy industry.

**Mrs. Ann Cryer (Keighley) (Lab):** I wonder whether I could confirm what the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) said about dairy farming. My constituency is similar to his—not quite as beautiful, but almost—and for the past two years I have been the president of the Keighley and district agricultural show. I have been made painfully aware of the feelings of many farmers, and I am not sure whether the Minister is aware of how deep those feelings go. Not just they but their children are being forced out of the industry, because there is not a wage to be earned.

**Jim Fitzpatrick:** Obviously, I commend my hon. Friend for the position that she holds locally. Notwithstanding the reduction in the number of dairy farmers, the volume produced is not far short of where we were 10 years ago—13 billion litres rather than 14 billion—and we are well within quota. I reinforce the point that the UK dairy sector is much better placed than those elsewhere, and the recent trends in prices across the world demonstrate a keen rise in recent months. We want that to continue, because the dairy industry is very important to UK agriculture, making up 18 per cent. of the whole industry.

**Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy) (PC):** A few weeks ago, the awful announcement of Corus closing on Teesside triggered an immediate and proper response and financial intervention from Government. The dairy industry is dying on its feet. The milk price today is lower than the production price, and that cannot be sustained. Will the ombudsman—ombudsperson in the Minister's language—have anything to do with milk prices when examining the supermarkets' actions?

**Jim Fitzpatrick:** Obviously, if an ombudsman is introduced, it will very much be up to him or her to determine which issues to consider most closely. Ultimately, we believe that markets determine prices. I reiterate that the UK dairy industry is in a much better position than most of our EU competitors. A high-level group has been set up by the European Agriculture Council to examine the problems of the dairy sector, which are not exclusively UK problems and are much more serious in other member states. It is examining the situation to see what assistance can be given to dairy across Europe.

#### Food Production (Research)

11. **Tony Lloyd (Manchester, Central) (Lab):** What steps his Department is taking to support research on food production methods. [305585]

**The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Hilary Benn):** The Government invest £254 million a year in food and farming research in

England and Wales, and £50 million through Department for International Development research overseas. That covers sustainable farming—reducing pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, adapting to climate change and protecting against pests and diseases—and tackling food waste.

**Tony Lloyd:** My right hon. Friend mentioned climate change. Obviously, one of the enormous challenges to agricultural systems around the globe is the capacity of climate change to change agriculture totally. Are we satisfied that research in the UK will ensure security of food supply from our domestic producers, come what may with climate change?

**Hilary Benn:** Adapting to climate change is, as my hon. Friend indicates, an important task for the farming industry, and a significant proportion of the research that we are funding looks at that. To take a practical example, some very good research is being done at East Malling Research into the ability to produce crops using less water, which will benefit horticulture growers in the country.

**Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West) (Con):** What will be the impact on food production of the decision to discontinue weed cutting in the lower Avon valley? Is the Secretary of State prepared to meet a delegation of farmers to review the matter?

**Hilary Benn:** As always, I would be very happy to meet a delegation with the hon. Gentleman.

#### Food Labelling

12. **Mr. David Jones (Clwyd, West) (Con):** What recent discussions he has had with ministerial colleagues and representatives of the devolved Administrations on country-of-origin food labelling. [305586]

**The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Jim Fitzpatrick):** As I said earlier, I have regular discussions with ministerial colleagues and the Food Standards Agency to ensure that we have tighter, clearer and more accurate origin labelling. I have had no discussions with the devolved Administrations.

**Mr. Jones:** The labelling arrangements as they stand facilitate not only the potential deception of consumers, but the theft of good will built up by generations of Welsh farmers who produce, for example, Welsh lamb. Does the Minister understand how dismayed those farmers will be when they hear of his rather lame response to the points put to him by my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert)—that this Government have stood in the way of attempts to change those labelling regulations?

**Jim Fitzpatrick:** No—as I said a moment ago, we are doing everything we can to protect British produce. I also mentioned that we are celebrating Cornish sardines becoming an EU-protected food name later today. There are 39 other products, and I hope that the hon. Gentleman will come to New Covent Garden to see them and celebrate with us.



### Economic Downturn (Rural Economy)

13. **Sir Nicholas Winterton** (Macclesfield) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the effect of the economic downturn on the rural economy. [305587]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dan Norris):** While the economic downturn is having an impact in both urban and rural areas, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs analysis of data from other Government Departments and the regional development agencies suggests that, when compared with the economy in urban areas, the picture in rural England so far has been more positive.

**Sir Nicholas Winterton:** Is the Minister aware that some 200,000 people living in rural areas do not have bank accounts; that mainstream banking facilities in rural areas are closing; that pubs, post offices and schools are closing; and that in some areas, village halls are closing because they cannot be maintained? Will the Minister and his Department undertake a review of the position of rural areas as a result of what has been happening recently, not least the recession?

**Dan Norris:** That is a very important issue, as I know from my own constituency. In June 2009, the Department for Work and Pensions, which is the lead Department for financial inclusion, and the Commission for Rural Communities jointly published a report on financial inclusion in rural areas, "Rural Money Matters", which found that rural areas did not appear to fare worse than urban areas, although it suggested that analysis on a smaller scale would be likely to identify smaller pockets of significant hardship. I am certainly concerned to keep an eye on that.

### Bovine Tuberculosis

14. **Mr. Andrew Robathan** (Blaby) (Con): How many cattle were slaughtered because of bovine tuberculosis precautions in the last three months. [305588]

**The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Jim Fitzpatrick):** The most recent three-month report available is for the end of August 2009. Between 1 June and 31 August, 5,202 cattle were slaughtered in England for bovine TB control purposes. Figures are provisional and subject to change as more data become available.

**Mr. Robathan:** I am sure that the Minister is aware of the devastating impact that the slaughter of herds has not only on the farmer's business, but on the farmer and his or her family—it completely destroys their entire life. Furthermore, there are questions about the reliability of the TB tests. How much does the slaughter policy cost and what is the long-term policy, because we cannot just go on slaughtering more and more cattle when it obviously is not working?

**Jim Fitzpatrick** *rose*—

**Mr. Speaker:** Order. One answer will do.

**Jim Fitzpatrick:** The hon. Gentleman is right. We are sensitive to the tragic impacts on farms, families, regions and areas when TB strikes. The Secretary of State set up the TB eradication group last November. It has met 19 times and has already produced a report that recommended a raft of initiatives to try to deal with this. The problem will only be eradicated in the medium to long-term, but I assure the hon. Gentleman that the Department is doing as much as it can to support the group.

### Mushroom Composting (Emissions)

15. **John Mann** (Bassetlaw) (Lab): What recent steps have been taken to reduce the level of noxious emissions from mushroom composting. [305589]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dan Norris):** Mushroom compost-making plants such as that in my hon. Friend's constituency require a permit under the Environmental Permitting Regulations 2007 and local authorities are responsible for enforcing compliance. DEFRA also issues statutory guidance on best available techniques in order to minimise air emissions, including odour.

**John Mann:** As well as the loss of quality of life in the surrounding houses from the stink from mushroom composting, is the Minister aware of emerging evidence of problems with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, a killer disease, caused by people breathing in the spores? Is it not time that action were taken to close down Tunnel Tech in my constituency?

**Dan Norris:** I congratulate my hon. Friend on his hard work and conscientiousness in bringing this issue to my and my predecessor's attention. The Health Protection Agency is, as of today, investigating the prevalence of COPD in the locality where he has identified concerns. Further, the agency will also investigate the potential for the composting operation to cause or exacerbate COPD. Those investigations will be in consultation with the local primary care trust and I understand that the local council has already made contact with the HPA.

### Financial Inclusion

17. **Ann Winterton** (Congleton) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of levels of financial inclusion in rural areas. [305591]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dan Norris):** DEFRA works hard across Government to ensure that all Departments take account of specific rural needs in their policies. Indeed, I met with my colleague in the Department for Work and Pensions only last month specifically to discuss rural issues.

**Ann Winterton:** Picking up a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Sir Nicholas Winterton), who has pinched yet another question of mine—the problem is that we both come from the same stable—may I reiterate that approximately 200,000 people living in rural England do not have access to broadband

facilities. Would that not aid financial inclusion as it provides access to valuable information, online banking, credit union services and other such services?

**Dan Norris:** Perhaps the hon. Lady should have some more interesting pillow talk than it appears she is having—*[Laughter.]* She is right: digital communications are crucial in rural areas as well as in urban areas. They make a big difference not least in access to banking and other important services and facilities. We are working hard on that issue and putting extra resources into it, including moneys from heads for which I have specific responsibility.

### Food Labelling

19. **Mr. David Amess** (Southend, West) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with ministerial colleagues on country of origin food labelling. [305593]

**The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Jim Fitzpatrick):** I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave a few moments ago. I am delighted to see that we have been joined by the hon. Member for South-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Paice). We were a bit worried that since the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds had promoted him to the Privy Council and shadow Secretary of State in its press release this week, he might have been banished by his colleagues.

**Mr. Amess:** Having heard the exchange between my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) and the Minister on this subject, I am confused about the Government's position. Will the Minister now clearly say that he supports the *Which?* campaign for country-of-origin food labelling and backs British food?

**Jim Fitzpatrick:** We do support the campaign for clearer country-of-origin labelling. We took a different position from Europe in respect of mandatory labelling for everything. That would have meant labels a foot long on pizzas identifying the source of every bit of pepperoni. We want clearer labelling so that we can have informed consumer choice and support British agriculture.

**Mr. David Chaytor** (Bury, North) (Lab): Given that meat production generates six times more greenhouse gas emissions than the production of fish, cheese or vegetables, should CO<sub>2</sub> emissions related to food products not also be included in any future labelling system? Would that not be one of the most effective means of adapting to climate change?

**Jim Fitzpatrick:** I can tell my hon. Friend that agriculture is making great efforts to reduce the impact of the carbon that it produces. It is very supportive of every effort to increase sustainable production and is doing what it can to tackle climate change.

### Single Payment Scheme (Mr. Peter Philpot)

20. **Mr. John Baron** (Billericay) (Con): What progress he has made in resolving the single payment scheme difficulties experienced by Mr. Peter Philpot. [305595]

**The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Jim Fitzpatrick):** Mr. Philpot's single payment scheme claims have been complicated by a number of factors, including both corrections to and transfers of entitlements. Progress has been made recently in resolving the underlying problems and the Rural Payments Agency is working to resolve the outstanding issues and to confirm the results to Mr. Philpot as soon as possible.

**Mr. Baron:** I thank the Minister for that response. He will be aware that, on 29 October in this place, I raised that issue with the Secretary of State, who kindly agreed to consider it if I sent the relevant paperwork. That was sent the same day, but since then neither my constituent nor my office have heard anything. Will Ministers consider the matter again as a matter of urgency? Otherwise, we can only draw the conclusion that the RPA is nothing more than a master-class in misadministration.

**Jim Fitzpatrick:** I outlined earlier the dramatically improving performance of the RPA, and I hope that the hon. Gentleman will take some reassurance from that. I can only apologise that neither he nor Mr. Philpot have received an update of the position. My responses are obviously researched in preparation for questions, and I am told that progress has been made, but I will find out exactly when Mr. Philpot will be told and communicate that to the hon. Gentleman later today, if possible.

### Flood Defences (York)

22. **Hugh Bayley** (City of York) (Lab): What plans the Environment Agency has for flood defences for the Leeman road area of York. [305597]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Huw Irranca-Davies):** I am pleased to say that the Environment Agency is developing a flood alleviation scheme for the Leeman Road-Water End area of York. The scheme will cost approximately £6.5 million and protect 550 properties.

**Hugh Bayley:** It is nine years since the worst flood on record in York. I remember clearly that night when hundreds of local citizens and soldiers built a mile-long wall of sandbags on top of the flood defences to protect 550 homes on Leeman road. We are still waiting for the flood defences to be improved. When will the Environment Agency consult the public on its plans, and when do we expect the improvements to be built?

**Huw Irranca-Davies:** My hon. Friend raises an important point, and I am pleased to confirm that the consultation will begin in early 2010 to help to select the best solution. Subject to funding, construction should begin in early 2012. It is important to get the flood defences in place as soon as possible, subject to consultation.

### Topical Questions

T1. [305598] **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Hilary Benn):** DEFRA's responsibility is to help us all to live within our environmental means.

I wish to inform the House that about 100 farms in Cumbria have been severely affected by the recent flooding, in particular by large quantities of stones deposited on their land. I visited two farms affected last week, and I will shortly announce details of help through the rural development programme for England.

**Michael Fabricant:** I think that the whole House will agree with the Secretary of State and offer its condolences to farmers in Cumbria. However, on another matter, the United Kingdom—that means the British taxpayer—is currently facing a possible £300 million fine for breaching the air quality directive. London is doing something about it. What will DEFRA do to try to avoid the fine?

**The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Jim Fitzpatrick):** DEFRA is working carefully to ensure that we are within the scope of the directives. Only two weeks ago, we hosted an air quality summit with local authorities to look at best practice and to share it with many local authorities. We are in close contact with the Mayor of London, because most of the roads where there are problems are in the London area. We are working with him and his officials to try to ensure that together we can solve the problems in London and avoid the fines that might be coming our way.

**Charlotte Atkins** (Staffordshire, Moorlands) (Lab): Does the Minister share my relief that British Waterways will retain its property portfolio and the income from it? Does he consider that the third sector model that British Waterways is now pursuing will enable it to work more closely with local communities, such as that around Rudyard lake, which is concerned about sailability and is fighting for facilities for disabled people at the lake?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Huw Irranca-Davies):** I was pleased to meet my hon. Friend and members of Rudyard Sailability recently to see the excellent work that they do. Everyone is concerned to ensure a satisfactory resolution as soon as possible, so that the work can continue. The Treasury has acknowledged that the mutual or third sector model is an interesting way forward and it is keen to explore it. I am sure that the Treasury will be seeking views from hon. Members and others on how the idea can be fleshed out, because it offers an exciting prospect for building on the good will that exists towards our waterways.

T3. [305601] **Mr. Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): Every year Kettering borough council has to round up about 250 stray dogs from across the borough, most of which do not have collars or microchips. Given the Department's responsibilities for animal welfare, especially in the run-up to Christmas, what more can the Government do to promote responsible dog ownership?

**Jim Fitzpatrick:** We certainly agree with the hon. Gentleman that we should do everything that we can to achieve responsible dog ownership. I visited the Dogs Trust re-homing centre in Harefield to support its annual campaign, which raises awareness with the message that a dog is for life, not just for Christmas. There are dogs charities and dog organisations all over the UK trying to get the message home, and we want to do the same.

Dog licensing did not work. Chipping is a more modern, technologically superior, less expensive and less bureaucratic system, and it may be something that we want to consider in future. Chipping is not under consideration at the moment, but one can never close the door entirely, particularly to improvements in the welfare of animals.

T2. [305599] **Jessica Morden** (Newport, East) (Lab): The Environment Agency is running an event today to raise awareness of flooding in my constituency. Although that is a welcome initiative, does the Minister agree that sustained and long-term investment in flood defences is what will really bring peace of mind to my constituents?

**Huw Irranca-Davies:** Indeed. I congratulate my hon. Friend on promoting the use of forestry and woodlands for a variety of purposes. We have come to recognise that forestries have not only an intrinsic value, but a value in respect of climate change, carbon and flood alleviation. Forestries also have a prominent role to play in many other respects. I applaud the work that she does to promote those ways forward.

T4. [305602] **Mr. Roger Williams** (Brecon and Radnorshire) (LD): Today many agriculture Ministers will be meeting in Paris to discuss the regulation of agricultural markets and the future of the common agricultural policy. I understand that Conservative shadow Ministers recently visited New Zealand to consider the future of farming without subsidies. Can the Secretary of State explain his position on the future of the common agricultural policy and whether it would include an element of co-funding or direct payment by nation states?

**Hilary Benn:** The UK will be represented at today's meeting in Paris, but no Ministers are there for the simple reason that Ministers are here in the Chamber answering questions. Our policy on reform of the common agricultural policy has been set out clearly in the past. As the hon. Gentleman knows, we have been a leading advocate of reform and a strong supporter of a shift in funding towards pillar two and agri-environment schemes, for the reasons that we have already covered in questions so far.

**Mr. Michael Clapham** (Barnsley, West and Penistone) (Lab): My right hon. Friend will be aware that windrow composting is now widespread, with more than 40 sites throughout the UK. However, it presents a danger: it is smelly and dirty, and it involves the release of *Aspergillus* fungus spores, which are a danger to health. What is he doing to encourage local authorities to join together to provide ways forward for other energy systems, such as the anaerobic digestion system? Is that something that he is working on?

**Hilary Benn:** It certainly is. I am aware of the close interest that my hon. Friend takes in the issue that he has raised. We doubled the incentives for anaerobic digestion under the renewables obligation system from 1 April this year. I am putting in about £10 million for demonstration projects, and when feed-in tariffs come in, they will add a further incentive. The House recognises that we are talking about a technology of the future. It is about to take off, and I encourage farmers and others who are responsible for green waste to look into it.

T6. [305604] **Mr. Andrew Robathan** (Blaby) (Con): One question only this time, Mr. Speaker. The British people are rightly concerned about animal welfare, and will broadly welcome the phasing out of battery cages in 2012. However, they do not wish to see imports of eggs and other chicken products from countries outside the EU that still raise animals in poor conditions and in batteries. What will the Government do to prevent the import of eggs and other chicken products that have been produced using poor welfare standards outside the EU?

**Jim Fitzpatrick:** As I discussed with the egg and poultry conference about two weeks ago, our position is still to hold firmly to the 2012 ban on battery cages. I was asked what plan B was. Plan B is to lobby the Commission to ensure that there are no imports of eggs from countries with lower standards, and to introduce a new marking number—number 4—for those eggs that fall below standard. That is plan B, but we have not yet given up on plan A, which is to hold firm, and hope that the Commission holds firm, to the ban on battery cages that will come in in 2012.

T5. [305603] **Tony Lloyd** (Manchester, Central) (Lab): May I ask my hon. Friends about insect pollinator research funding? In particular, can they allay the fears of those involved that the method of assessment of such research projects could lead to big gaps in essential research areas such as husbandry for bee keeping and in the money being devoted to honey bees and bees generally? We do not need elegant academic research; we need a practical result that will save the honey bee.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dan Norris):** I certainly can reassure my hon. Friend that the Government take the health of Britain's bees and other pollinators very seriously indeed. The decline in bee health is a complex issue with no single cause. The insect pollinator initiative consortium has now considered the expressions of interest received and has invited four research bids for the £10 million that has been made available. It will make its final decisions on allocations early next year. In the interim, it is crucial that all interested parties play an active role in DEFRA's healthy bees plan in order to tackle this hugely important and complex issue. They have a lot to say, and lots of expertise, and we want to hear from them.

T7. [305605] **Mr. David Evennett** (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): I met representatives of the Environment Agency this week to discuss flood and river issues affecting my constituency, and I was advised that, despite efforts to tackle domestic and commercial waste dumping, there are still problems with people dumping waste in our rivers. What recent assessment has the Minister made of this problem, and what action are the Government taking to try to tackle it?

**Huw Irranca-Davies:** The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. There is so much good work being carried out by the Environment Agency and by volunteer groups around the country, including in my own constituency. I am sure that, like me, he has spent many

happy weekends knee deep in the waters—subject to the Environment Agency's approval, of course. I will happily look at the issue that he has raised and drop him a line to give him the state of progress.

T9. [305607] **Hugh Bayley** (City of York) (Lab): Since I was first elected as MP for the City of York, the Minister's Department has moved hundreds of jobs to its offices at Kings Pool in my city. There is now a major development site right next to Kings Pool that would allow DEFRA to build additional office space if it wanted to transfer more staff from London and the south-east to the north of England. Will the Secretary of State ask his director of estates to look at the real estate possibilities in York, and consider whether they would help the Department to deal with its staff relocation plans?

**Hilary Benn:** I promise to take careful note of the kind bid that my hon. Friend has made. Perhaps it will be the first of many.

T8. [305606] **Paul Rowen** (Rochdale) (LD): The Commons Act 2006 placed additional duties and responsibilities on those who hold commons rights. It has been brought to my attention that the lord of the manor of Rochdale, who is a New Zealand resident, has claimed title to considerably more common land than he is entitled to. Will the Minister undertake to look into this with the Land Valuation Office? Residents in the Littleborough area of my constituency are seriously concerned about the effect that that decision is having on them.

**Hilary Benn:** Very gladly. If the hon. Gentleman will give me further details, I will do precisely that.

**David Taylor** (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op): What are the Government doing to encourage the producers and retailers of halal meat to increase the use of pre-stunning, which is compliant with the Koran and which would have significant welfare, economic and political benefits?

**Jim Fitzpatrick:** There are no plans to change the regulations on religious slaughter as they stand at the moment. My hon. Friend and I have had a meeting with some of his constituents in the past month to discuss this issue in depth. We obviously encourage support for the regulations as they stand, but there are no plans to change the status quo.

**Mr. Mark Lancaster** (North-East Milton Keynes) (Con): The proposed Milton Keynes-Bedford canal enjoys cross-party support and will bring many benefits to the region. It has interesting financial arrangements and could well go ahead, but it is stalling at the moment. Will the Minister use his influence to get the project moving again?

**Huw Irranca-Davies:** For obvious reasons we try not to intervene in individual projects, recognising that British Waterways has a good overview and has achieved a lot in the past decade in opening up new stretches of canals that had fallen into disrepair. I wish the project well and if the hon. Gentleman writes to me, I shall take a look at it. I applaud the enthusiasm of the people who

want to open that stretch. We have many such instances across the country, showing why the strength and enthusiasm of volunteers are such a bedrock of the British Waterways network.

**Dan Rogerson** (North Cornwall) (LD): Many farmers are challenging new maps from the Rural Payments Agency. Will the Minister consider looking at an RPA presence on the ground so that a more constructive process for challenge could be developed, along the lines of moving towards stewardship applications with which farmers seem much happier?

**Jim Fitzpatrick:** The progress on re-mapping the country is steady. Earlier this week I chaired a meeting between the RPA, the National Farmers Union, the Country Landowners Agency and the Tenant Farmers Association, which are relatively pleased with the progress that has been made on a complex issue. There are deadlines in January that we have to meet and we are working as hard as we can to ensure that that takes place, so that we can pre-populate the maps for next year's claims. At the same time, we welcome the progress made in the payments for 2009.

**Mr. Lindsay Hoyle** (Chorley) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give an updated statement on the surface water charges that affect sports grounds, churches and charities?

**Huw Irranca-Davies:** I am pleased to give an update. My hon. Friend and others who have lobbied assiduously on that matter will be pleased to know that the issue appears in our Flood and Water Management Bill. With the support of this House and the other place,

we will get that measure on to the statute book and protect scouts associations, churches, community halls and others.

**Mr. Michael Jack** (Fylde) (Con): In light of the outbreak of the fatal disease swine fever in Russia, what steps is the Secretary of State taking to re-examine our bio-security arrangements?

**Hilary Benn:** The right hon. Gentleman raises an important point and he will know that we are always vigilant. The teams monitor carefully what is happening elsewhere and he can rest assured that we will do what is required in light of the evidence. If he would be interested—I am sure he would—I will be happy to write to him further.

**Charles Hendry** (Wealden) (Con): The Secretary of State may be aware that there is great local concern that sites have been identified for potential land rise facilities for waste disposal on the boundary between my constituency and that of the hon. Member for Lewes (Norman Baker). Will he give a clear statement that he believes that such approaches are increasingly out of date and unacceptable and that we should be looking for approaches that generate energy from waste, rather than just dumping it, often in inappropriate locations?

**Hilary Benn:** I agree with the hon. Gentleman completely. We need to get our landfill down, which is why—because of the landfill levy—domestic recycling rates have risen from 8 per cent. to 37 per cent. in the past 12 years. I shall be consulting after the turn of the year on whether we should ban certain products from landfill. Food waste is a good example; why put it in landfill when we could turn it into energy?

## Business of the House

11.33 am

**Sir George Young** (North-West Hampshire) (Con): May I ask the Leader of the House to give us the business for next week?

**The Leader of the House of Commons (Ms Harriet Harman):** The business for the forthcoming week is:

**MONDAY 14 DECEMBER**—Second Reading of the Personal Care at Home Bill, followed by proceedings on the Consolidated Fund Bill.

**TUESDAY 15 DECEMBER**—Second Reading of the Flood and Water Management Bill, followed by a motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to Welsh language.

**WEDNESDAY 16 DECEMBER**—Motion on the Christmas recess Adjournment.

The provisional business for the week commencing 4 January will include:

**MONDAY 4 JANUARY**—The House will not be sitting.

**TUESDAY 5 JANUARY**—Second Reading of the Fiscal Responsibility Bill.

**WEDNESDAY 6 JANUARY**—Consideration of an allocation of time motion, followed by all stages of the Video Recordings Bill.

**THURSDAY 7 JANUARY**—A general debate on the pre-Budget report.

The provisional business for the week commencing 11 January will include:

**MONDAY 11 JANUARY**—Second Reading of the Children, Schools and Families Bill.

I should also like to inform the House that the business in Westminster Hall for 7 January will be:

**THURSDAY 7 JANUARY**—A debate from the Public Administration Committee on “Lobbying: Access and Influence in Whitehall”.

Through you, Mr. Speaker, may I also offer my best wishes for Christmas and the new year to all hon. Members, and on behalf of all hon. Members, may I offer our best wishes for Christmas and the new year to the Clerks of the House, the Officers of the House, catering teams, the cleaners, the police, the doorkeepers, and all who work so hard to keep the House running smoothly? I think that everyone deserves a very good Christmas and new year.

**Sir George Young** (North-West Hampshire) (Con): May I thank the Leader of the House for giving us next week’s business?

I warmly welcome the change from the right hon. and learned Lady’s initial refusal to allow time for a dedicated debate on the pre-Budget report. The House will want to discuss the issues raised by the Chancellor’s statement of yesterday, and we will particularly welcome the chance to highlight that the Government’s pay freeze will hit the poorest public sector workers, unlike our proposals, which excluded the million lowest paid employees. This debate will also give Ministers the opportunity to explain the cost to the NHS of the rise in national insurance.

If I am on a winning streak in asking for debates, may I repeat my other request, for a debate on Afghanistan? I appreciate the efforts that the right hon. and learned

Lady is making to ensure that every week we get an opportunity to question Ministers on Afghanistan, but does she appreciate that Members are looking for a more substantial opportunity to discuss Government policy on Afghanistan, particularly in advance of the proposed London summit at the end of January, so can we have a full day’s debate, in Government time, early in the new year?

I welcome today’s written ministerial statement from the Leader of the House on the Kelly report. We are relieved that the Government have finally accepted our arguments that legislation is needed now to implement Kelly in full. Can the right hon. and learned Lady give an indication of when this proposed legislation will be brought forward and whether it will take the form of a stand-alone Bill or an amendment to existing legislation?

When may we debate the motion on private Members’ Bills, which has been languishing on the Order Paper for more than a week? Unless we debate and resolve the issue soon, we will run the risk of not debating any private Members’ Bills at all in this Session.

May we have a debate on yesterday’s report from the Public Administration Select Committee on the unsatisfactory handling of the special report from the ombudsman on Equitable Life? As the Committee recommends, a mechanism needs to be found so that we can debate findings from the ombudsman without having to rely on either Government or Opposition motions. Does the right hon. and learned Lady agree that it would be sensible for the Government to respond to that recommendation during the debate on the Wright Committee report on Commons reform?

In the same vein, when will we debate and vote on the Procedure Committee’s report on the election of Deputy Speakers? This is an initiative from you, Mr Speaker, which requires action if we are to get a new system in place before the beginning of the next Parliament. The Procedure Committee has said that it is seeking the endorsement of the House. When might it secure it?

May we have a debate on the Copenhagen agreement early in the new year? This is an historic moment, which we hope will deliver a real and meaningful settlement. Given that, will the right hon. and learned Lady ensure that the House is able to debate the conclusions of Copenhagen in full, and its implications for the UK?

Finally, as the right hon. and learned Lady has made clear, astonishingly, this is the last business question before Christmas, so, despite the fact that many people have yet to send a single Christmas card, I, too, would like to take this opportunity to offer you, Mr. Speaker, and all hon. Members including the right hon. and learned Lady, as well as all the staff and Officers, from the Clerks to the caterers, the cleaners, the police and the doorkeepers, a very happy Christmas and new year.

**Ms Harman:** I am happy to accede to the right hon. Gentleman’s request for a debate on the pre-Budget report, and I have announced that. We are also looking for an opportunity to hold a debate on Afghanistan, and, given the context of the London summit, it is obviously even more important that the House has an opportunity to debate the issue, as well as hearing statements from Ministers, which have been made regularly, and hearing from the Prime Minister at Prime Minister’s Question Time when he answers on the subject.

The right hon. Gentleman made a point about the Kelly report and legislation to take forward Sir Christopher Kelly's proposals. We all recognise that the House had to deal with the public anger and concern about the abuse of the allowance system by some Members. The House did not sit back waiting for Kelly. We have already substantially changed the allowance system and legislated for the establishment of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority. As the right hon. Gentleman recognises, there will be further legislation, particularly to make it the responsibility of IPSA to decide Members of Parliament's pay and pensions. We had, of course, already voted not to decide our own pay, but we will now bring forward legislation to put that on a statutory footing. I am not yet in a position to tell him and the House whether that legislation will stand alone or be added to existing legislation, but, whatever the vehicle, we are determined and the whole House is agreed that we should go forward on that basis. There is, as he said, a motion outstanding for debate on private Members' business. It is important that that is taken forward, and it will be.

On Equitable Life, as the Chief Secretary to the Treasury set out in the Opposition day debate on Equitable Life, Sir John Chadwick will produce an interim report by the end of the year, and a final report in the spring. He is hard at work on that very important business.

The election of Deputy Speakers has been considered by the Wright Committee. The Committee has also considered how the House chooses the Chairs and Members of Select Committees, how the public can provide input to debates in the House of Commons through petitions and how House business is managed. I have written to Opposition parties about those issues, because how we should make progress on them is a House matter; it is not for Government diktat. We want to achieve consensus and we want to bring forward a motion on which both sides of the House can agree. I have asked Opposition parties to give me their views on all the issues that the Wright Committee has dealt with, so that I can introduce promptly, within the time limit that is expected of the Government, a motion that will achieve consensus, so that we can go forward with that important Committee's proposals.

On the right hon. Gentleman's festive comments—did he say that he had not sent a single Christmas card yet?

**Sir George Young:** I said that some people have not.

**Ms Harman:** Well, it could be said that the shadow Leader of the House is not one of the most cheerful Members of the House—[*Interruption.*] No, he is not. However, this is the time for Christmas parties. Even though it has been a very difficult year for the House and for the economy, we should not ignore the festive season altogether. With that in mind, I have been thinking about what we should all sing if we were to have a karaoke party, and I have allocated to the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) the karaoke number, "Remember You're a Womble". As the shadow Leader of the House is really the Morrissey of the House, I have chosen for him the Smiths number, "Heaven Knows I'm Miserable Now", and for myself, I have taken a Billy Joel number, "Uptown Girl".

**Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome) (LD):** Ho, ho, ho, Mr. Speaker. [*Laughter.*] May I wish you and all our staff and Officers of the House a Happy Christmas?

**Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby) (Con):** And us?

**Mr. Heath:** And all Members of the House, including even the hon. Gentleman.

**Mr. Robathan:** Thank you very much.

**Mr. Heath:** I, too, welcome the fact that there is to be a debate on the pre-Budget report. I fear that it is unravelling at such speed that we may have to have an alternative pre-Budget report before the original is even debated to correct some of the errors in the first one. Nevertheless, that debate is welcome.

On private Member's Bills—here, I declare an interest—I am very keen, obviously, that time should be set aside for private Members' Bills and that the resolutions should be considered. However, that is one of the matters discussed in the Wright Committee report, which suggests an alternative arrangement for dealing with private Members' Bills. I cannot for the life of me see what the problem is, given that the Committee has produced a draft resolution, on page 94, to be put before the House. It is not for me, or the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir George Young) or the right hon. and learned Lady to decide what is appropriate; it is for the House to decide. The Wright Committee has set out its draft proposals. Why cannot they now be put before the House?

There will be a debate on universities after today's statements. No doubt, the issue of the fiasco and chaos of the Student Loans Company will be considered, but it would be appropriate to have a statement from the Secretary of State to tell us just what has been happening. More importantly, what is being done about the company's senior management and chief executive? They have let down students across the country, who now find themselves in extreme difficulty. Will there be a statement to that effect?

May we have a debate on what I can only term abuse of section 44 of the Terrorism Act 2000 by police? It is not satisfactory that people up and down the country are being stopped and told that they cannot take photographs—and if they have taken photographs, they are asked to delete them from their cameras—apparently on the whim of police officers. So far, people have been told that they cannot take a picture of Christ Church in the City, St. Paul's, railway wagons, Christmas lights—and of Mick's Plaice, a fish and chip shop in Chatham! Such photography is not prime terrorist activity. I honestly think that the police need some education about the very strong powers that we in this House give them, to make sure that they are not used improperly.

**Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab):** You didn't say that during the miners' strike.

**Mr. Heath:** I did, actually.

Lastly, I know that the Leader of the House is committed to the use of plain English in enactments and Government pronouncements. She has said so many times and has gone to great trouble to provide easy-to-read translations of what might otherwise be opaque in the Bills under her own control. However, may I draw her attention to the statement made earlier this week about smarter Government? I shall read out one of the conclusions of the attached paper. It states:

"We will align the different sector-specific performance management frameworks across key local agencies...thereby increasing the focus on indicators relating to joint outcomes."

[Mr. Heath]

Does that make any sense at all? I do not believe that it does. This management-speak is nonsense, so will the Leader of the House eradicate it from Government business?

Again, happy Christmas!

**Ms Harman:** On the pre-Budget report, there will be a debate when the House returns in the new year, but there is also Treasury questions next week and hon. Members can ask questions and raise issues then.

On the Wright Committee report, I think that it is perverse of the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) to object to being consulted. I will bring the proceedings before the House, but I am consulting the Opposition Front-Bench teams. Of course it is a matter for the whole House, and for Back Benchers on all sides as well as for those on the Front Benches, but it is not unreasonable to give the Front-Bench teams an opportunity to give their views as to what should be brought to the House. However, if they do not want to be consulted, they do not need to respond. I have given them until 16 December.

The debate this afternoon on students and universities will provide an opportunity to discuss the issues that the hon. Gentleman mentioned.

The hon. Gentleman raised concerns about terrorism, and I can tell him that there are Home Office questions next week when they could be discussed. He also made a point about the smarter Government publication and plain English: if he could pass me a copy of what he read out, I shall work out a translation for him before the end of business questions this morning.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

**Mr. Speaker:** Order. No fewer than 23 hon. and right hon. Members are seeking to catch my eye. As always, I would like to get everybody in. Members will be conscious that there is a ministerial statement to follow, and that underlines the importance of short questions and answers.

**Natascha Engel** (North-East Derbyshire) (Lab): May I add my voice to those hon. Members calling for a debate on the parliamentary reform Select Committee, of which I was a member? I urge my right hon. and learned Friend to read the minority report submitted by myself and the hon. Member for Hexham (Mr. Atkinson), which at least indicates that there was no consensus on the Committee. I think that a debate would show that, although we were a minority on the Committee, we would be in the majority in the House.

**Ms Harman:** I thank my hon. Friend for her work on the Committee. The issues that she teased out in her minority report show that although the principles and objectives are clear and shared by everyone, how we put them into practice is far from straightforward and needs proper consideration.

**Mr. Hugo Swire** (East Devon) (Con): Given that the country is bust and there is now no money for anything, that the recent local government reorganisation in Cornwall trebled in cost from £20 million to £60 million and that my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) has said that any legislation enacted by this Government to reorganise local government,

particularly in Devon, would be changed by legislation by an incoming Tory Government, will the Leader of the House have a word with her colleague the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government and ask him to come to the House before Christmas to make a statement to end the uncertainties surrounding local government reorganisation in Devon and elsewhere?

**Ms Harman:** We have had a debate on local government this week, but I shall ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government to write to the hon. Gentleman.

**Mr. David Crausby** (Bolton, North-East) (Lab): Will my right hon. and learned Friend ensure that we have an early debate on defence procurement, so that Britain's world-class defence industrial base will get the full benefit in these difficult economic times of the Ministry of Defence's substantial budget?

**Ms Harman:** This is of importance to not only the MOD, but the regions from which our procurement is obtained and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. I shall raise my hon. Friend's comments with the Ministers concerned.

**Sir Patrick Cormack** (South Staffordshire) (Con): Would the Leader of the House ensure that the Wright report and the minority report are debated side by side with the report on the election of Deputy Speakers? Could we have a full day for that, not one that is delayed by statements, so that many people can take part in the debate?

**Ms Harman:** I take note of those points, which are seriously made. I should say that we often decide that we really want to protect a day, and on such days, for example, Opposition days, we never want to put on Government statements. That is because our doing so encroaches on the Opposition's time for the subject that they have chosen for debate. Sometimes statements are made because of a genuine emergency and we have to bring them to the House. Obviously, I want to ensure that there is a full day's debate on the Wright report, but I cannot guarantee that a statement will not need to be made to the House.

**Mr. Denis MacShane** (Rotherham) (Lab): People from Toyoda Gosei, the Japanese car parts factory in my constituency, wrote to me recently saying that they had 30 different nationalities employed there. Could we have a debate on hiring practices, because although I am sure that its hiring practices are completely non-discriminatory, there is widespread concern in south Yorkshire that employers are perhaps not giving a fair crack to local Yorkshiremen and women, and we need to discuss with employers how to bring more of the local work force into active work?

**Ms Harman:** It is important not only that we have training, high skill levels and the appropriate skill levels in the local community for the jobs that are available, but that those jobs are made available through the jobcentres and that the regional development agencies work with employers to make sure that agencies that do not just choose workers from abroad are used. My right hon. Friend makes an important point and it is being taken forward.



**Mr. Michael Fallon** (Sevenoaks) (Con): May I welcome the Leader of the House's assurance that the debate on the Wright Committee's proposals will not be delayed by Front-Bench discussions? Does she intend that debate to take place before the end of January?

**Ms Harman:** As I told the House at last week's business questions, there is a time period within which it is expected that the Government would respond to Select Committee reports, and we expect to respond within that time period. In this case, I believe that that more or less finishes at the end of January, but we are not waiting until the last moment and we will respond when we can, after we are satisfied that there is a reasonable consensus as a basis on which we can then debate the report and reach agreement.

**Julie Morgan** (Cardiff, North) (Lab): I am sure that my right hon. and learned Friend is aware of the report that was published today about the health needs of children in immigration detention centres. I know that the Government have improved the situation, but recently a child in my constituency was badly emotionally damaged by the experience of going into a detention centre. When can we have a debate in which we can consider ending the practice of families with children being put into immigration detention centres?

**Ms Harman:** We want to make absolutely sure that children do not suffer just because their parents have not abided by the immigration rules and regulations. Perhaps my hon. Friend will have the opportunity to raise her question during Home Office questions next week.

**Damian Green** (Ashford) (Con): The Leader of the House is wrong in her choice of karaoke song—surely the appropriate Smiths song for my right hon. Friend the shadow Leader of the House is "This Charming Man".

Could the Leader of the House organise a debate in Government time on immigration policy, specifically so that the House can debate the Home Secretary's interesting remarks last night? He said that the Conservative policy of an immigration cap was a "legitimate option" within the debate. I am glad that the Home Secretary is coming to recognise the wisdom of Conservative immigration policy, as all reasonable people do. If he is going to do a U-turn, the whole House would want him to do so in this place so that we could welcome it warmly.

**Mr. Speaker:** That question was, frankly, too long, albeit that it was amusing in parts. I hope that others will not seek to imitate the Green model.

**Ms Harman:** The Home Secretary has certainly not done a U-turn. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will be able to raise that point with the Home Secretary in Home Office questions next week. I am going to look at the hon. Gentleman in a different light after he has shown himself to be a true Smiths fan.

**Mr. Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): My right hon. and learned Friend will know that in this very rich city of London this Christmas will be a hard one for many people. Is she aware that the centre for runaway children run by the St. Christopher's charity is in danger

of closing down? Could we have a debate on this? The fact is that we should keep this precious resource going and that St. Christopher's does a wonderful job for runaway children—not only those from London, but those from all our constituencies up and down the country.

**Ms Harman:** Obviously everybody is concerned at all times of the year, but particularly at Christmas, about children who are not with their family and about whom their family are desperately concerned, and about what provision exists for such children. I shall raise the point about St. Christopher's with the relevant Minister.

**Sir Nicholas Winterton** (Macclesfield) (Con): The future integrity, independence and authority of this House depends upon the implementation of the proposals of the Reform of the House of Commons Committee and the Procedure Committee. Will the Leader of the House give me and the House a firm commitment that these proposals will be decided on a genuine free vote, unencumbered by the Whips on either side of the House?

**Ms Harman:** I do not think that the hon. Gentleman should foster any sense of apocalypse about this. We should all seek to work together to maintain the integrity, independence and authority of the House. Of course we will have a debate on the Wright Committee report, and it will be on a free vote. Members should jealously guard their free vote on House issues.

**Mr. Terry Rooney** (Bradford, North) (Lab): On the Wright report, may I point out that it is important to remember that this is a political institution, that political parties exist for a reason and that this House would never ever survive a day's business without the workings of the usual channels and the Whips Offices? Will my right hon. and learned Friend bear that in mind in her deliberations?

**Ms Harman:** It is also worth our reminding ourselves that we are all elected on a manifesto, whereby we make promises to our constituents that if we get elected we will strive to keep our promises. One thing that would undermine our democracy is if we got elected to this House and then did not deliver on our manifesto commitments. That is why we have a majority Government, rather than a minority Government, and why it is the job of the Government to deliver their business in order to keep their manifesto promises.

**Miss Anne McIntosh** (Vale of York) (Con): On environmental protection, is the Leader of the House aware that today The Flood Risk Regulations 2009, statutory instrument No. 3042, come into force? They have not been consulted on or scrutinised by this House or issued to all the relevant parties. Will she issue an apology to the House? Will she castigate the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs for this? Will she assure us that these regulations will not come into force today, and that they will be properly scrutinised and properly consulted upon? They form part of the Flood and Water Management Bill—she just announced that it will have its Second Reading next week. The DEFRA Whip on the Treasury Bench—

**Mr. Speaker:** Order. I am grateful to the hon. Lady. I think that there was a request for a statement next week somewhere in her remarks, but I did not readily identify it. I call the Leader of the House.

**Ms Harman:** We have just had DEFRA questions. I can reassure the hon. Lady, if she did not manage to raise her question with DEFRA Ministers, that all procedures were followed. Anyway, there is a debate on flood and water management next week, in which she might seek to catch Mr. Speaker's eye and to make her comments.

**Mr. David Drew** (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Leader of the House pass on my thanks to the Chancellor for making a statement on getting serious about tax avoidance? One can hear the breaking of glass in News Corporation and the Telegraph Media Group. With that in mind, there is no better place to start than media groups to ensure that they pay an appropriate amount of tax in this country. Will she ensure that that is taken forward?

**Ms Harman:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is important for companies and corporations to pay their taxes in this country and for individuals to do so, too. There is a particular issue for us in the House of Commons and for people who seek to come into the House of Commons. It used to be said that there should be no taxation without representation. We raise the taxes—we pass the Finance Acts—and so we should turn it around and say that there should be no representation without taxation. The idea that someone should purport to come into this House to make other people pay taxes while saying for tax purposes that they do not live in this country is bizarre.

**Mr. Andrew Pelling** (Croydon, Central) (Ind): Will the Leader of the House, in her busy schedule before Christmas, take the time to draw the Foreign Secretary's attention to early-day motions on the situation in Kurdistan, and particularly the adversely altered imprisonment arrangements for Abdullah Ocalan? If he were to pass away in Turkish custody, the security of us all would be greatly compromised.

**Ms Harman:** I know that the hon. Gentleman is concerned about this matter. There will be an opportunity next week in the pre-recess Adjournment debate, if he thinks that it is appropriate, for him to set out those points in more detail.

**Mrs. Ann Cryer** (Keighley) (Lab): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for the wonderful Christmas party in your apartments yesterday. It was much appreciated by my granddaughter.

May I ask for an early debate based on early-day motion 346, on organ donors?

*[That this House notes that 10-year-old George Higginson, who was tragically killed in a road traffic accident, donated his organs as gifts of life to five other people; wishes to pay tribute to the courage and selflessness of his parents who continue to support and promote organ donation; and supports Mr Higginson's suggestion that arrangements be made at polling stations to give people an opportunity to register as an organ donor whilst voting at the forthcoming general election.]*

It was tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Geraldine Smith). The final sentence reads that

“arrangements be made at polling stations to give people an opportunity to register as an organ donor whilst voting at the forthcoming general election.”

From my experience of bereavement because of a sudden accidental death, I know that it would certainly have helped me to have known that my late husband's organs had been used to save the lives of other people.

**Ms Harman:** My hon. Friend makes a very important point. I said to the House last week that we would look into whether information about signing up to the register of organ donors could be made available at polling stations. I am interested in my hon. Friend's comments about the Christmas party. Did they have karaoke at it, I wonder?

**Adam Afriyie** (Windsor) (Con): This is not a politically sexy subject, but it is an essential one that underpins freedom of speech, innovation and research, and societal change. Scientists and academics have a duty to criticise publicly the poor research and unsubstantiated claims of others in the public domain, but it seems to me that they are often silenced through fear and threat of lengthy and costly libel actions. May I urge the right hon. and learned Lady to hold a debate as soon as possible on UK libel laws?

**Ms Harman:** I shall raise the hon. Gentleman's point with the Justice Secretary.

**David Taylor** (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op): The shadow Leader of the House's song should, of course, be “Young Love”.

May we have a debate on the private finance initiative? As each successive report comes out, it appears that it is prohibitive in cost, flawed in concept and intolerable in consequence for our nation. With hundreds of billions of pounds stored up over the generations, it would help if we were to reform or abolish it. It would certainly assist the Chancellor in bridging the various financial gaps that he described to the House yesterday.

**Ms Harman:** The private finance initiative is massively changed from when it was originally embarked on. The reality is that in every constituency throughout the country we have really important capital projects—hospitals, schools and housing—that have been brought forward earlier because of the PFI system.

The question gives me an opportunity to reply to the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath), who asked me to translate “Putting the Frontline First”. On his point—I will not read it all out again—the quotation basically concerned the fact that performance management indicators should be common across the different Departments, rather than each Department having a different performance management indicator, pulling in different directions. It is really about partnership working towards common objectives, which is probably gobbledegook in itself.

**Dr. Julian Lewis** (New Forest, East) (Con): During the holocaust, a Foreign Office official famously wrote a minute in which he referred to the time being wasted

by what he called “wailing Jews”. When Mr. Rowan Laxton, the head of the south Asia desk at the Foreign Office, was convicted in September of an outburst in which he referred to “f— Jews” and was fined £350, his barrister said that that was

“going to have very grave and long-term consequences”

and that

“whatever happens in court is secondary to the effect it will have on his career and reputation”.

Given that he has been reinstated in the Foreign Office and appointed to a new job and that that job has not been revealed, may we have a statement confirming that the job will have nothing whatsoever to do with the middle east?

**Ms Harman:** In the sort of situation that the hon. Gentleman has raised, which concerns an individual employee of the civil service, I am not in a position to answer the question. However, as regards his overall point about the horror of anti-Semitism, I know that I can look to him to support the measures that we will introduce in the Equality Bill to give proper, strong legal protection so that people are not discriminated against or harassed on the grounds of their religion.

**Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab):** Is the Leader of the House aware that every day this week, thanks to your good offices, Mr. Speaker, school choirs have been able to sing in Portcullis House? At 1 o'clock today, Priory school from my constituency will be singing. Will my right hon. and learned Friend be able to join me in the audience and encourage other Members to be there, too?

**Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley) (Lab):** They are up against the quality of Chorley yesterday.

**Ms Harman:** I, too, pay tribute to all the schools who have come to Portcullis House, to you, Mr. Speaker, for initiating this, and to those hon. Members who have brought their schools here. I thank my hon. Friend for the invitation and I shall go.

**Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con):** Chorley school was excellent yesterday—I heard them.

Is it possible to have an early debate on the importance of community hospitals? Clitheroe hospital in my constituency provides a tremendous service to local people. A lot of rural villages use it and, as the Leader of the House knows, we do not have the same bus service as everyone else and a lot of people do not have access to cars to be able to go to the main hospitals. It was due to be replaced with a £12 million new hospital, but that has now been frozen while the trust considers the availability and provision of new services. Please may we have a debate on this subject? It is supposed to be a national health service that also includes rural areas.

**Ms Harman:** Absolutely it should. People locally, through the local health service organisations in consultation with hon. Members, patients' organisations and the local community should decide where those services are put. I suggest that if the hon. Gentleman is not happy with the proposals, he should write to the Secretary of State and ask to meet him to discuss this.

**Mr. Mark Lancaster (North-East Milton Keynes) (Con):** May we have a debate on sentencing so that we can discuss the case of Gregory Davis, who killed my constituent, Dorothy Rogers, by stabbing her 31 times and then chased her son, Michael, into the school playground and killed him, too? Does the Leader of the House at least understand the anger of my constituents at the news that after just six years, Mr. Davis is now enjoying unsupervised day visits to Oxford and could be released within weeks?

**Ms Harman:** Everyone will have absolute heartfelt sympathy for the relatives of Dorothy Rogers and her son Michael and will appreciate the concerns that have been raised by the hon. Gentleman on behalf of his constituents about the situation as regards Gregory Davis. Because the hon. Gentleman was able to give me notice of his question, I have already talked about this matter with the Justice Secretary, who has been looking into it this morning. He is happy to invite the hon. Gentleman to a meeting on this subject. The sentence was handed down by the courts but Gregory Davis was then transferred to a psychiatric facility. I think that we can all understand the concerns and a meeting with the Justice Secretary will be very important.

**Mr. Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con):** Under Standing Order No. 14, the Government are required to bring forward 13 days for private Members' business. Private Members' Bills will be presented next Wednesday, and unless by then the Government have nominated dates on which their Second Readings may be taken, the system will collapse. Will the Leader of the House name those 13 days, or provide a debate on changing the Standing Order?

**Ms Harman:** A motion has been tabled to amend the Standing Orders to provide for private Members' business in a Session that will inevitably be shorter than usual. However, the system will certainly not fall into chaos; it will proceed in an orderly and democratic way.

**Mr. Nigel Dodds (Belfast, North) (DUP):** May we have a debate on winter fuel payments and the need for regular review and uprating of those payments to pensioners? In that debate, we could also address the issue highlighted in early-day motion 407, which points out that those who reach the age of 80 after 27 September will not qualify for payments in the following year.

*[That this House congratulates the Government on the provision of winter fuel payments for those aged 60 and over; further congratulates the Government on providing an increase in the payment for those aged 80 and over; notes with concern, however, that those people who turn 80 after the arbitrary date of 27 September are not eligible for the increased payments throughout the following winter; and therefore calls on the Government to change the qualifying date to ensure that those aged 80 on or before 31 December receive the increased payment in the year they are 80.]*

**Ms Harman:** There will be a benefits uprating statement this afternoon, and the Prime Minister spoke about the matter during yesterday's Prime Minister's questions. If there is anything further that the hon. Gentleman would like to raise, perhaps he will write to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and keep the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland informed about his concerns.

**Mr. John Hayes** (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The Leader of the House was asked whether we could have a debate—or a statement at least—about the fiasco involving the Student Loans Company. It is not good enough for her to say that there is, coincidentally, a general debate on higher education this afternoon. There is a damning report about the Student Loans Company and ministerial involvement in it. It might be just one of those things for the right hon. and learned Lady, but students are suffering fear and hardship, night and day, and we want a statement in the House.

**Ms Harman:** Hon. Members will have an opportunity to ask their questions and to get them answered by a Minister during this afternoon's estimates debate. I would have thought that the point for Members is whether it is possible for them to raise the issue and get a response, whether that is as part of a topical debate, an estimates day or any other business. The question is whether there is an opportunity, and the answer is yes.

**Mr. Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): As this is meant to be the season of good will, is it not extremely mean-spirited and Scrooge-like of the Leader of the House to try to restrict debate on private Members' business in the new year to just eight days, instead of the statutory 13, especially when most of the Bills at the top of the list are being promoted by Labour Members?

**Ms Harman:** If we have a shorter Session, there are fewer days for private Members' business, so this is just proportionality—there is nothing unusual at all.

## Benefits Up-rating

12.13 pm

**The Minister for Pensions and the Ageing Society (Angela Eagle):** With permission, Mr. Speaker, I should like to make a statement about benefits up-rating and how that supports the action that the Government have taken to help people through the global recession. I shall place full details of the up-rating in the Vote Office and arrange for the figures to be published in the *Official Report* at the earliest opportunity.

As the global recession, which had its origins in the US sub-prime market, began, we said that we would act to protect people in the UK. Since then, the Government have taken decisive action to support families, jobs and businesses. As the effects of the credit crunch spread to the real economy, we acted to protect people's deposits in banks and to stabilise the wider financial system. Then we acted by making available an additional £5 billion to help people in the labour market to remain in work or get back to work as quickly as possible. We ensured that the Jobcentre Plus network and our providers could not only maintain but increase our support to the increased numbers needing help.

We were determined not to lose a generation of young people to work, which is why we set up the future jobs fund and why we will now guarantee every 18 to 24 year-old who has been unemployed for six months a job, a training place or a volunteering opportunity. The action that we have taken has had an impact. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will lay out further measures in our "Back to Work" White Paper next week.

Let me turn to the statement. I wish to tell the House that we will act to provide real help for people when they need it most during the early stages of recovery. People of working age who are claiming income-related benefits will have their benefits up-rated in line with the Rossi index, which is the retail prices index less housing costs. That means that people who receive benefits such as jobseeker's allowance, employment and support allowance, and incapacity benefit will receive an increase of 1.8 per cent from April 2010.

For those benefits that are traditionally up-rated in line with the retail prices index, this year, as a consequence of the extraordinary global conditions, the RPI has moved into negative territory—it stood at minus 1.4 per cent in September. That means that those who rely on benefits being up-rated by the retail prices index could have expected to see their benefits frozen in cash terms, which would have meant no increase at all next April. However, because the Government continue to demonstrate their commitment to helping the poorest and most vulnerable in society, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has decided that those benefits should be increased by 1.5 per cent. from April 2010. That means that we will increase benefits for disabled people and carers, and statutory payments for parents and others who receive national insurance-linked benefits, by 1.5 per cent from next April. Recipients of attendance allowance, carer's allowance, disability living allowance, and maternity allowances will have those important benefits up-rated to ensure that they do not fall behind.

The basic state pension is traditionally up-rated in line with the retail prices index, but as my right hon. Friend the Chancellor confirmed in yesterday's pre-Budget

statement, the basic state pension will be uprated by 2.5 per cent from April 2010. That means that, from April next year, the basic state pension for a single person will rise by £2.40 to £97.65 a week, while the standard rate based on spouse's or civil partner's contribution will increase to £58.50, giving a pensioner couple a total of £156.15 a week. That above-inflation increase, which is delivered as a result of a commitment by this Government, will ensure that more than 11 million pensioners receive a real-terms increase in the value of their basic state pension.

The uprating of state additional pension feeds directly through to public service pensions and to some aspects of occupational pension schemes. As a result, we are unable to uprate those benefits without creating unintended consequences for occupational pension schemes. In the circumstances, we plan to hold state additional pension flat in cash terms this year. However, the 2.5 per cent increase in the basic state pension will mean that, on average, pensioners in Great Britain will see an overall increase of 2 per cent in their state pension.

For the poorest pensioners, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor also confirmed that the standard minimum guarantee in pension credit will rise from next April by £2.60 a week for single pensioners and £3.95 for couples. That means that, from April next year, no single pensioner need live on less than £132.60 a week, and no couple on less than £202.40 a week. That represents a real-terms increase of more than a third for the poorest pensioners since 1997. The above-earnings increase in the pension credit guarantee underlines the Government's ongoing commitment to tackling pensioner poverty, which has already ensured that there are 900,000 fewer pensioners in relative poverty today than there were in 1998-99. In fact, the Government have spent around £100 billion more on pensioners since 1997 than we would have done if we had simply allowed the policies of the previous Government to continue.

We have taken action, and we will continue to take action to ensure that people do not have to face the recession alone—abandoned, as happened so often in the past. We have learned the lessons from the recessions of the 1980s and 1990s, which is why our upcoming White Paper will set out the next steps in our continuing determination to invest in people and give them the help they need because, for this Government, unemployment will never be a price worth paying.

The package of uprating proposals, which is worth around £2 billion for 2010-11, represents significant and worthwhile help for those who are among the poorest and most vulnerable in society. It provides real help in a challenging year, and I commend the statement to the House.

**Andrew Selous** (South-West Bedfordshire) (Con): I thank the Minister for advance sight of her statement. This recession has hit families hard throughout the country, and, as we heard yesterday, low and middle earners, particularly those earning £20,000 and above, will pay the price for the Government's fiscal irresponsibility.

The Minister's statement comes at a time of great challenges. Unemployment has reached 2.5 million, with youth unemployment being higher before the recession than when the Government came to power. There are 2.5 million pensioners living in poverty, and the rate of child poverty has increased by 400,000 since 2004. We

welcome any action that provides greater support to the innocent victims of Labour's failure to tackle poverty, but does the Minister agree that it is completely unacceptable and deeply cynical for the Government to increase benefit levels before an election, only to cut them after an election? That is exactly what they appear to be doing.

The Government are committed to a 1.5 per cent. rise in child benefit, disability living allowance, carer's allowance and incapacity benefit, but they have no funding to continue the measure after the election. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has made it clear that

"the Chancellor committed himself—or rather, his successor—to increase those same benefits by 1.5 per cent. less than inflation this time next year";

and the pre-Budget report confirms that the policy

"avoids a further permanent increase in expenditure".

It is a pre-election con, paid for by a real-terms cut in benefits following the election. Does the Minister understand that such sleight of hand is exactly what we have come to expect from her Government and one reason why so many hold politics in such low esteem? Will she also confirm that this year there is no £60 Christmas bonus, which many pensioners valued this time last year, and explain the reason for its absence?

We welcome the increase in the basic state pension, which will be a relief to pensioners who have seen their savings hit by low interest rates. Will the Minister confirm when the Government plan to restore the earnings link for the basic state pension and will she explain how the Government plan to pay for it, having set their face against a state pension age increase that would save £13 billion a year?

There was a hidden threat to pensions in yesterday's pre-Budget report. The Chancellor's opaque reference to

"phasing in the roll-out of pension personal accounts"—[*Official Report*, 9 December 2009; Vol. 502, c. 369.]

appears to herald yet another delay in the Government's flagship personal accounts scheme. Will the Minister confirm that personal accounts will not be fully up and running with 3 per cent. employer contributions until 2017? It is not high earners who will lose out from the delay, but people on middle and low incomes, because it potentially leaves millions of people facing a gap in contributions that they might never take up.

The measure will not only fail to improve the levels of saving, it could actually reduce saving rates at the very time that we need them to increase. The Association of British Insurers said:

"This money will be saved at the expense of getting the low-paid into long-term pension saving, which is absolutely vital for their future welfare in retirement."

Will the Minister confirm that the PBR has taken £2.4 billion out of the pensions of people on low and middle incomes? I also note that the Government are not uprating state additional pensions. Will the Minister tell us how many pensioners are going to lose out as a result?

On disability benefits, following the Opposition day debate on Tuesday, I note that there is still concern about the threat that the Government's care reforms pose to disabled pensioners. All the preferred funding models in the Government's Green Paper are underpinned by the integration of attendance allowance and disability

[Andrew Selous]

living allowance for the over-65s with a future care and support system. In effect, those cash benefits, which are currently paid directly to recipients for them to use as they wish, would be integrated into local authority social care budgets, and that would give older disabled people less control and less independence.

On Tuesday the Government were making up policy on the hoof without providing any details. They now have to answer a series of serious questions about how the new policy will work in practice. Will people entering a new scheme with equivalent needs to people currently receiving disability living allowance or attendance allowance get the same entitlement? Finally, will the Minister confirm that the Government are cutting £130 million from the national health service budget as a result of the rise in employer's national insurance which was announced yesterday?

**Angela Eagle:** I was going to thank the hon. Gentleman for welcoming the £2 billion of extra resources that, even in difficult times, this Government have managed to find for those who are poor and vulnerable. However, I did not hear any welcome at all in his remarks. He talked about the increase of 1.5 per cent. in disability and carer's benefits, but it would have been a zero-rate increase if we had not brought it forward as the Chancellor announced yesterday. That is not a cut in benefit; it is a 1.5 per cent. increase in benefit this year, over and above the current rate of RPI minus 1.4 per cent. Does he welcome that? He did not say whether he welcomed the fact that those who rely on disability and carer's benefits will have an increase this year instead of a freeze.

On the earnings link for the basic state pension, the hon. Gentleman knows that Parliament has already legislated to restore the link from 2012, or by 2015—the end of the next Parliament—at the latest.

**Mr. David Winnick** (Walsall, North) (Lab): Who abolished it?

**Angela Eagle:** Obviously the Conservatives abolished it in the 1980s. [Interruption.] Opposition Front Benchers say that we have done nothing about the earnings link for the basic state pension while we have been in power, but we have raised the basic state pension above prices every year since 1998-99. Every year we have seen a real increase above RPI; in 18 years, the Conservatives increased it once, and they did so to compensate for the introduction of VAT on fuel. We have a far greater record of which to be proud than the Opposition.

I can confirm that the personal accounts reform programme will begin in 2012 as planned, but there will be a slowing of implementation to enable us to ensure that this very complicated and large programme can be put into effect appropriately.

On additional pensions, the hon. Gentleman asked why there is no increase this year, and that is because of the feed-through to those private sector pensions that are contracted out. Such a measure would be extremely complicated, and there would then be an increasing difference between public sector pensions, which would get the increase, and private sector pensions, which are often linked to RPI increases and have planned for a zero-rate increase. We felt that that situation would not

be desirable, but I emphasise that all pensioners will see a real-terms increase because of the 2.5 per cent. increase that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced in his pre-Budget report yesterday.

The Opposition have spent the past few months telling us that in the depths of a recession we should cut public expenditure. They voted against the fiscal stimulus and the extra help from the Department for Work and Pensions for those in the real economy who have to deal with the effects of the recession, and for those who have been unemployed. Indeed, the Opposition continue to say that they would cut the deficit further and faster, but I still do not know and I have not heard from the hon. Gentleman whether they support the up-rating—whether they support the £2 billion of extra money that we have been able to allocate for the poorest and most vulnerable in our society. I note with interest that he gave us no indication of whether the Opposition support today's statement.

**Steve Webb** (Northavon) (LD): I am grateful to the Minister for advance sight of the statement. May I offer her my commiserations? When there is good news, the Secretary of State comes to the House to make the statement; when it is bad news, the Minister of State does so. I therefore thank her for coming to the House with this statement. However, we had hoped that it would provide us with the bits that the Chancellor forgot yesterday. When we saw a copy of it a few moments ago, we anticipated the Minister explaining that April's rise in child benefit and disabled people's benefit was temporary, and that when the 2011 increase comes about it will be as if the 2010 increase had never happened. Mysteriously, she forgot that as well. I wonder whether her Department actually knew, or knows, about this; when we read the small print of the pre-Budget report last night, we spotted the problem and I challenged the Minister's ministerial colleague, the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman), about it in the Chamber. I asked whether there would be real-terms cuts in 2011, to which the hon. Lady replied:

"I do not think that there will be a real-terms cut"—[*Official Report*, 9 December 2009; Vol. 502, c. 424.]

Will this Minister clarify whether the Department was told about the issue in advance, and indeed whether it knows now, that what it proposes is a real-terms increase before the election and a real-terms cut after the election? Is that not a definition of cynicism?

The Minister mentioned additional pension and the state earnings-related pension scheme, or SERPS. Surely the Government could have indexed SERPS if they had wanted to; pensioners who heard that they were getting 2.5 per cent. would hardly have thought that the Government were picking and choosing which bits of their pensions to index and which bits not to. Can the Minister confirm that next year SERPS will be indexed fully in line with the RPI, and not clawed back as child benefit and disability living allowance have been? Can she also confirm that more than 10 million families and disabled people will, as the hon. Member for South-West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) said, be subject to a real-terms cut—by definition—between 2010 and 2011, because whatever the inflation rate in September 2010, the Government will put less than that on the benefit rates for 2010? That is a real cut; it must be. Will she confirm that?

Among the additional pension components is the graduated retirement benefit. That is not subject to contracting-out issues, so will the Minister confirm that she will index that benefit, which many older pensioners receive? I am sure that she will, because there is no reason not to.

Had we had a real-terms increase in 2010 for disabled people and families that was a permanent feature of the system, we would have welcomed it unreservedly. As it is, it is a temporary, pre-election feature of the system. It should have been made permanent. We all hoped that the statement today would make that clear; it is almost as if the Government are embarrassed about what they have done.

**Angela Eagle:** I am not embarrassed about a statement on up-rating that, at a time of economic challenge and difficulty, puts £2 billion of extra resources into the pockets of people who are often the poorest and most vulnerable in our society. I am rather surprised that the hon. Gentleman could think that I would be.

The rise in retail prices-indexed benefits is not temporary, but real. It is happening in April next year instead of a zero increase. I would have thought the hon. Gentleman would welcome the fact that we have been able to get extra resources now into the pockets of those on child benefit, disability allowance and incapacity benefit, rather than inflicting on them the zero increase that the RPI benefits would have left them with. We are helping 5.5 million people, and I would have thought the hon. Gentleman would welcome that.

I confirm that we will increase SERPS indexation in line with the RPI; the question was simply whether we could, in the short space of time, give assistance with additional pension in that way. There would have been a difficulty with up-rating the additional pension rather than holding it flat this year; it would have meant that the public sector would have got the increase, but that those responsible for private sector pensions, which are connected to this, would all have been planning for a zero rate increase and would not have been able to increase their pensions in line with the increases we announced in the time available. We therefore felt that it would be better to do it in a more orderly way and keep additional pensions at zero for now. That does not mean that an increase connected to RPI will not come through in due course.

**Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North) (Lab):** As someone who occasionally criticises the Government, I should say to my hon. Friend that one of the most impressive achievements of the Labour Government since 1997 has been to undermine pensioner poverty substantially. We should also bear in mind the winter fuel allowance, which was introduced almost from the moment at which Labour was elected. That compares well with the disgraceful poverty that pensioners had to face year after year during the last Tory Government.

**Angela Eagle:** I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. I am certainly very proud to be part of a Government who are the first in our history to break the link between old age and poverty. People over 65 are now no more likely to face poverty than any other generation or age cohort in our society. That is a substantial achievement. I am also proud that instead of spending a mere £60 million on helping pensioners with their fuel bills—the situation

we inherited in 1997—we now spend £2.7 billion a year on that, because of the introduction of the winter fuel payment.

**Sir Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield) (Con):** May I direct the Minister's attention to the group of pensioners who were very responsible during their working lives and established a quality and way of life funded not only by benefits or the state pension but by the savings they had made? Their quality of life has now been dreadfully undermined, because the rate of interest on savings has plummeted to almost zero. Are the Government and the Minister concerned about that group of people, who were highly responsible during their working lives but are now suffering? They cannot benefit from the announcements—announcements that I welcome—from the Minister this afternoon.

**Angela Eagle:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for welcoming the announcements, which is more than his party's Front-Bench spokesman did. The historically low interest paid at the moment, because of the economic situation we find ourselves in and the world finds itself in, has caused particular issues for those who rely on interest from savings in their retirement. We do our best to assist them—particularly, for example, by increasing the personal allowance thresholds, as my right hon. Friend the Chancellor did in his Budget last year. That lifted another 600,000 pensioners out of tax altogether, and 60 per cent. of pensioners now pay no tax.

Although we are concerned about pensioners who rely on savings income, I should also say that 55 per cent. of pensioners receive less than £10 a week, or no income at all, from investments. In essence, today's statement is more about them, as the hon. Gentleman himself acknowledged.

**John Battle (Leeds, West) (Lab):** I warmly welcome this statement on benefits up-rating; it is proof today that the Government have not abandoned the poor and vulnerable. I particularly welcome the up-rating on state pensions. Some of us will recall Mrs. Thatcher's being handbagged because of the Conservative Government's disgraceful record for cutting pensions rather than upgrading them. Will my hon. Friend confirm that some analysts in the media are suggesting today that, when we take account of the RPI and inflation trends, the increase may be worth about 4 per cent. in real terms? Will she also confirm that the Government have done more to bring pensioners and retired people out of poverty than any Government since the introduction of the welfare state? A Tory Budget—

**Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord):** Order. This is becoming a speech.

**Angela Eagle:** I share my right hon. Friend's passion for the results of our work on eliminating pensioner poverty. Pensioners are now no more likely to be poor than other age cohorts in our society. There is still more to do, which is why we continue to work to improve access to pension credit, to assist those who are still on low incomes.

I can confirm that, with the RPI at minus 1.4 per cent., the 2.5 per cent. increase is closer to 4 per cent. If he had chosen to, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor could have frozen the basic state pension; instead, he chose to increase it by 2.5 per cent.—and that is closer to a 4 per cent. increase, as my right hon. Friend the

[Angela Eagle]

Member for Leeds, West (John Battle) said. I know that across the country many of the spokespeople for our 11 million pensioners welcomed the announcement when they heard it in my right hon. Friend the Chancellor's statement yesterday.

**Mr. Nigel Dodds** (Belfast, North) (DUP): Earlier, during business questions, I asked about the level of winter fuel payments and was told to await this benefits up-rating statement, but unfortunately there is nothing in it about that issue. I welcome the Government's introduction of winter fuel payments and the increase in the basic state pension that has been announced. However, is there not a need for regular reviews on increases in winter fuel payments? Also, what about the £60 Christmas bonus for pensioners this year?

**Angela Eagle:** My right hon. Friend the Chancellor always keeps in view the level of the winter fuel payment, which the Conservatives have called a gimmick but is £2.7 billion of real help that ensures that when the weather gets cold, pensioners do not have to worry about turning their heating up. I welcome the hon. Gentleman's view on that. On up-rating, my right hon. Friend keeps that under review. When the winter fuel payment was first introduced it was £20; this year, it is between £250 and £400 for all people over state retirement age—substantial and real help for those who wonder whether they can get through the winter and worry about turning their heating up. There is no need for them to do that because of the winter fuel payment, which should be arriving even as we speak.

**Mr. Dennis Skinner** (Bolsover) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend aware that in previous recessions stretching back to the '70s, on every single occasion the people at the bottom of the pile have come off worse? This is the first time that those least able to weather the storm have come off better than many others, including—dare I say it?—some bankers who could have been hit even harder. Can I suggest to my hon. Friend that this is an example of fixing the roof even when it is raining for those least able to bear it?

**Angela Eagle:** I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend's comments. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor was very clear in his approach to the pre-Budget report, of which this up-rating statement is a very important part. He believes that those with the broadest shoulders should bear the greatest burden of the challenges that face us in the economy at the moment. This up-rating statement proves that he has delivered that in action.

**Mr. Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): Will the Minister take steps to end the scandal whereby British taxpayers are funding the now up-rated child benefit payments to EU nationals who live in this country but whose children reside in their country of origin?

**Angela Eagle:** We keep these things under review. However, we are bound by EU reciprocal laws on social security that enable the 1.5 million UK citizens

who live and work in the European Union to benefit in turn from local arrangements in the countries in which they work.

**Mr. Jim Cunningham** (Coventry, South) (Lab): We all appreciate what the Government have done over the past 10 or 12 years in general terms in increasing benefits across the board. Having said that, coming back to the point made by the hon. Member for Belfast, North (Mr. Dodds), can my hon. Friend reassure me that she will keep the winter fuel allowance under review, bearing in mind that oil prices and so on are starting to creep up?

**Angela Eagle:** I know that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor is committed to keeping the winter fuel payment as the helpful benefit that it is. Its size has gone up consistently since it was introduced, and we now spend £2.7 billion a year on ensuring that older people need not worry about keeping warm in winter.

**Mr. Peter Bone** (Wellingborough) (Con): The Minister has a reputation for not trying to dodge a question and giving an honest answer. Will she therefore explain to the House whether, given that when we get to 2011 this year's 1.5 per cent. increase is going to be disregarded, that means there will be a real cut of 1.5 per cent.? Could she be absolutely clear about that?

**Angela Eagle:** Flattery will get the hon. Gentleman to all sorts of places; I welcome his comment about my answering straight questions. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor has taken action to ensure that 1.5 per cent. of money can be given to those on carers' benefits, who otherwise, without the action he has taken, would have been facing a zero increase in today's up-rating statement. That assists 5.5 million people. This morning, when asked about what would happen in 2011, he said that we will have to decide in 12 months' time what will happen for the next year. The hon. Gentleman knows that benefit up-ratings are held only on an annual basis, so we cannot speculate from this far away when we do not know what the rate of inflation will be and what the implications for up-rating will be in 2011.

**John Mason** (Glasgow, East) (SNP): Obviously, 1.5 per cent. is more welcome than zero per cent., but for the carer's allowance, which is particularly low, it is not very much. Can the Minister see a way towards pulling carers allowance up?

**Angela Eagle:** We can have some interesting debates about the interaction of benefits, but today we are talking about their up-rating rather than changing their balance in the benefits system. We all know from our own constituency case loads of the crucially important work that carers do. That is why I am pleased to be at the Department for Work and Pensions when we are bringing in the historic changes that, from April next year, will credit carers into access to the basic state pension for their caring responsibilities. For the first time, it will be possible for someone who has cared for 30 years and got the credits to qualify in full for the basic state pension. I am very proud of that change, which this Government have managed to bring in.



## Points of Order

12.46 pm

**Mr. David Heath** (Somerton and Frome) (LD): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. In response to a freedom of information request for papers relating to Cabinet Committees dealing with devolution to Scotland and Wales, the Information Commissioner determined that those papers should be released. Today, Sir, the Lord Chancellor has laid a written ministerial statement indicating that he has used the veto that Ministers possess to prevent the release of those papers. In nine years, that veto was not used; it has now been used twice in one year. In this instance, it has been used before the matter has gone to an information tribunal, and the Lord Chancellor has not, as he did previously, come to the House to explain his decision in an oral statement.

I understand, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that the Information Commissioner is likely to undertake a special report to Parliament. May I seek your guidance—perhaps if you cannot give immediate guidance, you might ask Mr. Speaker—as to how this special report, which is obviously of crucial importance, can be placed before the House for debate, because it is clearly inappropriate that such a report, which criticises the action of a Cabinet Minister, should be in the hands of the same Cabinet Minister in determining whether it should be placed before the House?

**Sir Alan Beith** (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (LD): Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The papers referred to, which date from 1997, relate to devolution to Scotland and Wales, and also to the English regions. I have in my hand a certificate that the Secretary of State placed in the Journal Office today in which he takes the view that the public interest favours the continued non-disclosure of all the information concerned. Bearing that in mind, could we, as my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) requested, have some clarification as to the procedure for ensuring that any report that the Information Commissioner makes is not withheld by the Secretary of State but is made available to the House, because so far it does not appear to be accessible?

**Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord)**: I have no prior knowledge of the point that the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Sir Alan Beith) and the hon.

Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) have raised. Clearly, it is a very serious matter. It is not something that I can rule on now, but the House has certainly heard what they said, and it is clearly on the record. I am sure that those on the Treasury Bench, and Mr. Speaker too, will want to look at the matter very carefully and decide precisely what course of action to take.

**Miss Anne McIntosh** (Vale of York) (Con): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Have you heard whether there is to be a Statutory Instrument Committee meeting today to scrutinise the Flood Risk Regulations 2009, which are due to come into force today? Is it the Government's wish for us to scrutinise them in the normal way?

**Mr. Deputy Speaker**: I have to say the same thing to the hon. Lady. I have no knowledge that any statement of that kind will be made today, but again, the point that she has made is firmly on the record and I am sure that those responsible for these matters will take note of it.

**Miss McIntosh**: Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Can you give me guidance on what the legal position is if a statutory instrument is not properly laid before Parliament, has not been properly consulted on with outside bodies and has not been properly scrutinised by both Houses of Parliament? Is that legal? Can such an instrument come into effect?

**Mr. Deputy Speaker**: I think the hon. Lady is tempting me into all sorts of hypotheticals that I would be well advised to avoid. She has made the point, and as I said, I am sure that those who respond to these matters will look at it.

**Mr. Nigel Dodds** (Belfast, North) (DUP): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Concern has been expressed in various quarters of the House today and earlier about the treatment of private Members' Bills and the time available for them to be discussed and processed in this Session. Can you do anything to ensure that they are properly debated and that proper time will be made available to deal with them?

**Mr. Deputy Speaker**: I understand that the Leader of the House is looking very carefully at that situation to see precisely how it can be resolved. It is a very important matter, and it needs to be cleared up without delay.

## Estimates Day

[1ST ALLOTTED DAY]

### VOTE ON ACCOUNT, 2010-11

#### DEPARTMENT FOR BUSINESS, INNOVATION AND SKILLS

#### Students and Universities

[*Relevant Documents: The Eleventh Report from the Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee, HC 170, Session 2008-09, on Students and universities, and the Government's response, HC 991.*]

##### *Motion made, and Question proposed,*

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2011, for expenditure by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills—

(1) resources, not exceeding £9,653,466,000, be authorised, on account, for use as set out in HC 33, and

(2) a sum, not exceeding £11,071,732,000, be granted to Her Majesty out of the Consolidated Fund, on account, to meet the costs as so set out.—(*Mr. Heppell.*)

**Mr. Phil Willis** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD) *rose—*

**Mr. David Willetts** (Havant) (Con) *rose—*

**Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord):** I call Mr. Phil Willis.

12.51 pm

**Mr. Willis:** What an august start to a debate—I am very grateful to you for making the historic decision to call me, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

I welcome this estimates debate on the report on students and universities that the then Select Committee on Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills published on 2 August. Although I recognise that many Members may wish to broaden the issue, I wish to keep my remarks to the report.

Far too often, the work of our universities is discussed in isolation from the very people who are the principal recipients, the students themselves. We often talk about research, institutions and organisations without mentioning the students, yet the quality of the experience that they get often not only determines their life chances but is critical to our nation's future. At this time, it behoves all political parties to take the issue of quality and standards in our universities to heart.

The taxpayer contributes something in the region of £15 billion to our universities, and there are currently about 2.3 million students of different sorts in them. They make a significant contribution too, through the money that they pay universities. The question that my Committee asked was whether the taxpayer and the students got good value for money and whether it was a quality product. We strongly welcomed the initiative by the right hon. Member for Southampton, Itchen (Mr. Denham), when he was Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills, of posing the question, "What do we want the higher education system to look like in 15 years' time?" That was exactly the right question, and I compliment him for beginning that debate.

I wish to put on record that over the past 10 years, the higher education system has received a significant investment of resources, both in revenue and particularly capital. On the matter that the Select Committee on Science and Technology, as it now is, is particularly interested in, there has been huge investment in laboratory infrastructure and so on. I have started on a positive note, and I hope that the Minister has noted it.

We considered whether the student experience is truly world-class, as it is often portrayed. Although fees and funding frequently came into our deliberations, they were not part of our brief, so I shall not comment on variable fees. The Committee looks forward to the report of the review by Lord Browne of Madingley, which should inform the debate after the general election.

I pay tribute to the four members of the Select Committee who are present for the debate. I have to say that our inquiry and our final report have not been without controversy, and it is fair to say that our mailbag was not only large but contained extremely diverse responses to our recommendations. That is exactly what a Select Committee report should do—it should be able to create debate and, to some extent, controversy. I thank all those who contributed to the report, including vice-chancellors, academics and representatives of professional bodies. In particular, I wish to single out students. We met a great number who were an absolute pleasure to deal with, and I wish to put on record our appreciation to the National Union of Students, which constantly provided the Committee with high-quality evidence and was prepared to take on board a number of the criticisms that we made.

The Committee actively sought out innovative ways to engage with students. We visited universities, and at Oxford we even had the equivalent of a speed-dating session, at which we spoke to a number of students in different formats. We also held a major consultation for three months as part and parcel of our work. We were rigorous in taking evidence, but it was controversial. I therefore wish initially to remove some misunderstandings.

We had no intention of undermining what I and my Committee believe to be a world-class higher education system. Our criticisms are to try to improve it rather than undermine it. Given the rapid changes in the sector, which are likely to accelerate in future months and years, we wanted to add to the debate about the future of the sector. We were therefore somewhat surprised by the reaction of the Government and the higher education sector to our report. When it was published last August Lord Mandelson, the Business Secretary, was quoted in the press as saying that he did not "recognise the committee's description" of universities. The Minister for Higher Education and Intellectual Property, who is in his place, was equally scathing about the fact that we had produced a report during the summer recess, which I found quite strange.

The Government echoed that line in their response to the report, stating at paragraph 1:

"We believe that the picture of our higher education system which emerged in the report was far less positive than is in fact the case."

Universities UK was equally hostile to the report. Indeed, many parts of the higher education establishment appeared largely defensive and reluctant to engage in many of the issues. They gave the impression that Parliament somehow had no right to interfere in the product being delivered,

and that we should just let them get on with it. Given the fact that we have put in £15 billion of taxpayers' money, that attitude is frankly unacceptable.

Over the past few months the Government and the higher education sector, having dismissed many of our concerns, have quietly been getting on with implementing most of the key recommendations in the report. Perhaps that is the way things are and how the system works. I hope that the Minister will explain why there has been a change of heart—perhaps the Government were planning it in the first place. [*Interruption.*] I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol, West (Stephen Williams) does not have swine flu just before Christmas.

I wish to deal with four matters, the first of which is the information available to prospective students, which is absolutely essential if they are to make informed choices about institutions and courses of study. We found that although universities' prospectuses competed on their public relations appeal, they did not present information in a consistent format to allow easy comparison. We concluded that the sector should develop a code of practice on information for prospective students, which should cover the time a typical undergraduate student should expect to spend attending lectures and tutorials, in personal study and, for science courses, in laboratories during a week, and a clear indication of who would be teaching them.

The need for that information was brought home to us by a mature student doing a nursing degree, who pointed out:

"Getting a clear idea of the hours involved and when lectures would be was incredibly important to me because of child care."

The sector has seen a huge growth in the number of mature students—post 21-year-olds—and part-time students, and those who study specific modules at a variety of different sites, and they need to be able to plan with certainty.

We did not recommend the standardisation of either courses or curricula. To do so would be to undermine university autonomy and academic freedom, and the core strength of our university system. To be fair, the Government responded fairly positively and agreed that it would be helpful for prospective students to have access to information concerning work loads. They have asked the Higher Education Funding Council England to examine the issues, in consultation with the sector.

By contrast, Universities UK appeared to see little need for change, stating:

"Universities have already put significant resource into publishing information for prospective students".

That is true, but they said that the problem was students' failure to navigate the information that was already there. We were therefore pleasantly surprised to see in HEFCE's statutory responsibility for quality assurance report, which was published in October this year, that its teaching, quality and student experience sub-committee considered that:

"Institutions also clearly need to provide information in an appropriate common format. This should cover the nature and amount of staff contact that students may expect, the nature of the learning effort expected, the time this will take, and the academic support likely to be available."

That is exactly what we had recommended in the report that was dismissed, so hallelujah! The Government, in their plan for the future of higher education, "Higher

Ambitions", which was published in November, on which I compliment the Minister, state:

"It is...important to ensure that potential students have the best possible information on the content of courses".

We warmly welcome that.

The second area our report covers is the treatment of part-time and mature students. The failure of the current system to treat part-time students on the same basis as full-time students is, in effect, a form of discrimination. That is not only wrong, but it hinders the achievement of the Government's objective of 40 per cent. of all adults in England gaining a higher education qualification by 2020.

Although we did not take extensive evidence from part-time students, there was a strong feeling that although some universities actively welcome them and make appropriate curriculum provisions, many do not. In the latter, students have to take what are effectively full-time courses in part, rather than appropriately designed modules.

**Mr. David Chaytor** (Bury, North) (Lab): Is not the real issue that as each year goes by, the distinction between full-time and part-time courses in terms of hours taught becomes increasingly irrelevant? In many universities and for many courses, it would be very difficult to distinguish clearly between a student attending a part-time course and a student attending full time? Many students on full-time courses will attend for fewer hours than students notionally on part-time courses.

**Mr. Willis:** I totally agree with the hon. Gentleman. That is why it is absolutely imperative for the review that is taking place to look at how we deliver higher education in totality and does not simply say, "Some students work part time and some work full time." We certainly need to consider that. I hope the Minister will tell us in his winding-up speech that that, and not simply funding, will be addressed in the review.

We were disappointed that Universities UK did not address the matter in its response. To go back to what the hon. Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor) said, one area we looked at in the inquiry was the delivery of modularised curricula, which means people can dip in and out over a longer period, accumulate credits and transfer them between universities. There were some very hostile reactions, particular from some in the Russell group of universities, which frankly did not participate in that more universal response.

We were pleased, however, that in "Higher Ambitions", the Government stated:

"In order to attract a greater diversity of students, more part time study, more vocationally-based foundation degrees, more work-based study...and more study whilst living at home must be made available."

I think we are making progress—I put that on the record in a spirit of co-operation.

The quality of teaching should be a core aspect of the undergraduate experience. It did not surprise us that the views of the students to whom we spoke ran the full gamut between complimentary and downright critical, but we were stunned by one constant criticism that came up time after time. One student said that

"university lecturers seriously need to take lessons from school teachers on how to teach. They are clever"—

that is a compliment—

"but they are not skilled at conveying the message."

[Mr. Willis]

That is quite a powerful thing to say. It would clearly be inappropriate to have an Ofsted-type approach to teaching quality in universities—I fully accept that and we do not recommend such an approach—but it is important that the Government and the higher education sector draw up and implement arrangements applicable across the sector that would allow students to convey concerns about poor teaching, and ensure that universities take quick remedial action. We should empower students in that way. The Government should require universities, as a condition of support from the taxpayer, to have in place programmes to improve teaching quality and the effectiveness of all academic staff—I do not think that that would interfere with their autonomy—and there should be a review of the common practice in universities of using graduate students to teach, albeit in view of the main academic staff. That concern, which was raised by many students, clearly needs to be addressed.

The Government's initial response was lukewarm, but it is fair to say that successive Higher Education Ministers have pressed universities on that issue and made money available to improve teaching. Although the Government said that they believe

"it is right that higher education institutions are responsible for ensuring their staff hold appropriate qualifications"—

the Minister has asked HEFCE to explore with the sector whether human institutions' human resources strategies provide adequate information about their approach to staff professional development. We feel that the Minister needs to take the issue of improving teaching quality seriously.

**Mr. Andrew Smith** (Oxford, East) (Lab): I value the work that the hon. Gentleman and his Committee did on the report. On his point about the involvement of graduate students in teaching or in support of the teaching effort, and linking it to what he is saying about professional development, is there a case for recognising the role that graduate and research students can play, and for actually structuring appropriate training and support, so that the quality of their teaching helps to raise the general standards?

**Mr. Willis:** The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. The Committee certainly did not say that we should not have graduate students teaching; we said that they should be properly trained. Quite often, their experience is nearer to that of the students', and they can therefore have a much close interrelation. However, the idea that a person can suddenly teach at graduate level just because they have completed their degree is stretching things.

**Dr. Evan Harris** (Oxford, West and Abingdon) (LD): On my hon. Friend's response to the right hon. Member for Oxford, East (Mr. Smith), we also need to recognise that part of the problem is that many graduate students are told to teach, and they are expected to do so, perhaps while their supervisor is on sabbatical. They are not properly remunerated for it, which is bad for the person taught as well as for the graduate student.

**Mr. Willis:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that. The reality is that we need to get a grip of the issue. We must not have teaching on the cheap. We would not get

high-quality research on the cheap and we expect people to deliver those programmes, and that should apply to teaching.

It was disappointing that Universities UK accepted none of the criticisms on teaching in universities. It said in its response:

"In our experience, criticism of the quality of teaching and standards tends to be isolated and anecdotal, and not borne out by larger scale surveys such as the National Student Survey or the CBI survey of employers...nor the national data on complaints."

None of those surveys asked those specific questions, so they did not get the answer. However, I am grateful to the Minister for recognising the quality of teaching is important and that we need to do something about it.

The final area I wish to examine is standards. That issue has generated much heat in the media, though not as much light as I would have liked. In my view, a key role of a Select Committee carrying out an inquiry is to test the orthodoxies—a thankless task, but essential. The orthodoxies on standards in higher education as we perceived them are, first, that the UK's international reputation is of strategic importance, and I think that we would agree with that. Secondly, universities themselves have the responsibility for maintaining the standards of their awards—again, we agree. Thirdly, maintenance of standards is integral to universities' autonomy and that autonomy is the keystone of the sector. Fourthly, all universities have systems in place to ensure that courses are regularly reviewed and, fifthly, the Quality Assurance Agency conducts regular visits to universities to scrutinise how they maintain standards. Who could disagree? The system should therefore be perfect. However, what we found when we challenged those orthodoxies was a somewhat uncomfortable truth.

We found that the system in England for safeguarding consistent national degree standards in higher education institutions is out of date, inadequate and in urgent need of replacement. With even the head of QAA describing the degree classification as "rotten" and "not fit for purpose", the issue needs to be taken seriously. The current arrangements with each university responsible for its own standards are perhaps no longer meeting the needs of a mass system of higher education in the 21st century with 133 higher education institutions and more than 2 million students.

One statistic sticks out like a sore thumb. The proportion of first class and upper second class honours degrees has steadily increased over the past 15 years, with the proportion of students achieving first class honours rising from 7.7 per cent. in 1996-97 to 13.3 per cent. in 2007-08. There may be good reasons for that, such as better teaching, harder-working students or a metamorphosis in students' ability. However, there may be perverse reasons, such as universities inflating marks to keep their positions in the league tables. I hope that it is the former, not the latter. The short answer is that we do not know. That is the uncomfortable truth. Nor is there any appetite whatsoever to investigate the reasons for that significant degree inflation objectively.

When we asked Universities UK about the increase in the number of first class honours, the answers we got would shame a first year student in statistics:

"Universities UK acknowledged that there had been 'a lot of talk and publicity on this in the last six months or so, about degree classification', but told us that 'the patterns of degree classification have not changed all that much over the last ten years—only a six per cent rise in the percentage of Firsts and 2.1s'".

Ministers appeared to take at face value explanations about grade inflation without detailed analysis. In fact the figures showed a steady increase in the proportion of first degree students achieving first class honours—an increase over the period of 72 per cent. That needs explaining, but rather than engage with the issue, it seems that everyone prefers to look the other way and hope for the best. Why? The defence is always university autonomy. I am talking here about institutional autonomy, not academic freedom.

The Committee rightly dared to question the institutional autonomy of universities to set and maintain their own standards, not because we wanted to lead an onslaught on the autonomy of higher education, but because we found evidence that autonomy was, if anything, obscuring, if not undermining, quality and standards. As a Committee, we would defend vigorously the right of universities to maintain autonomy from the state and be the custodians of academic freedom. That is the unique strength of our university system and why it is admired around the world. But in return, universities must be able to provide clear, peer-reviewed evidence that that they are the true custodians of standards too. They cannot have it just one way.

How we compare academic standards across different institutions is not easy, but to simply ignore the challenge is unacceptable. The evidence we received on assessment methodologies gave us serious grounds for concern. One witness told us that there is

“considerable variation across the higher education sector in assessment practices. Whilst this can be seen as a consequence of institutional autonomy, the rationales for the various institutional choices that have been made are unclear”.

We established that quite small variations in the way in which degree classifications are determined can have more effect on the classification of some students than was generally realised. One academic told us that

“my university runs what has been described as a very perverse model for classifying degree schemes. What happens is that low marks between 0 and 20 are rounded up to 20 and high marks from 80 to 100 are rounded downwards, and then they are averaged together, so you have this non-linear average before making a classification.”

If that is the basis on which we award degrees, something is wrong. There needs to be transparency and if the price of higher education organisational autonomy is a lack of transparency and inconsistent standards, we have to ask whether it is worth it?

Two pieces of evidence that we took from students and during the inquiry gave us real concern. First, different levels of effort were required in different universities to obtain degrees in similar subjects, which might suggest that different standards may be applied. Secondly, we came across some pointers that students in England spend significantly less time studying, including lectures, contact time with academic staff and private study, than their counterparts overseas. Our visit to the US confirmed that. We made no conclusion about these variations other than to ask that more research be done to examine whether these factors affect quality. That is not an unreasonable thing to ask. Sadly the Government said that they were

“not convinced of the usefulness of further...research”.

The only answer we were given by vice-chancellors, whose overseas market might be affected by declining quality, was that as international students continue

to apply to our universities standards must be satisfactory. As we say in the report, we consider that it is

“absurd and disreputable to justify academic standards with a market mechanism”.

Of course, the defence of standards by both the Government and sector was the existence of the Quality Assurance Agency. But we found that the QAA focuses almost exclusively on processes, not standards. That is why we called for the QAA to be transformed into an independent quality and standards agency with a remit to safeguard, monitor and report on standards. We did not seek some standardised format that could mechanistically be monitored by an Ofsted-type organisation. Instead, a quality and standards agency would take up the challenge of maintaining standards across the sector rather than simply within individual institutions.

In reply the Government said:

“The Quality Assurance Agency...does a good job but needs to take on a more public-facing role and one which allows any concerns about quality or standards to be investigated quickly, transparently and robustly.”

That misses the point. It is not better public relations that are required for the QAA, but a better examination of standards.

In a discussion only two weeks ago, I was intrigued to hear the new chairman of the QAA, Anthony McClaran, outline a proposed consultation on key principles and processes for a revised quality assurance system. He said that the purpose would be to provide authoritative, publicly accessible information on academic quality and standards in higher education; to command public, employer and other stakeholder confidence; to meet the needs of funders and of autonomous institutions; to meet the needs of students; and to reply on independent judgment. Hallelujah! That is exactly what we have called for. Quite frankly, I am not bothered whether it is called the quality and standards agency or the QAA, providing those issues are addressed.

That was a useful exercise for the Committee to undertake and it pointed out several issues that need further discussion. The Committee recognised the strength of our higher education system and that to meet the needs of a 21st century, post-recession economy, the system has to work harder, better and to a higher standard than ever before. We have to compete with a US system and an Administration that has just put nearly an extra \$1 trillion into higher education, and with China and India, which are putting untold wealth into producing not just widgets, but the highest intellectual quality. That is why we did the report and why we recommended it to the Minister. In that spirit, I hope that he will respond in an appropriately supportive way.

1.20 pm

**Mr. Eric Martlew** (Carlisle) (Lab): I thank the Chairman of the Science and Technology Committee not only for the report before us today, but for the report by the Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee, which he also chaired. There is no doubt that his Committee has a good reputation for holding Government to account. That is what Select Committees are about. He said that some Members might wish to go broader than his report, which I have read, and I intend to do so.

[*Mr. Eric Martlew*]

The thing about students and universities is that people need a university before they can discuss them. It is not a packed Chamber today, is it? However, the two hon. Members for Oxford constituencies—the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford, East (Mr. Smith)—are present. That says something about the fact that Oxford university is probably the most famous university in the world and has done tremendous things not only for Britain, but the world.

**Mr. Andrew Smith:** I am grateful—as too, I am sure, will be the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris)—for my hon. Friend’s recognition of Oxford. However, my hon. Friend must remember, when talking about universities and Oxford, to mention both of them—Oxford university, and Oxford Brookes university and its excellent work.

**Mr. Martlew:** But I shall try not to mention Oxford United.

I was elected MP for Carlisle in 1987. As a Cumbrian MP, I was faced with a particular challenge. More than 300 years ago, the area’s application for a university was turned down because of our warlike neighbours, the Scots; it was thought inappropriate to have a university so close to the Scottish border, so it was put in Durham. People in Cumbria long took it for granted that they would not get a university, as a result of which so few of our young people actually went to university, and many of those who did, such as Lord Bragg of Wigton, Hunter Davies, Margaret Foster and Sir Brian Fender, the great educationist, did not return for many years. That meant the area was being drained of its talent, which we needed to bring prosperity.

Soon after I was selected as a candidate, I went to a lecture by the vice-chancellor of Preston polytechnic, as it was then—it is now the university of Central Lancashire. He said that north Cumbria and south-west Scotland were the most deprived areas in western Europe in terms of higher education provision. When I was elected, therefore, one of the first things that I knew that we needed to do was to provide local people with the opportunity to study for a degree without having to leave home and to encourage others to study there.

I am grateful to a good friend of mine, the noble Lord Glenamara, who was then chancellor of the university of Northumbria. Ted Short, as he was called when a Member of this House, was the Education Secretary who took the decision to locate the university in the north of England in Lancaster, not in Carlisle. As a Cumbrian, he always regretted having to do that, but I think that it was the fault of the local authority.

I worked well with Lord Glenamara, and in 1992, we opened—he kindly asked me to open it with him—the Carlisle campus of the university of Northumbria in the historic quarter next to the cathedral. That was the first time people from my area and north Cumbria could get a degree in their own constituency. And it made a difference. I remember meeting a young girl who must have been in her mid-20s with a child of about eight—obviously, she had a baby very young—who was attending the university. She had a child to look after and was thrilled that she could do a degree and become a teacher. There was great satisfaction in that example.

When Labour came to power, my area got a brand-new hospital—the first private finance initiative hospital to be built in this country. However, the old district general hospital, which was a listed building, had no use. That could have been a disaster, because listed buildings with no use are, in many ways, a menace, as I know well. However, St. Martin’s college—one of the finest teaching-training colleges in Britain—which was looking to expand out of Lancaster, took over the old hospital. It is now a teacher-training section of the university of Cumbria.

We had the critical mass of facilities needed to build the university of Cumbria. My noble Friend Lord Dale Campbell-Savours, who at the time was the Member of Parliament for Workington, proposed a university of the Lakes, which in some ways was meant as a virtual university, but at the end of the day it was not successful, and a traditional university was chosen instead. However, for many years, we had had a very good art college, which became the institute of art. We pulled those things together and two years ago we were able to say, “We have a university of Cumbria”. That was a magnificent day for many of us—as I said, the area had waited 300 years—and, as hon. Members can I imagine, we were rather pleased.

There is no doubt that the university has teething troubles. The buildings are spread throughout the county: it has two campuses in Carlisle; there is one in west Cumbria; another, called Newton Rigg—it used to be the old agricultural college—is out in Penrith; and there is a 115-year-old teacher-training college, Charlotte Mason college, in the Lake District at Ambleside. Those facilities were brought together, along with part of St. Martin’s college in Lancaster, to create the university of Cumbria. We are well aware that we need the university if we are to attract talent and business, and to keep that talent. That has gone very well, and I am thankful to the Labour Government for that provision.

There is, however, a difficulty about the location of the headquarters, which I think, being MP for Carlisle, and because it is by far the largest city in the area, should obviously be in the city of Carlisle. That was agreed, as too—finally—was the Caldew viaduct site, which I suggested many years ago. Everything was going well until the current economic problems. We now have an £8.4 million annual deficit and the capital moneys for the headquarters might no longer be available or its provision might be stalled. I find that puzzling, because as far as I am aware there has been no cut in the higher education budget, so it is not a question of the effect of the recession. Rather, there are obviously other issues at play, and over the past month or two the local media have highlighted the problems.

I have talked about the campuses at Charlotte Mason in Ambleside and at Newton Rigg in Penrith. One of my concerns is about the talk of mothballing those campuses and moving a lot of the staff and the teachers to Lancaster—to return to the 1960s, that was when Cumbria lost out to Lancaster, which is now probably one of the top 12 universities in the country. However, the reality is that we cannot have a university of Cumbria, the majority of whose students are in Lancaster. That will undermine the whole process.

I asked the new vice-chancellor—I sympathise with him, because he has not been in post very long—to come down on Monday afternoon to discuss the situation with Cumbrian parliamentarians from both Houses. I

would like to ask the Minister, who is now in his place, whether he will have time after that meeting, probably early in the new year, to meet a delegation including myself and others to discuss the matter further. Although we have made great progress, we have a problem, and we have to come through it.

I recognise that the university of Cumbria has to build its own reputation. I suspect that it might be many years before it has the reputation that Oxford has, but that is what we must try to achieve. We must try to improve the university. However, we will overcome the problem. The university has stalled, but it will continue; indeed, other great strides have been made during this time. Before 1997, we did not have any medical training whatever in Cumbria. We are now part of a medical school and are training medical students. We also have a campus of the new dental school based in Liverpool, so we have made amazing strides and we are looking forward to the future.

What I would say to those hon. Members who take universities for granted is that there are parts of this country that have been deprived for centuries. We are getting over that, but we should not lose the impetus. We should continue to strive to make higher education available to as many people as possible.

1.33 pm

**Mr. Tim Boswell** (Daventry) (Con): I congratulate the Chairman, the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis), on introducing this debate and on his leadership of our Select Committees, which has been much appreciated. May I also commend the hon. Member for Carlisle (Mr. Martlew), who came into the House on the same day that I did in 1987? He has stuck up for his constituents and made an important point, to which I will obliquely return later.

It occurred to me in preparing for this debate that it is almost exactly 17 years to the day since I became the Further and Higher Education Minister, in the then Conservative Government. And, for the record, it is now nearly 15 years since I stopped being that Minister. I realise that that is a mere blink of an eye in the history of institutions as venerable as Oxford, Cambridge and St. Andrews. Nevertheless, I am staggered by how many of the issues remain current. It is rather like the gentleman from Salamanca university in the late middle ages who was locked up by the Inquisition for five years and resumed his next lecture with the deathless words: "As I was saying yesterday".

When I was doing the job as the Higher Education Minister, I was very much involved in higher education quality issues and issues of access to higher education. It would not be generally known, because it was private correspondence, but my first request through my private office on becoming Minister was for further information on the socio-economic background of participants in higher education at that time. One therefore should not feel that we are talking about a matter of interest to just one or two parties. It is remarkable to me, looking over that period, how little has changed with the institutions that we are dealing with—and in certain cases, the personalities we are dealing with. At the same time, however, the sector has undergone major expansion since the 1990s, which has been superimposed on the rapid expansion that began in the 1960s after the Robbins

report and was accelerated in the 1980s, so that, in rough terms, we now have between 10 and 20 times as many students as in my days as an undergraduate.

I suppose that we should declare any current interests. First, I was a member of the previous Select Committee on Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills. I signed the report and in no way do I resile from our conclusions. For the reason that the Chairman of that Committee has outlined, we needed to be pretty trenchant in what we said. As for my personal interest, I suppose that I should declare that I am a graduate of Oxford university, as we are well represented here. At the same time, my wife comes from an educational background in the Principality, as some hon. Members might be aware. I am also a governor of the University of Wales Institute in Cardiff. I say that not as some statement of virtue—although it is a hugely engaging, interesting and constructive job—but, I hope, as a validation of a certain range of interest in higher education across the piece.

Anyway, it is far too late in my political career for any covert elitism or for making elaborate gestures against alleged dumbing down, or even any in favour of it. Nor am I particularly interested in megaphone diplomacy with Universities UK about alleged strengths and weaknesses. What seems practical is that we should recognise the strengths and find practical and useful ways of mitigating the weaknesses, always operating within the context of academic freedom and institutional autonomy. Even if we have been quite harsh and blunt as a Select Committee in some parts of our report and its press release, it is entirely proper that we have challenged some of the conventional wisdom and any element of defensive complacency. To quote from almost my first speech as an ingénu Minister, from about the first time that I was let out and considered safe enough to speak in public, "The days of the unaccountable professional are over". That was true in 1993, and it is still true.

In relation to my work as a governor of the institution that I have mentioned, perhaps I might also advert the fact that I am particularly proud that one of the bits of our mission statement is that governors should act as the safeguards and guardians of the philosophy of dissent. It is terribly important, and entirely consistent with the principles and values of higher education, that we should have a debate about such matters. We should bring them out and not seek to push them under the carpet.

I would like to begin my remarks by putting three points firmly on the record, in case they are misunderstood. The first point—I say this in no sense to soften up the opposition to our report or another view to it, wherever that might come from—is that the British university system, although not faultless, is an overall success story on almost all counts, including student numbers, which have already been referred to, and completions of degrees. We have a low drop-out rate and high participation and success. We have major international participation, which has also been referred to, and, at the same time, we sustain research excellence well above our weight. Some of the great continental universities—the Parises, the Bolognas and the Bonns of this world—have tended to fall behind simply because they have fallen victim to the coils of bureaucracy and inadequate resourcing.

Last time I said something good about British higher education, it coincided with a lecture tour that I was giving in the states of the former East Germany. I delivered

[Mr. Tim Boswell]

a speech in Halle, which was duly picked up by *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, which gave me the headline—shock, horror!—“Minister goes the East Germany to say nice things about British higher education”. However, it was and remains my view that those comments are appropriate.

My second general point is that Kingsley Amis got it wrong when he said “More will mean worse.” In my earlier days, I would perhaps have said that “More will mean different”, and I would now modify that message only slightly to read “More means more diverse.” To take my own institution, the University of Wales Institute, Cardiff, as an example, we have just been under the hammer of the Quality Assurance Agency because of our application to be awarded research degree-awarding powers. We were awarded those powers on 7 September, and we are now proceeding with an application for university status and title. It was an intense process, involving the engagement of specialists, the entire academic body and the governance of the institution; it was no soft touch.

However, obtaining those research powers does not preclude our institution from offering initial teacher training or being actively involved with further education colleges. It is not an either/or situation. Sometimes, when we talk about diversity in the system, we do not always recognise that it can exist not only across different institutions but within an institution, where different departments are doing particular things according to their own strengths.

In any case, I do not think that it would be acceptable to revert to some kind of rosy, cosy myth of an Edwardian university, with donnish obscurity plus a few self-indulgent, privileged undergraduates. Even if we wanted to do that—I do not believe that anyone does—we could not, because there is now a huge stakeholding in higher education across society. The aspiration to get one’s children into higher education has now become a kind of middle class entitlement. The issue is whether those from other classes and backgrounds can match that. In addition, a dynamic economy requires a significantly graduate population.

The third issue that I want to mention is that of institutional autonomy. In evidence, Dr. John Hood, in particular, averted to the changing character of autonomy. As the Chairman has already said, our Select Committee attached importance to those observations. I am slightly sorry that the Government have rejected the idea of a concordat on this subject. Even if the Minister is not in favour of that, he needs to impose a self-denying ordinance above and beyond any legal constraints that he might have.

**Dr. Evan Harris:** I want to endorse what the hon. Gentleman says about the importance of that recommendation to review the meaning of autonomy. In some areas, there is not enough autonomy; academic freedom is under threat and needs to be safeguarded. In others, however, the taxpayer is entitled to expect universities not to hide behind their autonomy if they are unwilling to engage in evidence-based processes that would widen participation or improve standards.

**Mr. Boswell:** I entirely endorse the spirit of that intervention. It is better that we should look at this subject properly, and not in an hysterical way. To make

a general point about educational debate, it is, paradoxically, often expressed in terms of an either/or situation: either one is completely in favour of autonomy or one is against it. Such false polarities characterise so many of these debates, and we should look at the matter objectively.

In any case, the Minister needs to hold himself back, and he and his colleagues in the devolved Administrations need to look at the activities of their funding bodies. There is evidence that they collectively hanker after centralised planning functions, which, in my view, they are ill equipped to discharge, and possibly legally constrained from so doing.

**Mr. John Hayes** (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): As ever, my hon. Friend makes a thoughtful contribution to our considerations. Does he agree that the best expression of autonomy is when autonomous bodies collaborate, and that the funding mechanisms need to pump-prime, or at least catalyse, that kind of collaboration, which is a celebration of autonomy, not its negation?

**Mr. Boswell:** That, too, was a hugely helpful intervention. We are beginning to build up a picture. We really must stop telling people in higher education what they have to do, and leave them to make the right decisions. That is not meant as a threatening remark. If we are to implement reforms, they need to achieve buy-in from academics and institutions, whose confidence in the system we must retain, and whose self-confidence we must not subvert in the process. We do not want an infantilised HE system that is simply told what to do.

Having cleared those preliminaries, I want to speak to three areas of policy. At first sight, they might seem disparate, but I believe that, when viewed from a wider perspective, they hang together. The first is the quality assurance system, to which the Chairman has already referred at length. As I have mentioned, I played a part in this. In some respects, it has come under increasing strain: first, conceptually, because it is still not clear from the evidence—it was not clear to me when I was a Minister—how we compare a first in one discipline with a first in another, or firsts obtained from different institutions. These are difficult “apples and pears” questions to respond to.

Operationally, there is also a lack of clarity. We need to be aware that there is a temptation, or a tendency, towards upwards academic drift, about which we have already heard. At one end, that might involve the Russell group, with its higher proportion of firsts; the other end might involve some of the hairier anecdotes that we pick up and occasionally hear in evidence about courses that have been “stuffed”.

I know from our own work that there are some interesting dilemmas between the extent to which one should try to get people in for access reasons—through clearing, for example, and by other means—as against the maintenance of standards. It is an interesting question: do we want the proportion from clearing to rise, to remain at the same level, or to drop? The answer is not necessarily the same for all institutions.

We need to achieve a system that delivers more perceived autonomy and that also has more teeth to deal with cases of alleged failure. We have also heard examples of that. We have allies in this matter, and, in some respects, things are easier than they used to be. We now have the



national students survey, which I welcome. We also have local student feedback. We must bear in mind that students are now stakeholders, because they are paying fees. I know that some universities are concerned about people going to a TripAdvisor-type system and rating their professor, as happens in some American institutions. I do not think that we could stop that. My own family would certainly use TripAdvisor to check out a hotel, and I do not think it unreasonable for someone to check out their professor as well, as long as they did not take everything that they read on such feedback sites literally.

As Universities UK mentioned in its response, money spent on quality assurance has opportunity costs. The Government's proposed cuts in the higher education budget are likely to drive a wish to achieve value for money, but we need to ask how much money we should spend in order to save money. I would be inclined to go against the message from the Select Committee and give the external examiner system one last chance. If we were to do that, we would need some kind of external, central involvement in spot-checking, outside the system, perhaps involving inserting an extra examiner from time to time.

I would also like to see some international participation. People will immediately comment that no one other than ourselves has an external examiner system. That might be true, but if such a system is a virtue for us, it could be educational for us to have someone coming over from Bonn university, or Rimini, or wherever. It could also be a useful way of cross-checking our own achievements. Are we as good as we think we are? That is the question that we have to keep asking. Our potential students will also ask it, whether they come from the United Kingdom or abroad. As the new chief executive of the Quality Assurance Agency, Anthony McClaran, has already reported, there are signs that the agency will place greater emphasis on institutional audits, as well as the alternative route of cause for concern inquiries. This is perhaps the more fruitful area for levering up standards.

I have mentioned the great efforts that my institution had to make to get itself accredited for research degree-awarding powers. The logic is that institutions should go through a re-accreditation process in a way that would be quite familiar to American universities, up to and including Harvard. I am not sure that we need to go that far, but I believe that there needs to be a slight element of precariousness in degree-awarding powers. They are bestowed, but they should also be able to be suspended or withdrawn with good cause.

It is perhaps ironic that I am leaning towards a two-tier structure with a re-introduction of some of the old distinctions between HEFCE as the funding council and the Higher Education Quality Council, which was run by the academic world, before the two in effect came together in the QAA. I acknowledge that the taxpayer has a perfectly proper interest in seeing that the £15 billion of public funds are well spent and that students are getting degrees with at least a minimum threshold standard, while the institutions operate to proper and internationally acceptable standards of academic commitment and governance. I want to emphasise the need for governance to be coincident with the academic effort. If governors are not talking to the academic board, they should be.

Beyond that threshold issue, or above it, the academic world itself both wants and claims to be able to manage a quality assurance system within its own institutions and by reference and audit across. This needs to be academically driven and focused on meeting quality standards. That needs largely to be influenced not so much by some comparison with a Platonic norm, as by compliance or otherwise with the academic goals and aspirations set by the institution itself including what it asks of and or promises to deliver to its student body. I am not so interested in a sort of Gertrude Stein-ish "A first is a first is a first" as a definition of common quality standards. I am interested in the double questions: in a degree from a certain university, first, is there something that has currency—the national interest test—and, secondly, does the course meet the needs and aspirations of students, which is the user test?

That brings me to qualifications. Part of the enhanced diversity to which I referred is the explosion of activity at all levels. In my days as an undergraduate, it would almost have been possible to claim no acquaintance with mature students at all and not very much with graduates. Now the whole system has opened up, with huge participation in higher degrees, mature students and part-time students, all on different courses and with their activities co-existent. These may range, for example, from diplomas and foundation degrees, which I now feel, having been an earlier sceptic, are one of the better innovations of the present Government, through, first, undergraduate degrees—the classic degree—to taught masters' degrees and doctorates. Remember also the huge range of opportunities for short courses and continuing professional development qualifications. My own institution is quadrupling its CPD effort over the next few years.

I am sure that we are right to call for a closer look at the integration or at least the concentration of policy between further and higher education and more generally within the framework of post-compulsory education and lifelong learning. We need to drop what I used to characterise as "Go at 18 for three years and you're out", and develop a much more flexible framework to meet the needs of students, including those returning to study after a break and, of course, those in remote parts of the country to whom the hon. Member for Carlisle (Mr. Martlew) referred; Cornwall is the same sort of issue. We need to meet the needs of employers, and they operate in localities as well.

Into this area falls the need for better transcripts of actual attainment rather than the current classification system that no longer seems fit for purpose; we have been told that as if we did not need to work it out for ourselves. We need a properly functioning credit system that carries credibility and is accepted, and a proper national record of achievement. I sometimes ask myself why we got that far by 1993 but have got no further forward since. As academics would certainly say, Rome was not built in a day, but all of this agenda has been, to my knowledge, at least 20 years in the gestation.

Finally, I want to refer to students themselves. They are now a major force in society, even in politics, and, very largely, a force for good, both now in their student days but also as developed and empowered citizens as graduates. Certainly those we met during our evidence gathering gave an excellent account of themselves and, in doing so, revealed the diversity of roots and backgrounds that now characterise the sector.

**Mr. Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): What does the hon. Gentleman say to the critics who would compare the activity and work of our students with other students in other countries and suggest that our students do not work hard enough?

**Mr. Boswell:** I would always take that with a measure of scepticism, although not always from the hon. Gentleman, but this kind of thing needs analysis. Even within our own student sector, the word on the street is that some courses, some universities and some types of approach are much more or less demanding than others. It is a bit odd that this has arisen through a quality framework that is supposed to be delivering not a uniform product but a product to uniform principles, if I may put it that way.

**Mr. Andrew Smith:** Would not it be appropriate at this juncture to place on the record our appreciation of those aspects of student activity that do not so often capture the headlines in our local press or come to us in our mailbags—the enormous contribution that students make to charitable work, community activity and to politics, as well as to sporting activities in the areas served by the universities? That work greatly benefits local civic society.

**Mr. Boswell:** I hugely agree. It is very important. To be frank, I doubt very much whether I would be a Member of Parliament now had I not participated in junior common room activity at university and done things that were, frankly, probably more educational than the courses that I may, or may not, have taken at that time. Let us celebrate that and not be mealy-mouthed about it. It is good news and, as I said, a force for good.

One only has to be a constituency MP to be sensitive to the pressures that are now coming on to students. The House knows that we did not engage on the fees issue ahead of Lord Browne's review; it would have been improper and unhelpful to do so. But, without being pointed to the Minister, it would be difficult to overlook the known problems with the Student Loans Company and the recent Office for Fair Access report on the widespread lack of awareness of bursaries even when they were on offer. Whatever eventual student support package is hammered out has to be fair, affordable and sustainable.

On the access issue, there are two levels. One is touched on in the report: the admission of students with regard to their own context and background. The second, which is much more difficult to identify, is what I might call the non-admission of students who have never been encouraged to apply in the first place and whose experience of the state education system seldom, if ever, gave them a chance to do so. There is a chilling effect, as well the pressures on students who do get in.

Across the student scene, the quality issues to which I have referred will be pointed and aggravated by the squeeze on public funding, about which we heard yesterday. Clearly a cut of public support for higher education on the scale envisaged—£600 million, I gather—even if it has been heavily discounted in advance and if prudent higher education institutions have factored it into their planning, is likely to change many aspects of the scene quite radically. I hope that, as the report suggests, we will encourage Lord Browne in what seems to be his widening remit to look at some of the wider issues, not just the tuition fees issue on its own.

We touched in our report on the issues of postgraduates, overseas students and, my own particular interest, part-time students, who already make up a major, or even in some cases a preponderant part of the student body in many institutions. Trying to meet their needs and the needs of our future society will need a radical and more flexible approach. I hope that in due course we can look afresh at the unique importance of the student support package. Frankly, the Education Act 1962, when I was an undergraduate, is still the driver of all this. The good old ship has gone along for 47 years, collecting barnacles, wrinkles and all the other things that good old ships have, but occasionally they have to be taken to the breakers' yard and we have to start again.

Our entire concept of funding, and of the regulation of student numbers, is driven by this good old model, yet the reality is that student life is now far broader and more diverse than ever it was then. To cater for the conventional cohort—for the students the media still write about—is often to neglect the legitimate interests of other students. The entire locus of business, further education, skills acquisition and the needs of the future economy are simply not factored in. I personally would favour initiating a process of shifting—over time, I stress—to a package of support for all post-compulsory education together. That would need to be largely student-driven, and it would include entitlements to public funding based on entry qualifications and neutral as to the mode and time of delivery, topped up with student savings, inputs from employers, and any top-up national or local public funding to meet specific needs.

There are, perhaps, welcome signs of the Government, in their present economic difficulties, moving towards this—I heard the Chief Secretary being interviewed on "Newsnight". Sadly, however, this is largely motivated by the need to make cuts, rather than by a desire to enhance the role of students and their universities, but this mode of thinking in responding to these much more diverse needs is nevertheless right. Also, although the Minister undoubtedly faces difficulties ahead, he must plan for happier times as well, and I detect a real readiness among higher education institutions to get on with that job.

In all of this, I am conscious of the need to work with the grain of academic opinion and student interests. No Minister in the United Kingdom should claim to deliver higher education, and no Minister should aspire to do so over the heads of those who actually do deliver higher education. Furthermore, no Minister should wish to ride roughshod over academic interests in the cause of the nostrum of the day.

There is a perfectly proper role for Parliament in acting on behalf of the taxpayers, and that is one of the jobs our Select Committee has decided to try to advance. We have a right and a duty to inquire about, and call for, appropriate changes and developments, but the House will not expect me, at this late stage of my parliamentary career, to shun the importance of the great institutions that we have at all levels, or to denigrate their palpable achievements to date.

2.2 pm

**Dr. Brian Iddon** (Bolton, South-East) (Lab): I was one of those non-grammar school boys who were fortunate enough to be admitted to the university of Hull in 1958.

In those days, there were only 23 universities. This report talks a lot about access, but access to universities is a lot easier today than it was in 1957 when I was due to matriculate. I must admit that I had never heard of the word “matriculate”; I thought it was a medical term, but I soon realised how hard matriculation really was, because in those days in order to get into university it was necessary to have an O-level in a foreign language. Greek and Latin were preferred, but French would also be accepted. However, my only language was “Lancky”, and getting into a white rose university when speaking with a strong Lancashire accent was even more difficult.

However, I made it to the university of Hull, and it was a life-changing moment, such as everyone has. There are only a few truly life-changing moments. Coming to this place was another one for me, but going to university was the most life-changing moment. I think that is true for almost every young person who is fortunate and privileged enough to go to a university.

Going to university is not just about gaining a qualification. I went to university to graduate as a chemist. I wanted to study chemistry ever since I got my first chemistry set at the age of 11. That is all I wanted to do, and the chemical industry was looking for thousands of graduates in chemistry, so my reason for going to university was plain and simple. However, I realised soon after entering university that it was about more than getting an education. I was from a small country village. I had never met a black or Asian person, or a Buddhist or a Muslim. I met them at university, however. I was fortunate enough to be admitted to Ferens hall on the Cottingham road site of the university of Hull, and I was thrown together not with my chemistry colleagues, but with lawyers, philosophers and mathematicians from all over the world—Mauritius and Canada, for example. I send a lot of Christmas cards now, which is very expensive, but I do not mind because I have kept in contact with all the fabulous people I met. I learned about their culture and their opinions.

I was also surrounded by Tory students. My family had always been strong socialists. I did not go to university to be a politician, but I soon became one, because I had to defend my opinions against other people strongly expressing theirs. That was the case all around the university.

The library was fabulous, with row upon row of books. I did not browse only the chemistry stacks; I looked at all the other books, too, although I could not read them all, as there was not enough time. We have to realise that, for every student who goes to university, the experience is much more than studying the subject. Of course I studied hard—I had to—but I learned so much. It was a true life-changing experience.

Halls of residence are important in this regard. So many of our students now live in terraced housing in the cities, sometimes four or five in a house, and they learn from each other, of course. However, I learned a lot more by being in a hall of residence, and I regret the fact that we are not building student accommodation on the same scale as in the past. It was not cheap, either, by the way. Of course, I was lucky enough to get a grant, as I came from a family with a modest income. That is why I was always cautious about grants and fees, and I still am cautious in the debate about top-up fees—a topic I may return to soon.

In those days, there was also a certain deference to members of staff. We could not challenge some of the professors, as they were elitist. That is something else that has changed—and for the good, in my opinion. Students are much more challenging today. They are much more willing to challenge their professors and lecturers about their opinions. When I was lecturing at university, I always said to my students, “Don’t believe every word I am saying or every word you read in the textbook. I am only giving you today’s opinion. Tomorrow’s opinion might be different.” I think all lecturers should get that message out clearly to all their students.

Another difference between now and then is that there were far fewer courses to choose from. The prospectuses were half as thick as they are today, and it was fairly easy to choose a subject to study. Today, however, prospectuses contain a mind-boggling variety of combinations of courses. As the Chairman of our Select Committee, the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis), has already said, some prospectuses are not very well laid out. I think that students are drawn to the more attractive prospectuses, however, and universities are now realising that one way to attract good students is to produce a colourful prospectus with lots of clearly laid out information.

There are far more students nowadays, too: 2.3 million of them, as has been said. Consequently, lecturers are having to teach much larger groups. I have lectured in a lecture theatre to groups of 100 people, mainly coming in from different departments for a lesson on an ancillary subject. I would not like to lecture to 100 or 200 students regularly, however, because the personal contact between lecturer and student is very important. It is particularly important in tutorials, but nowadays tutorial groups are very large, sometimes with 20 or 30 students. I used to have groups of five or six, and I got to know all my students quite well. I was therefore able to know their abilities and classify them almost before they got their degree classifications—without telling them, of course. The move to teaching larger groups of students at universities has taken away some of that important personal contact.

**Mr. Hayes:** Does this changed dynamic the hon. Gentleman describes—the altered relationship between teacher and taught—not emphasise the need for us to be clear about the quality of teaching and learning, as the Select Committee report argues?

**Dr. Iddon:** Yes, I absolutely agree. It is okay to lecture to large groups, but university teachers must be able to meet students in smaller groups as well. It is also extremely important to have tutorials run by a lecturer, rather than by a graduate student, which is increasingly the trend today.

Our report also talks about plagiarism, which has not been mentioned yet. We talk to students and lecturers alike about plagiarism, which is undoubtedly on the increase. It is a much bigger problem today than in my day, but it existed then. Let me tell hon. Members a little story. As a chemist, I used to give unknown chemicals to my students, and they had to go and analyse them chemically and with instrumentation. I would give them compound No. 24, for example, and they would come back with a perfectly written account, with the right answer at the bottom, about what chemical

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it was. I had a very bright student who always came back with the right result. His copy was absolutely perfect—I could not fault it—but I became very suspicious of him. I thought that he was picking up the practical books of students from former years, finding out exactly which chemical compound No. 24 was, and giving me the right analysis. He was plagiarising. So I decided to crush some Polo mints up and give them to him as compound No. 36. He came back with a perfect analysis for compound No. 36, only to be very disappointed when I said, “I don’t know how you’ve got that, because what I gave you was just Polo mints.”

We have to be careful about plagiarism, which is harder to pick up today. Some lecturers have told us that they can pick out, with complicated computer programmes, students who are plagiarising, but I think that students are smarter than computers.

**Mr. Sheerman:** Does my hon. Friend accept that the House deserves to know whether the student he mentioned got a first at the end of his degree? Secondly, he will remember that when he and I were university teachers, new ways of teaching and learning might have arrived, but we were not taught or given any instruction about how to teach.

**Dr. Iddon:** My hon. Friend’s latter point is absolutely true. In answer to his first point, I have conveniently forgotten.

Another sad thing about universities today is the fact that academic staff are not encouraged to take on extra-mural activities. The postgraduate side of work has killed that, and the research assessment exercise, which is now known as the REF—research excellence framework—exercise. In my time, academics were positively encouraged to get involved in the community and to be councillors. I was a councillor for 21 years. I still did the same amount of teaching as all my colleagues and I still ran a research group, but I felt comfortable enough to do another job, as well, which I hope was of benefit to my local community. Academics were also encouraged to be justices of the peace on the bench of the local magistrates court, and to be school governors. I picked up an interest in demonstrating my chemistry knowledge and did a famous “magic of chemistry” show once a month for 29 years. My hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman) has seen that show in Huddersfield city hall.

Today, however, because of the pressures on academic staff, they rarely get involved in the community. I was a safety officer for 13 years in my chemistry department, which was the largest in Britain. As such, I was often asked to investigate deaths, fatalities, explosions and fires to give a chemical analysis of what had happened. I investigated the burning down, in Manchester, of the biggest coffin factory in Britain, and I investigated a fatality in a small dye house in Brighouse, in Yorkshire. That wide-ranging experience meant that I was able, as a lecturer, to excite the students by giving anecdotes in between all the facts they needed to acquire from me. Universities have changed enormously, and academic staff and students have a lot more pressure on them today than I ever had.

In the past 10 years, under Labour Governments, we have had a 21 per cent. expansion in the number of students in universities, so access has become a lot easier for many people in that time. We have increased the amount of money spent on universities by 25 per cent.—in real terms, taking inflation into account—so I am very pleased with the way in which universities have developed in my time in Parliament.

I would like to take a pop at vice-chancellors, who have been very sensitive about the report—some more so than others. I should like to say to the people who have been caught by the report that if they have been a bit upset by it, we have done our job, because the only Select Committee reports we have ever done any good with are those that generated a lot of controversy. We once announced to the Royal Society that we were going to look at how it spent public money. My goodness, what an uproar there was! People asked how we dared to look at the Royal Society and the cream of scientists in Britain, but they were spending public money. In the end, the report was good, but it created a lot of debate and discussion about the Royal Society. I think that we helped to put it on the map. Some people had never heard of it. Similarly, this report has generated a lot of criticism and debate, but that is all to the good and is for the health of students and universities, both of which are the subject of the report.

Let me address some further comments to the vice-chancellors. The other day I saw a graph of salary rises for ordinary workers in all organisations and of salary rises for those who manage those organisations, which were well ahead. By the way, I declare an interest in this matter. I am a member of the University and College Union, so I speak from that point of view. If one looks at the way in which the salaries of vice-chancellors and academics have risen, there is no comparison between the two. I heard yesterday that public sector salaries were going to be pegged back to 1 per cent. next year, but I do not think that the salaries of vice-chancellors, and of chief executives of housing associations and other public bodies, will be pegged back to 1 per cent. I hope that they will, but I do not think so. Of course, I shall be reminded that they are independent organisations and that we cannot control the salaries of vice-chancellors—or can we? After all, we control the salaries of the staff who work for them.

Moving on, the relationship between teaching and research is discussed in the report. I have always believed, and still do, that it is important for teachers to be at the cutting edge of their subject. As far as I am concerned, with the odd exception, the only way of being at the cutting edge of one’s subject is to do research, or through scholarship, which I accept is equal to research in some subjects. I found, by doing research in my subject and learning about what was happening in every laboratory all around the world, I could put on special courses for my third-year students about big molecules and carbon-60—and that was before Harry Kroto got his Nobel prize. That sort of thing excited my students, because they could see the frontiers of their subject advancing and many, although not all, of them wanted to do research. It is important to be at that cutting edge as a lecturer, so that one can pass on one’s enthusiasm and passion for the subject that students want to know about.

I always found that the lecturers whom the students complained about—there were a lot of bad lecturers in the universities and perhaps there still are, although I hope there are fewer—were often those who came in from 9 till 5, did not work there during the summer vacation doing research and just did the basic job. I do not think that that can be done any more, but there must undoubtedly be some bad teachers out there. If research is done in a university, there is not only better teaching but a better library, because the researchers are aware of all the new publications and insist on the library putting them online or buying them in. For STEM—science, technology, engineering and maths—subjects in particular it is important to have a good library, but I think that is true of all subjects.

What can we do about bad teachers? I sat on the promotions committee of the university of Salford for more than 10 years, and I had to judge the best and worst teaching across departments, so I thought that I knew who the better and the bad teachers were. The problem was there, even though students and lecturers could complain and complain when they did not think someone was pulling their weight. Our report flagged this issue up. What can we do about poor teachers teaching undergraduates in universities? The universities have not really grasped the problem, but when teachers are flagged up early in their career as bad, it may not be entirely their fault. As my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield asked, what kind of training do they get? Some universities are still not unplugging these people and putting them into professional development programmes. Our report flags that up, and the universities really ought to take notice of it.

**Mr. Sheerman:** My hon. Friend is getting to the heart of the matter. Does he agree that the incentives to be a good university teacher are still very small? In contrast, publishing often very mundane articles in obscure journals has become such an industry, and is so well rewarded by universities, that teaching is still neglected.

**Dr. Iddon:** In my time, we did not differentiate between the three areas of teaching, administration and research. We had to do a bit of each, but that has declined in universities. People who can produce papers give their university a good reputation, and ironically the universities think—and I do too—that that attracts better students. Research has always been given a lot more importance than teaching, and that is even more true today. That is a shame, and I agree with my hon. Friend.

Our report also deals with contact times: when students are able to meet their teachers in the lecture theatre or the tutorial room. They vary enormously from one university to another, even within the same subject. At some universities and in some subjects, the contact times amount to about six or seven hours a week only. What are we teaching students? I used to have friends who believed that they could ignore lectures—they could not ignore practicals, which they had to attend—and still get a good degree. There are not many of those people around, of course, but I think that six or seven hours a week is a poor level of contact time in any subject. We must remember that we are looking for value for money. Some students pay full fees, so “value for money” is an important phrase—sadly, in my opinion.

In yesterday’s pre-Budget report, a £600 million cut in the budget for higher education and science was announced, which the supporting papers say is to apply

to “lower-value or lower-priority” programmes. I am not sure what that means, and if my hon. Friend the Minister can help us this afternoon, I am sure that many people in the academic system would be pleased.

Our report also talks about portable credits, another matter that has to do with access. The university of Bolton, which I represent, has one of the best access programmes of any university in Britain. The trouble at the other end, by the way, is that it has one of the worst drop-out rates. It gets praised for its access, but criticised for its drop-out levels. We really have to address that problem, and our report suggests a way out—the introduction of portable credits.

I have talked to many students who have studied both part time and full time at my local university. Some of them have to drop out for all kinds of reasons. For example, a student may have to drop out to take over a business when there is a death in the family. Again, women may have to leave to have children, or wives or husbands may have to follow their partners to another town when that partner gets a new job. Consequently, the students have to drop out of their local university course.

For a lot of people, particularly in communities such as mine, it is very difficult to stay at university and get a full-time, three-year degree. It is almost impossible for many. Part-time study is a boon for them, but even that can be difficult: people might have to drop out of even part-time study for a thousand and one reasons.

The report encourages universities to give credits for every part of the courses that students do, so that people can take the credits from one university to another, or even come back into the same university a few years later. We have to look at that if we are really serious about ensuring access to universities and degrees.

I have to congratulate the Government, as the infrastructure in universities today has improved tremendously. I am on the external advisory board of Manchester university’s school of chemistry, and I visit quite regularly. The transformation of that university in the last decade has been so spectacular that I have not been able to believe what I have seen on my visits. I congratulate the Government on putting a lot of money into the infrastructure. I have even opened new laboratories that are state of the art.

Incidentally, one of the criticisms that industry often makes of students of STEM subjects concerns the university laboratories where we train them in techniques and instrumental procedures. If those laboratories are not as good as the industrial laboratories where they will work when they graduate, we are wasting our time. When this Labour Government first came into power, I am afraid that the instruments and laboratories were out of date. Industry was very critical of undergraduates’ lack of experience when they started work, and it had to start training them from scratch. That situation has improved tremendously.

Our report also looks at international students. As I have said already, they are a tremendous boon in our universities because they give students a rounded experience. Some universities rely a lot more than others on attracting international students and if they could not come here in their present numbers, those universities would suffer badly. We should never forget that, so I just want the Government to be a bit cautious about the fees that

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international students are charged. It is not just about money. It is about having them here to interact with our own students, so money is not everything.

The report recommended a national bursary scheme, but sadly the Government have rejected that idea. There is a lot of competition now between universities, which have formed themselves into bodies such as the millennium plus group and the Russell Group. That suggests that competition is going on, which is not altogether a bad thing. However, it would be a sad thing if some universities were able to give more and better bursaries than others. I agree with the report's conclusion that we should have a national bursary scheme, and I hope that my Government will have another look, please, at that proposal.

I have a very favourable attitude to the TRAC approach—the transparent approach to costing, which reveals the true costs of teaching and of research. There is some overlap, but there will always be a grey area in the middle, and it is very important to know how much we are spending on teaching across the departments of each university, and between one university and another. That has been another big step forward.

I shall finish by dealing with the Government's response to our report. They said that we painted a picture of our HE system in a less than positive light. I am sorry if we did that, because none of the Committee members who took part in these investigations wanted to paint our university system in a poor light. I think that I indicated through my concluding points that tremendous progress has been made all round—in admissions and in infrastructure. This country is still producing some of the best university students in the world at undergraduate and postgraduate level, and long may that remain so.

2.29 pm

**Mr. Rob Wilson** (Reading, East) (Con): I am delighted to be able to contribute to this estimates debate, and it is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon), who has great knowledge and experience of this area. May I congratulate the Select Committee on Science and Technology and, in particular, its Chairman, the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis), on giving us such a thought-provoking and wide-ranging report? I also congratulate him on his excellent speech. Indeed, all the speeches have been first class—I hope that hon. Members will excuse the pun—not just 13 per cent. of them. Perhaps we can have a Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education investigation at short notice into the number of first-class speeches being given in the House of Commons—although we still have some balance to come with the Front-Bench speeches.

As the House will know, I continue to take a particular interest in the higher education sector, so I was delighted when the Committee published this much-anticipated report back in August. Despite the controversy in the sector, I am grateful that the Committee has set out so many of the important issues in the higher education sector, not least those involved in the fees review, which we need to examine in detail. It was important that the report put down a few markers, and it has been helpful in doing that.

Hon. Members may be aware that last week I held a Westminster Hall debate on the future of higher education, which also proved to be useful and thought-provoking. I wish to take this opportunity to thank all the hon. Members who turned up and contributed so intelligently to that debate, because I know that it had a very early morning slot and a few people probably had to get in a bit earlier than they would have liked.

As I say, the report is thorough and wide ranging. It highlighted salient issues ranging from admissions to teaching, and from standards to scandals in some places. In some ways, there is so much in this report that it is difficult to know where to start, but I wish to use the time available to me today to build on some of the issues and arguments that I set out in that Westminster Hall debate, putting a particular focus on standards and quality. I should also like to say a few words about Professor Hopkin's report on the Student Loans Company and about the Minister's thoughts on the recently published report by Demos advocating the introduction of a "civic corps".

As autonomous institutions, universities have the responsibility for maintaining the standards of their awards and the quality of their teaching to students so that they can achieve those standards. The body responsible for assuring standards is the QAA but, as the Chair of the Select Committee said, the report notes that the QAA's role

"focuses on processes rather than standards."

In evidence to the Committee, the then QAA chief executive, Peter Williams, with whom I have discussed this several times, confirmed that the purpose of the organisation is to

"ensure that institutions have effective processes in place to secure their academic standards".

He continued,

"but we do not judge the standards themselves".

So although the QAA is said to have responsibility for assuring standards in universities, it has little or no power to enforce them. It is not like Ofsted, for example—it certainly does not have anything like the same powers.

I am not as critical of the QAA as this report or the Committee appears to be. I have no doubt that the QAA acts more as an influencer than as an enforcer of standards, but that is not necessarily a bad thing. In many cases, the results of its influence are reassuring in keeping standards high. However, the report is right to raise the following important questions: is it right that the organisation that inspects our universities has, in effect, no real powers; and is it right that it is directly funded through subscriptions by universities? The Committee is right to question the cosy relationship that apparently exists within the sector. For example, I was shocked by some of the reports that I received when I was shadowing this brief of the external examination system and the cross-checking of degrees. The QAA's current purpose, therefore, should be robustly challenged, and I think that that is what the report has done. When we talk about university standards, especially in the international context, we need to know that the quality assurance system is accountable, rigorous, transparent, responsive and public-facing.

The Committee rightly raised concerns about the comparability of academic standards between universities. I fully appreciate that there is no national curriculum in

higher education and nor do I want there to be. As they are autonomous institutions, it is only right that different courses are offered in different universities. In my former brief, I travelled around the country to numerous institutions and can understand why potential students are confused when applying to different institutions. However, the Committee struggled to assess the current situation, finding itself in difficulty when it dared to question whether a degree from Oxford university meant more than one from Oxford Brookes. The question made vice-chancellors very uneasy. However, in this day and age and at a crucial time for higher education, it is imperative that standards are understood in their consistent application across the sector. I simply ask whether all degrees, irrespective of where they are taken, should be set against a consistent set of standards across all higher education institutions.

If the fees review decides to open the market and to allow universities to set their own fee level, they will need to prove to students that they offer value for money and that their degrees are considered worthy by employers. The Government and vice-chancellors sell the concept of higher fees by saying how much more income will accrue through a worker's lifetime as a result. This needs to be evidence-based and to be constantly under review. In this digital age, there is absolutely no reason why universities cannot provide students with all the information that they need to make an informed choice.

It might well be the case, as the Committee's report suggests, that the current system of self-regulation is out of date in the 21st century. However, something holds me back from supporting this view unreservedly. My gut instinct is that on the whole—there are always exceptions—universities are at their finest when they are at their freest and at their best when they have more autonomy, not less.

**Mr. Hayes:** My hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell) talked about comparing apples and pears. Does my hon. Friend the Member for Reading, East (Mr. Wilson) accept that a plural system is bound to be a diverse one, but that students need to know whether they are choosing apples or pears? The kind of information that he describes is essential if we are to create empowered learners.

**Mr. Wilson:** My hon. Friend has hit the nail on the head. It is about access to information. The more that universities become an arm of the state—through Whitehall or through quangos—the worse standards will become, weighed down by bureaucracy and box-ticking. The more interference that comes from Government and their agencies, the harder universities will find it to compete internationally.

**Mr. Boswell:** Following that earlier exchange, does my hon. Friend not agree that there is a risk that if too much is imposed from the centre, that might destroy some of the diversity that we all feel is important?

**Mr. Wilson:** That is critical. It is unimaginable to me that the Government should have any more involvement than they do in universities. That applies not just to the Government but to the arms of government, such as HEFCE, which are greatly involved in universities. Some would say that they have too much involvement

and slightly suffocate universities' ability to undertake some of the activities that they would clearly like to undertake.

One thing that was outlined in the report and confirmed in the remarks made by the Chairman of the Select Committee is the culture at the top of the HE sector. The report described it as "characterised as defensive complacency". I happen to believe that in some parts of the sector there is defensiveness and complacency. There is also often ambivalence to criticism. Sadly, it sometimes reminds me of the "Little Britain" character whose answer to any question is "Computer says no." Sometimes, when speaking to vice-chancellors, I felt that, whatever the question, the reply would be the computer said no.

I believe that the universities have to give the question of standards and quality the seriousness it deserves and find a solution that generates confidence. However, I would instinctively rather that came from within the sector, not from the Government. From what the Chairman of the Select Committee said, it sounds like the QAA is taking that matter seriously.

Before things get too negative, let me say that I have great respect for vice-chancellors and the job they do in universities. Let us not forget that the sector is still world class and generates huge revenue for the country. The job is already difficult as many vice-chancellors have had to close departments, lay off staff and work within very tight budgets over the past couple of years. I am sure that their job will be made even harder by the Chancellor's announcement yesterday that the Government will cut £600 million from the higher education budget.

I have looked through the pre-Budget report, but it is not clear to me how the Minister for Higher Education and Intellectual Property expects to achieve that saving by 2012-13. Perhaps this debate will give him a good opportunity to explain where that money will be saved. He must also tell us how, at a time when universities have been asked to "up their game", as Lord Mandelson put it, that will not have a detrimental impact on the learning experience or quality of education in our universities. However, things might become clear after we have heard an explanation, so I shall reserve my judgment.

Graduates will increasingly expect help with employability, especially in a continuing deep recession with high youth unemployment. When the Institute of Directors gave evidence to the Committee, it defined employability as a mixture of basic skills, personal qualities, good attitude and being reliable. To demonstrate a better service, universities should do all that they can to help their students to get into the world of work. Several universities are already leading the way in that area, including my own—the excellent Reading university—and it is fair to say that many universities that I have visited have dedicated teams to help students. Whatever happens with the fees review, universities will need to be able to demonstrate a marked improvement in the quality of the student experience.

It was worrying that the Committee's report detected no evidence that tuition fees at their current levels had driven up quality on campus. That is not surprising, given that fees hardly vary across the higher education sector, and therefore give students little incentive to look for value for money among institutions. It would appear that some universities are slightly short-changing students, so I agree with the Committee's recommendation

[Mr. Rob Wilson]

that the fees review should involve the commissioning of independent research on the impact of a higher cap on course quality. Neither the Government nor universities should expect students to pay thousands of pounds more for their degree if teaching and course content remain exactly the same.

As I have hinted today, and as I said during last week's debate, I am not completely satisfied that universities have justified the current level of tuition fees. As I have travelled around the country while shadowing the HE brief, I have felt that some students were being short-changed by the quality of teaching and the support services at some universities. The fees have raised an additional £1.3 billion for universities, but I am not sure that I have seen a £1.3 billion improvement in the student experience over the past five or six years.

Although comprehensive figures on student debt are still unavailable for the most recent intake, the figures that have been provided make sober reading. A recent survey estimated that students who commenced their studies in 2006-07 could expect to owe an average of £17,500 on graduation, while those starting in 2007-08 could see their average debt increasing to £21,500. Of course, medical students' debts are much higher, so I say again that before the Government consider saddling our young people with even more debt, it will be imperative for the fees review to justify how the existing fee money has been spent to improve the student experience.

Ensuring that students have access to robust and comparable information about what they can expect from their time at university must be at the heart of proposals coming out of the review. It is only right that students, as fee-paying customers, receive the best and most accessible advice and guidance that universities can offer, although of course that is if students are lucky enough to secure the funding to which they are entitled in the first place.

Professor Hopkin's report into the student loan fiasco found "conspicuous failures" in the current system that led to universities shelling out hundreds of thousands of pounds in emergency funds to students left without money. The report found that the processing system had faced problems due to lost documents, equipment failures and difficulties with the online application system. Only 5 per cent. of phone calls were answered at peak time. The Minister knows what a monumental cock-up this was by the Government. Financial support is specifically targeted to help those who need it most, and it is exactly those people who have been so badly let down by the fiasco. Indeed, some have now left university and many more are still suffering. Many families have been counting the pennies this year, and the last thing that they needed was to have to fork out extra funds thanks to Government and Student Loans Company incompetence.

I shall give the House a couple of real examples of the difficulties that families have faced. One student says:

"I am a 30-year-old mature student with a one-year-old child. I have embarked on a one-year PGCE course... I applied at the beginning of the year and have not received any funds at all. My tax credits stopped when my course began and I cannot pay my child's nursery fees. I am struggling to survive financially and cannot afford to live never mind buy the books. I fear I will be forced to leave university in the New Year if someone does not intervene."

This crisis is a real blow to the widening of participation. Here is another example:

"My daughter has been told she is eligible for a grant and loan. She has received nothing. I lost my job and have had to borrow the £1,060 first payment for hall-of-residence and pay for food etc. Neither her father nor I went to university and we are so proud of her. She is sick with worry and does not want to be a burden to us. She then received a letter telling her she will get no money until January. She is distraught and about to leave, thankfully, she received an A for her first piece of work. She has agreed to stay but says money worries are affecting her study and health. She is not the only one."

I can confirm that she is not the only one. I was recently at a Wantage hall founder's dinner at my university, the university of Reading, and I was fortunate enough to talk at length to a number of students. Many had not received the money to which they were entitled and were in desperate financial trouble. One female student told me that unless she could find £700 by Christmas, she would have to leave.

We could go into almost any university and, with very little or no effort, find the same story, demonstrating the size of the cock-up. In November, 176,000 students had still not received the financial support that they were promised and to which they were entitled.

**Mr. Willis:** May I say what a powerful case the hon. Gentleman is making about what is an absolute crisis? Does he agree that, in summing up, it would be useful if the Minister could guarantee that the second tranche of Student Loans Company grants will be paid on 28 January? Without it, literally tens, if not hundreds or thousands of students will simply have to leave university at that point.

**Mr. Wilson:** That is exactly the message that I have received from students, and I hope that the Minister will directly address that question when he sums up. I know that the Front-Benchers are anxious to speak, and I shall try to finish in a couple of minutes if they will all bear with me.

A recent report by Demos included comments and proposals on the introduction of a civic corps—it would be paid for by increasing the rate of interest that university graduates pay on their loan—to carry out community service. I fully appreciate that our young and unemployed people need real action to help them to turn their lives around, and volunteering in the community can be a way of raising self-esteem and helping people to develop important soft skills, such as teamwork, while doing something positive for the local area. Indeed, such initiatives sit very well with my party's plans to get Britain working and, in particular, our "Work Together" initiatives, which involve volunteering in local communities.

But where have those comments come from? Are we not in the middle of an independent fees review? Anyone making such comments is surely pre-judging the outcome of the fees review, so, unless I have misunderstood the Minister or he has been misquoted, the situation makes no sense at all. I would genuinely find it helpful if he dealt with the issue, because, if he did make those comments in the middle of the fees review, he has been very unhelpful.

The Committee's report looked at community colleges, and, as the Minister and others will know, I have been passionate about them for some time. The report looked at credits, which, for the purposes of widening participation,



are incredibly important to the system in this country, because they enable people to drop in and out of study as their lives dictate. I do not see why we in the UK, given our progressive sector, should not be able to do something that is comparable in flexibility to the US community college system. I acknowledge that the Government have made moves in that direction by broadening foundation degrees. However, much more could be done.

The Select Committee report is right to say that

“if the community college credit system model operating in the US were adopted in England, it would provide much greater flexibility in higher education in this country, which will be essential to widening participation.”

That is absolutely right. I will not go through the other interesting aspects of the community college system, but they are mentioned in the Select Committee’s report and I endorse them.

As the Minister knows, this is an opportunity to make the real changes that the sector needs. Now is the time for fresh and innovative thinking. I thank the Select Committee for its report and for making a thought-provoking contribution to what will be an interesting but very intense debate over the weeks, months and years to come.

2.51 pm

**Stephen Williams** (Bristol, West) (LD): This has been an excellent debate, although I am not sure that I want to put a classification on it. I enjoyed the thoughtful and good-natured contribution made by the hon. Member for Reading, East (Mr. Wilson). I also enjoyed the speech made by the hon. Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon), who talked about his journey across the Pennines to Hull; I was reminded of my own journey across the Severn estuary, with the valleys-boy accent that I had at the time, to the strange world of Bristol university, where I met different classes of people whom I had never come across before.

This debate shows Parliament at its best, because it is based on a Select Committee report that is an example of Parliament at its best. During my first two and a half years as a Member, I thoroughly enjoyed serving on the Committee that preceded the now former Committee chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis). Select Committee reports make an important contribution. I wish that we had more opportunities such as this to debate the thorough research and evidence-based reports that Select Committees produce.

Yesterday’s pre-Budget report provides a context, and it has already been mentioned by a couple of speakers. On page 110, among a series of bullet points covering cuts in IT, the criminal justice system, residential care and rail franchises, is tucked away a reference to anticipated cuts in higher education:

“£600 million from higher education and science and research budgets from a combination of changes to student support within existing arrangements; efficiency savings and prioritisation across universities, science and research”.

The Minister has already been asked to provide several bits of information when he sums up; I hope that he will clarify what that £600 million-worth of cuts means. I am thinking particularly of student support, which has been on a roller coaster in the past 12 years. Grants

were first abolished, then reintroduced. Provision was then extended, but clawed back 12 months ago. I hope that there will not be a further roller coaster ride for students.

**Mr. Boswell:** Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one of the worst possible things would be if students had gone to university with a particular profile of grants and loans on offer, and then found that those were being withdrawn and that their legitimate expectations were not being met?

**Stephen Williams:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Students in their third year may already have a completely different financial scenario from what prevailed when they applied; not only that, but students from the same families who are assessed on family income may also experience entirely different outcomes. Brothers and sisters doing the same thing may have different grants or eligibility for maintenance loans.

Will the Minister also clarify what the cuts in science and research will be? The Chancellor said in yesterday’s pre-Budget report that science, innovation and a low-carbon economy were the way forward for this country, and Lord Mandelson has said much the same. It would be perverse if all that were now undermined by budget cuts.

The hon. Member for Reading, East mentioned the report on the Student Loans Company by Professor Sir Deian Hopkin, which came out on 8 December. It is a particularly damning report, and it is strange that there has been no sign of contrition on the part of the directors of the Student Loans Company. I remind the House that these people actually paid themselves a bonus last year, when they should have been preparing for their new responsibilities for this year. Will the Minister clarify his and his Department’s responsibilities in this respect? Will he undertake, at least between now and the election—I am not necessarily predicting what will happen then—to closely follow the progress of the directors of the Student Loans Company to ensure that we do not have a repeat of this fiasco and that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough mentioned, further grants are paid on time?

**Mr. Rob Wilson:** Does the hon. Gentleman agree with the president of the National Union of Students that heads should roll at the Student Loans Company?

**Stephen Williams:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. In fact, I can agree with myself about that, because I said the same thing at the same time as Wes Streeting. Liberal Democrats and the NUS were in complete agreement on that matter.

The Select Committee report is wide-ranging, and we could have spent all afternoon discussing different aspects of it. Indeed, annexe 2 lists a whole raft of things that the Committee did not have time to look at in detail, notably the contribution of further education, the delivery of higher education, and postgraduate study. I hope that the successor Committee will find time to look at those important, valuable areas.

I want to focus on two aspects covered in the report—admissions and resources—and then the three areas of concern that it identified. First, on admissions, I think that widening participation in higher education is now,

[*Stephen Williams*]

it is pleasing to note, pretty much common ground between those on the three Front Benches. We have had enough debates with each other to know that although we may disagree on some of the policies, we are at least personally committed to ensuring that widening participation is very much on the political agenda. I welcome that common commitment, because we know that there is still a stark social divide in terms of who goes to university. We can have a debate about the absolute number of people who go to university, but who goes is still very much an area for legitimate concern.

The subtext of fair access to higher education is also addressed in the report. That is incredibly important. I have often heard vice-chancellors of Russell group or 1994 group universities say that fair access is not important in volume terms. Of course, with 1 million undergraduates at university, fair access probably can be seen as not that important. However, in terms of what happens to people who go to our research-intensive universities later on in life, and whether they become Members of this place or leading members of the media, the judiciary or other leading professions, it certainly matters who gets an opportunity to access those universities. It is absolutely right that the Committee considered that, and all politicians should ensure that it stays on the agenda. Contextual information about the applicant is extremely important. I agree with the Committee when it says that the state is entitled to take a view on fair access to our universities even if that can be perceived as overriding institutional autonomy.

Information, advice and guidance to university applicants is very important in ensuring that people are well prepared for making their application and know what is expected of them. That is not always clear. It is tragic to hear sixth formers or people in FE colleges say, "I wanted to study this, but I've only now discovered that I needed to persevere with physics or to have done better in maths." Good information about what is needed to apply to all universities, but particularly those that are perceived as research-intensive, is absolutely vital. Universities do a lot of good work on that in the context of outreach. The university of which I am an alumnus and which I represent in Parliament—Bristol university—has the ChemLabS initiative whereby academics go out to local schools to enthuse people about chemistry, as well as inviting teachers and lab technicians into the university to update them on how to teach a practical lesson by bringing chemistry to life and making it exciting for teenage students. As the hon. Members for Bolton, South-East and for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman) said, the work that staff do in that respect, as well as their research work, ought to be recognised by their employers.

School relationships can also make an incredibly important contribution. The Committee's report refers to the review by Professor Steven Schwartz, which has still not been fully implemented across the sector. In my view, the unfinished business of the Schwarz review is particularly on post-qualification application. It is absurd that we still have a school system designed in 1870 with a term structure based on having young people available to do agricultural work in the summer. We all know that the future of our economy does not depend on that. It will be knowledge-based, and universities need more time to consider the field of applicants. Individuals also

need time, once they know how they have done at school or college, to decide where to apply to. I hope that post-qualification application will be seriously considered in future.

On resources, I do not want to have the usual row that the Minister and I have about tuition fees, but I agree with the first conclusion in the Committee's report that it is a shame that the fees review is not concluding this year so that we can debate it thoroughly before the general election. The report recommends a national bursary scheme, which I certainly support. It is absurd that twin brothers—an academic Jedward, perhaps—going to different universities such as Cambridge and Anglia Ruskin, but with exactly the same family circumstances, get different bursary support. Information about bursaries is patchy, and since the Committee's report Professor Claire Callender has produced a report about the difficulty that many young people have in navigating their way through the system.

The Committee's report highlighted three areas of concern, and many contributors have mentioned them. The first was standards. I covered A-level results day for my party both this year and two years ago, and I know that there is a debate about standards every single year. In my role I meet many admissions tutors, who all say that A-levels are not what they used to be and students are not as well prepared as they used to be. However, as has been recognised in the debate, the same admissions tutors and academic departments shy away from any discussion about the number of students who go on to get a 2:1 or a first in their degree course. When I graduated from Bristol university in history 21 years ago, nobody in my peer group got a first, and it was not because we were all stupid. Not that many got a 2:1, either. Now it is quite different, so the Committee was right that we must have a debate about academic standards, and universities should not be afraid of that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough referred to the new chief executive of the QAA, Anthony McClaran, whom many of us know from his UCAS days. I was at the same meeting as him last week and met him again the next day, and he certainly takes seriously the issue of standards raised in the Select Committee's report.

Many contributors to the debate have mentioned the quality of teaching. Students have a right to know what experience they are going to get when they go to university. It does not necessarily follow that a world-class research-based professor will be the best teacher, but students ought to know how much contact they are likely to have with that person and how much of their course is likely to be taught or monitored by a PhD or post-doctoral member of the department.

Consistency was an area of concern mentioned in the Committee's report, which brings me back to my earlier point about the need for information for applicants so that they know what to expect and can plan their lives around course expectations. That is particularly important for people with difficult family structures who are trying to access university.

The third and final concern that I am going to mention is part-time and mature students. That is unfinished business. In its final report, the old Select Committee on Education and Skills recommended that the artificial divide between full and part-time undergraduates be removed, as is the case in many other countries. Of

course, many full-time undergraduates, because of financial constraints, do paid work throughout their full-time studies, so all students are to some extent part time.

None the less, there is a financial divide between full and part-time students and it ought to be removed. The Liberal Democrats and the Government disagree about the fairness of tuition fees, but I do not understand why they cling to the distinction. Part-time students must pay tuition fees up front, in cash, while they are studying, whereas full-time students can borrow and pay back the fee debt over the years of their future careers. I hope the review of Lord Browne of Madingley will recommend that that divide is bridged.

Finally, we agree that the contribution of British higher education is going to be absolutely crucial in ensuring that this country prospers beyond the recession. We know that it is world class, but there is absolutely no room for complacency. The rest of the world is catching us up. In the context of the current recession, all other G20 countries are investing in higher education rather than proposing budgetary cuts. We need to ensure that whatever happens during this recession, we have a strong English, Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish higher education system beyond it, and that this country prospers into the future.

3.7 pm

**Mr. David Willetts** (Havant) (Con): We have had a wide-ranging debate on a wide-ranging report. It is a valuable report and I congratulate the Chairman and members of the Committee who have contributed to the debate.

We approach this subject sharing a belief in some very important principles. First, we recognise that British higher education is excellent, of a very high standard, and well regarded internationally, and we can all take pride in it. Nobody wishes to denigrate the achievements of our universities or their students and staff.

The second principle was put very well by my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell), who rightly challenged the statement that more means worse, and said that rather, more means more diverse. I completely agree with him. That captured the direction of our higher education sector very well indeed: it is becoming more diverse and we should all understand that the term “university” covers a wide range of institutions with distinct missions and characters, but—we hope—they all display the academic rigour that comes with higher education.

The third principle, which was enunciated by my hon. Friend the Member for Reading, East (Mr. Wilson), is that the distinctive strength of universities in this country—our universities have this asset when those in other countries, including on continental Europe, do not—is the degree of autonomy that they still enjoy. We may sometimes suspect that they enjoy it despite the best efforts of Ministers, but they nevertheless still enjoy it. If the Conservatives were in government, we would do our best to try to enhance that autonomy. It is a very good principle.

**Mr. Robert Syms** (Poole) (Con): Is not the English language another great asset for our universities? The current review of immigration rules, which may impact on universities, is very serious, because a big section of their income comes from foreign students.

**Mr. Willetts:** My hon. Friend makes a very important point that needs to be borne in mind.

If we start with those three principles and an understanding of the excellence, diversity and autonomy in the system, we can understand some of the controversy that surrounded the Committee, and particularly its Chairman, when the report was published.

I have been in this House for a long time with the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) and have always found him to be a mild-mannered and courteous Member, but he clearly got up one morning and thought, “No more Mr. Nice Guy”, as he managed to say some extraordinarily inflammatory things that perhaps upset the sector more than he expected. He followed that up by summoning a range of vice-chancellors to his study, expecting them to “tell on” each other. He was waiting for the first one to break and criticise the others, and he was clearly amazed when, despite his prolonged interrogation, the Wellington square of those assembled vice-chancellors held and none of them ’fessed up and criticised the others. It was a bizarre few months with some of his investigations and the publication of the report.

I suggest to the Chairman of the Committee that perhaps the difficulties that he got into are reflected in the frustration that he clearly still feels. The very first page of his report states:

“Vice-Chancellors cannot give a straightforward answer to the simple question of whether students obtaining first class honours degrees at different universities had attained the same intellectual standards.”

The problem is that he was trying to treat university degrees as if they were A-levels. These are diverse institutions with diverse missions. There is much in the report that I welcome, but if I had a criticism of it, it is that it does not fully understand the autonomy and diversity of the sector.

**Dr. Iddon:** If that is the case, how does the hon. Gentleman expect employers to distinguish them?

**Mr. Willetts:** Employers do distinguish, and one reason why we attach so much importance to better information for students and prospective students is that they need to understand the distinctive roles of different universities. In fact, one of my frustrations is that sometimes I think that employers do not fully understand the distinctive strengths of, for example, regional universities, which can be excellent, but they are not the same as those institutions that are rivals to US ivy league colleges as global institutions. They have different roles.

Of course we expect every first class degree in any university to have been achieved with high standards and rigour, but they are different institutions that often measure different things. When it comes to academic rigour, a part of our system that is already a distinctive strength—the external examiner system—needs further strengthening. As several hon. Members on both sides of the House have already said, the big increase in the number of people getting first class honours degrees causes concern. We need to be confident that we will not face the grade inflation debate that has been such an issue for GCSEs and A-levels over the years. It would be a terrible pity if that debate took off for universities.

[Mr. Willetts]

I also agreed with the report on the importance of the student experience and information about it. We have ended up with a system that has sharp incentives to reward high-quality research, but still has inadequate incentives to reward high-quality teaching. Many students want to talk about their academic experience. They ask about the high-profile professor who was advertised in the university prospectus and whom they have never seen in their two or three years there. He or she is writing great research texts or appears regularly in the media, but has not delivered any lectures or attended any of their seminars. Those are the types of concerns that we are picking up, and when communicating with universities, we all try to convey it to them that they need to address such concerns if they are to maintain the good will of students and parents.

As an Opposition Member, I welcomed the report's very effective dissection of the Government's announcement of the 10,000 extra places, about which we pursued Ministers at the time. The report reaches a powerful but measured conclusion. It states that, after "Mr. Denham", as he was called in the report, presented the original 10,000 places, in October 2008, the

"reasonable construction that an observer would put on his statement was that there would be 10,000 places for new entrants to university, whereas the new places announced at that time boil down to 3,000 extra places for full-time new entrants."

That captures the Opposition's experience, month after month, year after year, in dealing with some of these Government announcements. It is useful to have such a clear and authoritative analysis of what was actually meant compared with what actually happened, and of course we took the analysis to heart when I, at the Conservative party conference, announced our 10,000 extra, properly funded and properly costed university places for new students.

The discussion of student numbers leads on to a question to which I hope the Minister will respond. Some universities have recruited additional students beyond the number agreed by the Higher Education Funding Council. We are intrigued to know whether he will fine the universities for this terrible offence against his planning system. A game of bluff is going on here. We have a crisis in which Ministers are deciding whether to fine universities and universities are trying to work out whether it is a bluff. It reminds me awfully of the early stages of the Cuban missile crisis when people were trying to work out who was going to blink first.

I was assured today by a vice-chancellor that he did not believe that the Government would impose any fines. We would be interested to know whether they will. They have a dilemma: if they do not impose fines, their entire structure for planning and financing higher education will be thrown into question, but if they do impose fines on universities for taking on the extra students, they will be in the unusual position of fining universities for taking steps towards meeting the Government's own public service target of 50 per cent. participation in higher education. Fining universities for moving closer to the 50 per cent. target that Ministers are willing to finance would put the Government in a very odd position. We look forward to hearing exactly what the Minister plans to do.

The report contains interesting material on part-time students. A recent HEFC study made a devastating point of which I had not previously been aware. It showed that only 39 per cent. of part-time students who began a first degree programme in 1996-97 at a higher education institution in the UK completed their degree within 11 academic years. That is a very worrying statistic and leads me on to something about which I hope to hear more from the Minister. Members on both sides of the House have been talking about the case for more part-time students, and clearly such evidence needs to be considered.

We read yesterday, however, in the pre-Budget report document about a £600 million cut in the higher education and science and research budgets. We, and many people in higher education and science and research, hope that the Minister will indicate what that means. When one looks at the components, one can see several angles on which we need more information. I shall take this slowly, because the brief four-line entry on page 110 of the report contains so many different points. It states that the cuts will come

"from a combination of changes to student support within existing arrangements".

What are these changes to student support? Will there be yet more changes in the rules for access to maintenance grants and maintenance loans? Is that what the report means? Or does it mean something else? We need to know.

The pre-Budget report also talks about "efficiency savings and prioritisation across universities, science and research"—

I would be interested to know what those efficiency savings are—and

"some switching of modes of study in higher education".

As the hon. Member for Bristol, West (Stephen Williams) said—we heard this on "Newsnight" last night too—the Chief Secretary to the Treasury says that that means a shift towards part-time students. How do the Government intend to achieve that shift? What changes in the financing rules will they propose? Given the evidence from the Select Committee's report, what support will the Government give to part-time students so that they do not suffer from the very high drop-out rates that we are debating today? It is a sad irony that we should have had an autumn statement yesterday that apparently proposed a cut, in a move towards having more part-time students, when we have also had a report showing that part-time students need extra support if they are to achieve the participation and completion rates for which we would all hope.

The list also mentions "reductions in budgets that do not support student participation".

We want to know what that is. From the scientists' point of view, when the Minister talks about efficiency savings and prioritisation across universities and science and research, what will happen to the Government's previous pledge on the ring-fencing of the science budget? We would like to know whether that statement still stands. There is a lot of important information that we need to hear to have those four key lines in the PBR explained.

Finally, and very briefly, the Minister will know how devastating the report on the performance of the Student Loans Company that was released earlier this week was. Personally, I think that the report merited an oral

statement. Indeed, it was regrettable that the report was available only at about 4 o'clock in the afternoon, despite the fact that the written statement said that it would be placed in the Library and made available. However, the report was not available when the written statement came out, and that statement was a rather anodyne account of what is a very powerful report indeed.

Some other hon. Members have made these points, but it is shocking that there were times when only 5 per cent. of phone calls to the Student Loans Company were answered. It is shocking that 100,000 items of evidence that were supposed to be electronically scanned could not be scanned. It is also shocking that, alongside the gross incompetence of the Student Loans Company, some responsibility clearly lay with the Department and Ministers. We should not forget that, as the report says:

"The new service, originally intended to be operational from September 2008 to coincide with the UCAS annual cycle for applications was delayed because of decisions by the then Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills to alter the regulations governing student financial support,"

which postponed it until February 2009. Part of the "terminal 5" problem of the service, which was re-launched in a rush and without proper testing, was caused because five months were lost owing to Ministers chopping and changing the maintenance rules. I would very much like to hear what steps the Minister will take in response to the comments in the report that are addressed to the Department and to Ministers. I would also like to know whether he understands that the problems have caused enormous distress to students. I hope that he will take this opportunity to apologise to students and their families for what they have gone through.

Above all—this is my final point, Mr. Deputy Speaker—I would like to hear what will happen in future. We need to know when students who make applications in the coming year will be able to access advice and support from the Student Loans Company and when the backlog of cases that have still not been resolved will finally be clarified, resolved and sorted out by this grossly incompetent organisation. The Minister owes the House and students an explanation of that.

**Sir George Young** (North-West Hampshire) (Con): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. There has just been an extraordinary statement in the upper House concerning the eligibility of Members of the upper House to sit there. It has come to light that, as a consequence of the Electoral Administration Act 2006, there is now some doubt about whether Commonwealth and Republic of Ireland citizens are eligible for membership of the House of Lords. There are also implications for certain other offices under the Crown, as well as for membership of the Privy Council and judicial officer holders. The eligibility of Commonwealth citizens to be employees of the civil service is also in some doubt.

We have just had the most recent business statement of the Session, yet no reference was made to that announcement. May I ask you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, whether you have had any indication from the Leader of the House that she plans to share with the House the Government's proposals to legislate in the current Session, in order to clarify the position and avoid any doubt about the eligibility of those citizens to be members of the upper House and to continue to hold certain other offices?

**Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst):** In specific answer to the right hon. Gentleman's question, no, I have not received any message from the Leader of the House that a statement or further action is intended. By virtue of his raising this obviously serious matter on a point of order, however, note will be taken, and I hope that the House will be informed at the earliest possible date.

3.25 pm

**The Minister for Higher Education and Intellectual Property (Mr. David Lammy):** Let me begin by thanking the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) for this opportunity to discuss higher education and his Committee's report. Many of us in the Chamber have had successive discussions on these matters recently—it feels like week by week. I have been a Minister for either skills or higher education for some three years now, and it is my feeling that the standard of the debate this afternoon was among the very highest. That is a reflection of the work of the hon. Gentleman's Committee, and of the real contribution that Back Benchers have made. It is also a reflection of the contributions by my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Mr. Martlew), the hon. Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell), my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon) and the hon. Member for Reading, East (Mr. Wilson). I hope I shall be able to deal with some of the points they raised in the moments I have at the Dispatch Box, although I recognise that we have another debate this afternoon.

It is important to put this debate in context, and I think the whole House will agree that there is never an excuse for being complacent about our public services. We can count the number of lives that are changed as a result of them, and we particularly commend the professionalism of the staff, students and management in the higher education sector.

When we consider the backdrop against which the Committee reported, we can see that we now have more students in our universities than at any time in our history. We have more students from state schools in our universities than ever before, and we have more black students from less well-off families, more black and ethnic minority students, and more students expressing satisfaction with their courses, than at any time in our history. It is also right to say that British universities have achieved a higher ranking in the international league tables than ever before. All this is underpinned by a 25 per cent. real-terms rise in public spending. I genuinely hope that hon. Members recognise that investing in higher education underpins the success of all those students. We heard my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, South-East speak movingly about the nature of that investment, and, in particular, what it means for facilities in the sciences.

The report was wide-ranging and substantial. I welcome the spirit in which the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough made his remarks, although I detected a slight difference in tone in the Chamber this afternoon from when the report was initially announced. I hope he recognises that since the Committee published its report, the Government have published their own framework for the development of higher education over the next 10 years, which is called "Higher Ambitions". I hope he will also acknowledge that we have taken on board

[*Mr. David Lammy*]

some of his Committee's proposals, especially in relation to the student experience, about which much has been said today.

The student experience is not about driving students to be solely consumers of education. That is not the right fit; education is far more than just a consumer interest. But against a backdrop of widening participation and of seeking a student contribution to ensure that students are centre stage for that experience, the thrust of the report was spot-on and we sought to reflect that in "Higher Ambitions."

I did not fully recognise the bleak picture regarding quality that was presented in the report, and obviously there was tremendous concern across the sector—and some incredulity—at the way in which the report was reflected in other parts of the world, with items turning up in China, Malaysia and other places. The breadth of experience for students in higher education—the fact that it is not just about the end grade, but the range of experiences that students have—is reflected in the thrust that the sector is placing on the higher education achievement record. That is important for employers who want to understand fully the soft skills that students have, but it is also a virtue of our system. Many countries in the world recognise that the undergraduate experience in the UK is part of the cultural circumstances that surround the student and what the student engages in; it is not just about the end achievement.

The hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough said much about the proportion of firsts and 2:1s that appear in the system. With widening participation and more students in the system than ever before, is it not right to look at that as a percentage rather than pure numbers? If he does that, he will see that the proportional increase is not as large as it first appears. The proportion of 2:1s has increased from 45.5 per cent. to 48.1 per cent. over the last period. That is not as significant a rise as has been suggested. The proportion of firsts has gone up from 8.2 per cent. to 13.3 per cent.; a larger rise but, measured against the success that we are seeing at A-levels, not an overly significant one.

The hon. Gentleman talked about the importance of the QAA in ensuring standards. The QAA—under the new leadership of Anthony McClaran, to whom I spoke this week—is conducting an extensive review of how it quality assures and, in doing so, has already sought to put students at the centre of that process. We will have student auditors for the first time from January. A student is on the board of the QAA now as a result of concerns about the student voice. I hope the hon. Gentleman is pleased also that the QAA, in that public-facing role—it is more than public relations—is seeking to make its work student-friendly and is revising much of its literature, using YouTube and other places where students go. I hope that that meets much of the concern raised by the hon. Gentleman.

There needs to be a further firming up of the external examiner system. I thought that the work done by Professor Colin Riordan was very good and I was pleased to be at his presentation to the HEFCE board. That work is being taken forward by UUK over the next year under the leadership of Dame Janet Finch. It is hugely important that we ensure that the external examiner is the voice of that standards agenda within

the system—that they are not isolated by working in a particular institution, but can join up in a more collective and cohesive way to communicate the importance of standards. It is right to say that the Select Committee's work has contributed to that progress.

Members have raised the issue of the pre-Budget report and it is important that I put the following comments on the record. The economic downturn that followed the banking crisis has been the most severe since the second world war. The Chancellor's main task is to put the public finances on to a sound footing, while at the same time continuing to promote economic growth. The PBR is not a spending review, but it does set out where efficiency savings will be needed by 2012-13. The savings will amount to 4 to 5 per cent. of the total Government spend on higher education, science and research. When Members reflect on how hard families are finding this downturn and the sorts of savings they are having to make, I hope we will recognise that 4 to 5 per cent. is reasonable. When the Government have received the report following Lord Browne's review of higher education funding and student finance in the summer of 2010, we will make the necessary decisions about where and how these savings can best be met, and, as always, we will do so in close liaison with the relevant funding council.

The Government remain committed to our higher education system and to continuing to pay a significant share of the costs of educating each student, but the current economic situation is difficult, and as higher education institutions have benefited significantly over the last period, with some receiving funding increases of almost 50 per cent. over the last decade, it is right that they should make their contribution now.

**Mr. Boswell:** On the student support package, can the Minister give the House the simple assurance that students who are already receiving a particular level of support will not suffer?

**Mr. Lammy:** I can confirm that I do not anticipate there will be any changes in respect of students who have already entered the system. May I also put on the record our commitment to the science ring fence, and to our framework?

On the Student Loans Company, Members have described the difficulties that students have experienced with the system this year. I have previously apologised for that, and I am happy to do so again today. It is entirely right, however, that my focus should have been not on scapegoats or scalps but on setting up the review, which I did promptly, and on acting promptly in other ways when this situation was first brought to my attention in September, as well as on ensuring that the SLC got extra resources at that time to deal with the court problem. I also focused on ensuring that there was an extra contact centre and that a greater volume of calls were answered, and I joined with Sir Deian Hopkin in saying that the No. 1 priority was to ensure that the lessons are learned, so that there can be significant progress as we move forward to next year's cycle.

The SLC chair has already said that its senior management team will be strengthened and reorganised. As it was the Administration of the hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts) who set up the SLC, I hope he will recognise that it is a private organisation, so these

matters must be for the new chair—he is a new chair—and the board to consider. Over the next short while, they must, through due process, determine how best to strengthen and reorganise the body. It is right that that should not be within the purview of Ministers.

We must look forward, and my Department must learn from this exercise in relation to its responsibilities. I am absolutely clear about that. That is why we are happy to consider more closely both risk management and the escalation of such problems up the SLC to the board and on to the Department. There have been problems, but it is clear from the strategic framework document that governs the SLC that the Department's ambit is strategic. It cannot be right for Ministers to micro-manage the processing of student loan claims. Of course I will act in relation to that one recommendation of the report, but the most important thing Sir Deian recommended was that stakeholder management and the customer experience should be much more centre stage in the SLC's operation. We have set up a new stakeholder forum on which Universities UK and the National Union of Students is represented. We want to ensure that we do not have again the problems we have had this year, and that those interests have a voice and are communicating with the board and senior management.

I remain particularly concerned about the situation for students with disabilities. It is always the case in a post-qualification application process that students with disabilities take longer to go through the assessment process, having presented their medical certification and other things, and to be assessed for the equipment they need. I was at the London assessment centre yesterday, and I spoke to staff there about the nature of that process. We currently have many such students—5,000—in the system, and there is an onus to take matters forward, but I have asked the SLC to ensure that universities are ringing around and that it is making contact with those students to ensure they move through the system.

**Mr. Willetts:** I am encouraged by what the Minister has just said about disabled students, as this issue is a particular source of concern, but will he explain two points to the House? First, when does he expect the backlog of current cases to be cleared? Secondly, when does he expect the SLC to be able to start the new cycle and to offer assessments for future claims?

**Mr. Lammy:** The chief executive of the SLC assures me that he will have got through the backlog by the end of this weekend. However, the hon. Gentleman will realise that, as up to 5,000 students are still applying for student loans week by week, there are still a number of applications to get through that are effectively new applications. On the backlog, it is important to emphasise the issues regarding students who applied within the appropriate time, and students for whom the SLC had lost material, including students with disabilities. The system has been delayed by such problems, but we should get through the backlog, and I hope to start the cycle shortly. I hope the hon. Gentleman recognises that it was important that we did not start the cycle before

we got the report, and before I could make sure that any newly formed management team—and, indeed the new chair and his board—have reflected on the report and taken action to ensure that we will not have the same problems next year.

**Mr. Willis:** In his discussions with the SLC, has the Minister received an assurance that all of the second tranche of the loans, which are payable on 27 or 28 January, will be paid?

**Mr. Lammy:** I have received full assurance from the chief executive of the SLC that students in the system who will have got their cheques can expect to continue to receive those payments as normal. Therefore, there will be a further payment in January, which we would expect to go appropriately.

I am encouraged by the comments of the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough, and he can be assured that of course I treat this matter as a top priority. I am working with the SLC to ensure that the board and chair are doing all they can to drive the matter forward, so that we have a better system next year. I assure the hon. Gentleman too that we absolutely put customers first over this three-year period. We have eradicated from the system the need for parents to submit passports or P45 forms: people can now apply online, and calls are answered without the problems that arose this summer.

This has been a good debate, and I am delighted to have had another opportunity to talk in the House about the importance of higher education.

**Mr. Martlew:** My hon. Friend may be coming to this, but in my speech I asked whether I could meet him early in the new year to discuss the situation regarding the university of Cumbria. Will he deal with that before he concludes his speech?

**Mr. Lammy:** That is a very good way for me to end my speech. I absolutely assure my hon. Friend that I am happy to have that meeting. I recognise the historic challenges in Cumbria, and particularly his championing of the area.

**Mr. Rob Wilson:** Earlier, I asked the Minister about the views he had given to Demos. Will he say what his comments were, and whether they were reported accurately in the press?

**Mr. Lammy:** As always with these things, they were reported accurately in some of the press. My position with regard to a national civic service has been absolutely clear for many years, and, indeed, the Prime Minister has made his commitment to it plain. However, that is completely different from funding such a service by effectively billing and charging students. I made it clear that I do not support that, as I think Demos fully understands. The hon. Gentleman should not confuse think-pieces with the position of the Government.

*Question deferred (Standing Order No. 54 (4)).*

**DEPARTMENT FOR COMMUNITIES AND  
LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

**Central and Local Government**

*[Relevant Documents: The Sixth Report from the Communities and Local Government Committee, HC 33, Session 2008-09, on The balance of power: central and local government, and the Government response, Cm 7712.]*

*Motion made, and Question proposed,*

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2011, for expenditure by the Department for Communities and Local Government—

(1) resources, not exceeding £17,434,832,000, be authorised, on account, for use as set out in HC 33, and

(2) a sum, not exceeding £17,433,673,000, be granted to Her Majesty out of the Consolidated Fund, on account, to meet the costs as so set out.—*(Mr. Watts.)*

**Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst):** Before I call the Chairman of the Select Committee, may I just observe that there is less time available for this debate than there was for the former debate? I will not impose a time limit but, given the numbers of hon. Members who I know wish to take part and in an effort to be as inclusive as possible, a rough tariff of about 15 minutes per person will apply.

3.47 pm

**Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West) (Lab):** Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I shall try and moderate what I say to make sure that there is ample space for other Members.

I want to begin by setting the scene for the report from the Communities and Local Government Committee on the balance of power between central Government and local government. Over several decades, the pattern in this country seems to have been that of a pendulum swinging backwards and forwards. First it lurches towards centralism, then it swings back in the other direction towards localism before swinging back towards centralism again. The overall trend in the past century has been towards a reduction in the numbers of elected people, if one takes all levels together and excludes MPs, and there has also been a substantial reduction in the powers of local government. However, although that has been the overall trend, the pendulum has undoubtedly swung the other way too. Those of us who were in local government before we came to this place will certainly have experienced times when local government was even more constrained than it is at present.

I think that we need to be aware that the pendulum that I have described exists. At the moment, it seems to me that there is a willingness—or at least an expressed willingness—among all the political parties to lurch towards localism, and away from centralism. The Select Committee's report is therefore extremely timely, in that it looks at what it considers to be appropriate ways to give more power to local government and ensure that we have a much less centralised process.

Those hon. Members who have read the report will be aware that, in coming to our view, we took evidence from a number of witnesses, and that we also visited Denmark and Sweden. We made that visit because local government in those countries has a lot more freedom than is the case here, and also runs a wider range of services. It was interesting to see their system in operation

and to discover that it was not quite as localised and free from central control as perhaps one might have thought from looking from the outside.

I also ought to make the point that we have received the Government's response to many of the recommendations in our report, but we agreed with the Government that we did not want their response to all of them, because at that point they were still consulting on some of the changes that they had proposed. We felt it would be inappropriate for the Government to say either that they had not come to a view and would do so at the end of the consultation or that they had come to a view when the public consultation was still going on—that would have looked somewhat odd. We have received only a partial response, but that was by agreement and we hope that the final response, including the Government's response to the public consultation, will be given at the end of this month.

I wish to go through a few of the main points in the report to set the scene. First, I wish to restate that, notwithstanding the swings back and forth in the relationship between local and central Government in England—of course, the report was considering only the arrangements in England—we have one of the most centralised systems in the whole of Europe. We discovered as we were undertaking our investigation that this is not simply a matter of local government and central Government imposing controls; it is about a whole culture in this country of centralism. We feel that that manifests itself in the way in which even though there has been a lightening up of the controls, some councils have been backward about pushing the margins and taking on the freedoms that they have. It is as if they have got into a culture of waiting for direction from the centre, even when they have the freedom to do more.

The culture of centralism certainly affects the public at large. If they were asked whether they would like more decisions to be taken locally, they would generally speak in favour of that, yet they complain if there is any variation between the service delivered by their own council and that delivered by the one next door—this is the so-called “postcode lottery”. Of course, there cannot be increased freedom and flexibility for local councils without variations in outcome. Therefore, the public are in a bit of a schizophrenic mood about whether they really want their local council to have the freedom to decide on the level and standard of services or whether they would prefer central Government to lay down standards and their local council to be held to them.

This is also about the press and the media. The example that we cited over and over in our report was the baby P case in Haringey. I do not want to get into the details of that but, in essence, as soon as it happened, horrific though the case was, it was being discussed in Parliament, the Opposition were requiring Ministers to respond and Ministers felt that they had to respond. However, in reality, the case involved a failure at the local level on the part of the council, and the police and the local health service—they are the ones who should be held to account. The local councillors and the local council officials are the ones who should have been put on the spot by the media and by the people in the borough concerned; they should not have gone to central Government level to take people to task. Our colleagues in Sweden and Denmark said that that would not have happened in their countries; if there was a



comparable case in those countries, the national press would not demand that the Secretary of State stand up to comment.

**Mr. Robert Syms (Poole) (Con):** The hon. Lady makes a powerful point. As a result of that case, the Badman review is taking place. It is trying to get local authorities to implement new inspection regimes on home education—that issue has been a feature of petitions in this House. Such a regime will add costs; indeed there will be a tougher regime on home educators than in respect of those on the at-risk register. We seem, again, to be going full circle, rather than allowing local authorities to sort out their own problems.

**Dr. Starkey:** I am not going to comment on the detail of that, because I suspect that I take a rather different view from the hon. Gentleman on that review, the proposals and the objections. However, this is an example of where a decision is being taken centrally, although it is a matter of debate among members of the public as to whether that is the appropriate place for such a decision to be taken. On child protection, the public have proved themselves to be resistant to leaving local councils to get on with it and appear to have much more confidence in central Government.

In parenthesis, in another inquiry that the Committee has completed on the Supporting People programme, it was very interesting that many of the people who gave us evidence on services for people with drug addictions, the vulnerable homeless and victims of domestic violence—groups who might be perceived to have a pretty low profile with the local electorate—were very twitchy about removing central controls. They were not confident that local councils would respond to the demands. I am not saying that they are right to be so, but that simply is a fact. The people supporting those groups had more confidence in central Government than they did in local government.

I simply want to make the point that was made to us very forcefully by Dr. Vernon Bogdanor, who is of course a constitutional expert. We asked him whether we needed a constitutional change and he said that we need a cultural change. This is not just a question of changing the rules—it is much more wide ranging than changing the rules and regulations, and who decides them. We need a huge cultural change, which it is probably a bit beyond Parliament to create. Obviously, we should do what we can.

That is the opening point that I wanted to make about the background. On the central and local relationship, it is also interesting that although the Government, in their evidence, could point out a number of steps that they had taken that appeared to reduce the level of control over local government and to start nudging it slightly towards greater localisation, the Government's assessment of how far they had gone down the road towards lightening up was a bit further down the road than the progress perceived by most councils.

The Committee effectively recommended that councils must be given much greater flexibility in the breadth and standard of services that they deliver and much greater power to vary that as well as a much greater ability to raise a bigger proportion of their income, and not to be so reliant on the Government. Let me touch on those aspects of the report, but before I do so, I want to make what might be considered a philosophical

point. We were in favour of more devolution not simply because locally determined services were likely to be more responsive to local need and therefore more effective and, probably, more cost-efficient, but because we felt that it would strengthen local democracy to have much more decided locally. That itself would strengthen the democratic fabric of the country. Democracy is seamless and if people had a clear understanding of, and greater involvement in, local democracy, they would be more likely to feel that they had more of a commitment to, and involvement in, the democratic process at a national level and a regional level, if appropriate, too.

The second point about allowing councils to raise a bigger proportion of their income is that we cannot get local accountability unless we have much greater local control of income and spending. Otherwise, there is no obvious link for local voters between what they are paying in council tax and the quality and breadth of the services that they receive. At the moment, some 75 to 80 per cent. of the councils' income comes, in one way or another, from central Government grants. The relationship between the level of council tax and the quality and breadth of services is therefore pretty minimal.

**Mr. Andrew Pelling (Croydon, Central) (Ind):** May I proffer another example? Although the devolution to London was extremely welcome, we ended up in a situation where the council tax made up only one twelfth of the revenue of the mayoralty and the Greater London authority. The current Mayor has ended up reverting to the fare-box to secure a significant hold on the finances. Perhaps if the business rates—or some element of them—had been given to the Mayor, that would have shown an even greater endorsement of the Government's ambition to devolve and to have that direct relationship between the voter and the Mayor in the control of the finances.

**Dr. Starkey:** The hon. Gentleman anticipates one of the specific proposals—albeit not in relation to the London Mayor—that the Committee made when we got down to the detail of our recommendations on local government income. He makes the point that under the existing system, especially when there are several layers of local government, it is extremely difficult for voters to understand exactly what they are paying for and the relationship between local tax—whatever it is—and the quality of services. In my view, the clearest form of accountability comes when someone is able to see a relationship between what they vote for, in relation to paying, and the services that they get.

On giving greater autonomy to local government, we certainly felt that central Government should reduce the number of performance indicators and specifications that they make on the detailed way in which services should be provided. We felt that the subsidiarity principle should be adhered to properly, and that local government should be given a power of general competence, if it was demonstrated that the existing well-being powers were falling short. At the time when we concluded the report, the court case on a mutual company had not concluded, and we would now say that there should definitely be a power of general competence because it is clear that the well-being powers did not deliver quite what they were supposed to.

The Committee felt that there should certainly be statutory rights for local communities to determine the way in which public services are implemented and

[Dr. Starkey]

co-ordinated in their areas. We thought that the power of councils to vary service standards should be limited, in that there should still be reasonable national minimum standards below which councils should not have the freedom to reduce services. This is a difficult issue, but we got the sense that the British public were not quite ready for councils to have complete freedom to reduce such things as the level of education provided or standards of street cleanliness. While there should be national minimum standards, however, councils should have the freedom to vary above them. Obviously, that suggests that the standards should not be so prescriptive that no reasonable council would want to vary from them one way or another. We certainly feel that councils should have oversight over the full range of public services in their area and the way in which they integrate with each other, as I shall point out when I set out our suggestions on policing and health care.

The Government's response shows that they at least partially recognise what we are saying and that they are moving in the right direction. However, I think that we would conclude that they are still not moving far enough and that they need to lighten up considerably more.

Health care and policing, especially neighbourhood policing and public health, are incredibly important local services, and there is already a degree of co-operation between local councils and those services through crime and safety partnerships. Several local authorities have pooled budgets, particularly with the NHS, and some make joint appointments. For example, my council's director of public health is a joint appointment, so there is already some joint working. However, the Committee feels that a local authority, as the only elected local body, should have much more direct control over other public services.

Specifically on health care, we suggest that where there is a coterminous primary care trust and unitary authority, the Government should consider introducing a pilot scheme that effectively gets rid of the PCT board and replaces it with the council. We recognise that that process would be relatively simple in such areas, whereas it would be difficult to introduce throughout the whole country because the boundaries of PCTs and councils are not coterminous in many places and a huge reorganisation would be necessary. However, it would be worth trying that out in some areas. We also suggest that, in the absence of such a development, the Department of Health and the Home Office should at least work much more closely with the Department for Communities and Local Government to establish local authority commissioning models for both health care and local policing.

When members of the Local Government Association representing the three main parties were asked in our evidence session about democratic control over police services, it was extremely impressive that they spoke with absolutely one voice. I understand that the one voice with which they spoke differed from each of the parties' Front-Bench policies. Essentially, that one voice said that we should certainly have local, democratic control over the police, that there is already a local, democratic body—the council—and that it should have such control. The members of the LGA were root-and-branch opposed to directly elected

police chiefs and police committees. We were extremely impressed by that, and I think that we largely agreed with them.

Ministers in the Department for Communities and Local Government have at least some understanding of local government and some feeling for devolution to local government, but we were unimpressed by the Ministers from the Department of Health and the Home Office, who did not seem to have much understanding of how local government worked or how it impinged on their Departments. I suspect that we would have gained a similar impression had we asked for a Minister from the Department for Children, Schools and Families or any other Department.

That points to a problem: even if DCLG is signed up to devolution, it has a big job to do to persuade the Ministers and civil servants in other Departments whose responsibilities impinge on local government to take the same relaxed view; to recognise the virtues of devolving power to local councils; and to realise that devolution might lead to departmental policy delivery locally that was more effective and cost-effective than it would be if they continued to try to micro-manage it.

On local government finance, we expressed the view that the Government must consider a variety of options to increase local government's revenue-raising powers. The issue is particularly relevant, given the country's likely economic climate and the need, as we come out of the recession, to rein in public spending. Local councils should be given greater flexibility in terms of revenue-raising powers, because future extreme funding shortages, as constrained by central Government, will mean that, even if councils are given increased powers to take decisions, they will not have any effective ability to vary services; they will simply be given flexibility in terms of what to cut. Indeed, local councillors will once again be held responsible for cuts that they have no power to vary. It is therefore particularly important that we increase local government's revenue-raising powers.

On local government taxation, the Committee concluded that there should be a supplementary local income tax alongside a property tax, and a corresponding reduction in central income tax rates so that the overall tax burden remained the same. Obviously, that could not be introduced tomorrow, but it is a potential long-term solution to the balance-of-funding problem, and one that the Government should seriously consider. Unsurprisingly, they immediately responded by saying that they had no plans to undertake such a project. I shall leave it to the Minister to explain why.

**Mr. Clive Betts** (Sheffield, Attercliffe) (Lab): Or change her mind.

**Dr. Starkey:** Or change her mind, indeed.

**Mr. Pelling:** Some of the Committee's proposals are very similar to those of the Layfield report. Does the hon. Lady think that the Callaghan Government's abandonment of that report was where we all went wrong?

**Dr. Starkey:** It is difficult to blame one set of people at one point. The fact is that, over the decades, a variety of people have, if I may describe it this way, bottled out. On the other hand, this country's experience of changing

local government taxation systems has been an unhappy one, and I can absolutely see why central Government of whatever party, having been rather burnt by the poll tax experience, take the view that minimal and incremental change is the best way forward.

Personally I think that incremental change on council tax reform, for example, could go a lot further than it has; all Governments seem to be extremely timid about the matter. To be fair, I understand that. We all know that when a system is changed, there are winners and losers. The winners take what they have got, keep quiet and carry on and the losers make a lot of fuss. It is extremely difficult. Sooner or later, however, somebody will have to bite the bullet because we cannot carry on nibbling away at the system and changing it incrementally.

We certainly reiterated the view that the Committee had taken before, which was that the business rate should be relocalised. Speaking personally again, I should say that I was on the other side of the argument in the sense that I was in local government when the business rate was taken away. It was alleged that some councils were bleeding businesses dry because the businesses had no vote. However, I recall that there was never any concrete evidence that that was happening on a grand scale. It seemed to me at the time a pretty poor evidential basis for reducing—removing, essentially—any accountability between a local council and its local businesses.

The fact that business rates are not localised means that whether there are active and successful businesses in an area makes no difference to the income of the local council, which will get exactly the same amount of redistributed business rate back. The relocalisation of the business rate is an extremely important issue.

**Mr. Betts:** On the issue of the business rate and how councils might misuse it if they got it back, I am sure that my hon. Friend recalls from her days in local government that when domestic and business rates were levied, there was a link between the two; councils could not increase the business rate and hold the domestic rate down. There was always that local accountability and democratic control over overall increases in rates.

**Dr. Starkey:** Absolutely. Of course, the Government have introduced the supplementary business rate, although that is largely for Crossrail. Schemes have been introduced that allow for business income to be raised locally against specific local projects. That has re-established a relationship between local businesses and local councils and demonstrated how local businesses benefit from local spending. Their acquiescence in contributing towards that spending is also encouraged when they know what it is for.

Unsurprisingly, the Committee reiterated its opposition to capping. When there is capping, democratic accountability between a local electorate and their local council is essentially removed and central Government try to second-guess the decisions of local councils. If local councils believe that they are delivering such a good and improved service to their local electorate that their local electorate will be willing to pay higher tax, the Committee and I felt that that is for them; if the local electorate did not agree, they would know what to do. We reiterated our view that capping should go completely.

We also considered forms of grant allocation and recommended some improvements. We were very constrained about what we could suggest in relation to Government grants. During our visit to Denmark and Sweden, it became apparent to us that the level of equalisation required between different authorities in those countries is small compared with what would be required in this country. The income difference between the poorest and richest councils in those countries is much less than the gap in this country because they are much more equal societies—partly as a result of their histories, but also because of their political systems.

When we look at the difference between our poorest and richest councils and the amount of money that needs to be reallocated through the equalisation process, it becomes difficult to think of ways in which one could reduce the contribution that central Government grant makes to local government income. We therefore contented ourselves with making several recommendations about transparency. We said that the advice and evidence that was given to the Department to inform changes in the grant formula should be made available on the DCLG website so that people could see how the formula was arrived at, the factors that had gone into it, and the advice that had been given; that the Government should do everything they could to increase the transparency of the grant allocation process; and that the maximum amount of detailed material should be published on the website. That would at least go some way towards enabling people to have a more informed debate about the outcome of the grant process instead of their being reduced to complaining, as we all have, about our own areas being funded less adequately than others without relating that to different needs.

We made some recommendations about constitutional change. We felt that it was important to enshrine the position of local government and the commitment to subsidiarity in a constitutional framework so that future Governments could not swing things back towards centralisation. We suggested that the European charter of local self-government, to which we signed up some years ago, should be put on to a statutory basis. We also said that there should be a Joint Committee of the House of Commons and the House of Lords to scrutinise and monitor legislation to ensure that none went through this House or the other House that took power away from local government, but preferably did that the other way round. Essentially, it would be like the connection between the Human Rights Act 1998 and the Joint Committee on Human Rights, but in the sense of protecting local government from further central Government encroachment.

**Dan Rogerson** (North Cornwall) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Lady and her Committee on their report. In their discussions on having a Joint Committee, was any consideration given to the constitutional implications of having representatives from local government serving on such a body alongside peers and Members of the House of Commons?

**Dr. Starkey:** We may have discussed that, but I do not recall doing so. We were thinking that it would be analogous to the Human Rights Committee, in which case it would be much more appropriate to have Members of both Houses.

[Dr. Starkey]

I am getting the message that I should finish and allow other Members to contribute. The spirit of our report was that we wanted to get debate going; we have certainly done our best to do that within the House, but also more widely. I am grateful to all those in local government, among others, who have taken up the report and used it as a discussion document to get the debate going outside this House as well as within it. I hope that we are going to see real change.

4.18 pm

**Sir Paul Beresford** (Mole Valley) (Con): I think that in the light of the earlier point of order I should explain that although I am an ethnic minority immigrant from the Commonwealth, I am also a British national. Safety first! No comments about going back, please.

The Chairman of the Committee has ambled all the way through the report, so I will make my speech somewhat shorter. The inquiry looked into the long-standing sources of conflict between central Government and local government. I found it particularly interesting given my history of being both poacher and gamekeeper—or, as some would say, poacher and poacher.

In many ways, local government acts on behalf of central Government; to some degree, it subcontracts to central Government. The situation is very similar in most western democracies. It is therefore understandable that central Government would wish for some measure of control over local government. Again, that applies in most western democracies. The interest and concern arises in relation to the degree of that control. In England, central Government control is clearly excessive, in my belief, and it has increased markedly since 1997. The minutiae of control was imposed from very early on following the 1997 election. When I served on the Committee that considered the “best value” Bill, which became the Local Government Act 1999, I saw these measures being introduced with a very heavy hand. There was monitoring, audits and reports from local government to Government Departments—not just the Department for Communities and Local Government, as the Chairman of the Committee pointed out, but other Departments. In those days, of course, the DCLG was the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. The best value legislation is notorious among councils, because it gave the Secretary of State the power to take over local authorities, literally.

Since 1997, councils have been loaded with targets to meet and judgments from the Government on quality, many of which have been based more on process than service quality. The current Secretary of State justified that under questioning by the Committee by saying that he believed the majority of councils in 1997 were of poor quality. He is possibly right; after all, the greatest proportion of councils in 1997 were Labour-controlled.

Hand in hand with councils struggling to manage with those central instructions, inspections and so on have come costs, which are moved on to the council tax payer. There has been a huge rise in council tax since 1997, with little change in the number of services provided. Much of it has been imposed as a result of Government audits and so on. For example, one local authority in my area is a tiny one called Mole Valley district council. A couple of years back, its comparative performance

assessment was undertaken. It was a huge event for the council, and its officers, particularly its senior officers, worked on it for weeks beforehand and for the time that the auditors were there. To some degree, the council stalled as a result. It cost it £250,000, but because of gearing it cost the council tax payer £1 million, for little or no gain that I can see.

As I mentioned, one of the biggest bones of contention for local authorities is the myriad targets, and the Government have latterly accepted that there are too many. It has been a source of amusement to see the pride of various Secretaries of State as they have announced with an air of smiling benevolence that the number of targets would be reduced, ignoring the fact that the mountain of targets was put in place by either them or their predecessors in the first place. I suppose one could call it “grand old Duke of York syndrome”—march us up the pile of targets and then march us down again.

The problem, which the Committee Chairman touched on, is that although the DCLG cut the raw number of targets, a number of them were amalgamated so that there was no actual diminution. As she pointed out, other Departments went on loading on new targets. Certain freedoms have been announced recently, often with a flourish, such as in capital borrowing. However, that freedom is not really in place, because although in theory councils can borrow with much greater freedom, there is still a tight rein on grant and council tax, and therefore on the revenue side of capital. Even worse, the Government have taken away many local authorities’ capital receipts and redistributed them elsewhere.

At face value, there are now only 198 national indicators. As I said, however, there are sub-indicators within them, so that figure does not give a true picture. The inspection regime has changed, and instead of concentrating on quality of service and value for money it is moving into other areas such as—I could not believe this—inspecting work force management. Councils that like to test the market for service providers are now crippled by legislative changes that make it virtually impossible for them to do that properly. Such action is now essentially a waste of money, particularly for councils with in-house services, because the system set up in law cripples potential private competitors.

For decades, local councils have worked with partners—that is the buzz word and has been for a long time—which may be private sector contractors or other public sector bodies such as the national health service and the police. I remember that before I came into the House, such partnerships were used by most of the local authorities that I knew well without mandatory statutory imposition from the Government. Now the Government are getting in on the act and setting up regulated, mandatory local strategic partnerships. They appear to have rules of engagement and require detailed assessment, with the usual flags of so-called performance all going on to a website that claims to grade councils from “good” to “poor”. Once again, valuable senior council officers will spend hours of valuable time rushing around, tailed by Audit Commission officers, ticking boxes that are more about process than the situation on the ground that the public would like. To make matters worse, many of those partnerships are now going to be tied into a system that does not reflect the fact that different partners may have different, conflicting priorities. Those should, but will not, be reflected in the flags that go on the appropriate website.

There is a marked contrast between Ministers' and local governments' view of the balance power. In fact, the tail end of paragraph 28 of the report puts that in a moderate and generous way:

"There remains a sizeable gap between the newly empowered local government that the Government believes it has established in principle, and the actual impact as witnessed at the local level." That summarises the essence of the report. It is about time—long overdue—that central Government, whichever party is in control, gets off the back and out of the pocket of local government.

4.25 pm

**Mr. Clive Betts** (Sheffield, Attercliffe) (Lab): As my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey) said a few minutes ago, the aim of the report was not only to make recommendations, but to stimulate debate. Hopefully, that will happen not merely in the Chamber, but outside. The Local Government Association, for example, has generally welcomed the thrust of the report. Hopefully, it will help its general push for greater powers and responsibilities for local government.

There is no doubt that Britain is one of the most centralised democracies in the western world. Certainly, the evidence given to the Select Committee was virtually unanimous—if there was a lack of unanimity, it was because the Government do not quite agree with everyone else on the matter. Putting that to one side, we took a lot of evidence that despite some moves toward greater powers, responsibilities and freedoms for local government, there had been a modicum of change rather than a seismic change since '97. Of course, we can welcome the different mood music that now comes out of the Department for Communities and Local Government. Ministers now generally seem to want to trust and work with local government.

I must tell the hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) that it is nice to hear Members become very supportive of local government when they are in opposition. However, I seem to remember spending an awful lot of time, when I was a leader and chair of a committee in local government, dealing with something called compulsory competitive tendering, which I seem to remember him having something to do with when he was a Minister.

**Sir Paul Beresford:** As the hon. Gentleman may remember, I inherited that when I became a Minister. Just before the election, I changed the rules considerably, giving local government much more say and sway on those matters.

**Mr. Betts:** I will accept the hon. Gentleman's point, but the Government of the time, as a whole, had a certain approach to local government—they sought either to control it completely or to ignore it altogether. I certainly remember a White Paper on urban regeneration, which Nicholas Ridley, the then Minister, introduced, that did not mention local government at all, as though it was not relevant to local people and the places in which they lived.

The Committee also took evidence in Denmark and Sweden. It is true that inherently, all parliamentary democracies are centralised, in that Parliament is ultimately

sovereign—it can choose either to use powers itself or to devolve them to other organisations. The fact is that Denmark and Sweden have chosen to devolve more powers to local and regional government. Obviously, those countries have different histories and cultures, so we cannot simply replicate what happens there in this country, but they offer examples of how parliamentary democracies, with Parliament remaining sovereign, can ensure that more decisions are genuinely taken at local level by local elected representatives.

As I said, there has been some improvement. The attitude in the DCLG has definitely improved. The approach of giving city regions more powers is a welcome step forward, and the reduction in the inspection regime and trusting local government more is helpful. Other positive steps forward include the changes that the Housing Minister is considering with regard to the housing revenue account, but an awful lot remains to be done.

We could look at how devolution in Scotland and Wales has been achieved. I certainly do not argue for, and I have never been supportive of, trying to replicate that sort of devolution in the regions in England, which are generally administrative conveniences and not real areas in the sense of being economic entities. I am much more supportive of giving powers to city regions on such matters. In the end, what matters to local people more than anything is their local council because they can see the things that local councils do—they are immediate to people. Councils are about sweeping the streets, the care of the elderly and local education provision. They are concerned with important local matters that affect people's daily lives.

In a healthy democracy, local councillors have to be allowed to respond to the needs of their local population. If they did not have that power and people felt that they were voting for representatives who were powerless and impotent and only there to do what central Government said, we would have an unhealthy democracy and people would get very frustrated and become very cynical. It is important for the health of our democracy that we get real power and responsibility down to local councillors. If we are to do that, we have to examine the whole issue of powers and how they fit within our constitution. Our constitution is, of course, unwritten, which does not make it easy to amend in the way that countries such as Sweden and Denmark can amend theirs. We also have to consider the issue of finance and the constant urge that Ministers have to interfere.

One reason why we have so many projects, so much central Government direction and so many grants for different items is that every single one is a photo call and a press release for the relevant Minister. Ministers can be seen to be doing things. Instead of saying to local government, "Here's the settlement for the year, and you can raise most of the money for yourself by various means", Ministers like to be seen to be doing things and to be involved. That is why they do not keep their hands off what are essentially local issues, and that affects the whole relationship between central and local government.

Establishing the principle of subsidiarity is important. Both Front-Bench teams are talking about moves towards a new localism and accepting the principle of subsidiarity. I have two examples that demonstrate that, whatever the general principles are to which those on the Front

[Mr. Betts]

Benches want to sign up, in practice they cannot resist taking a view on what should happen at local level. First, I am slightly worried by the care proposals that the Government are putting forward. If they are moving towards a national care service, does that mean that local councils will no longer have the freedom to deliver particular services in particular ways to people in their community? I do not know the answer, but if that is the case, I am worried that another whole section of local government services will be controlled and determined by a Minister, with local government simply as a delivery agent. That is not helpful for local democracy.

Secondly, we have just passed legislation that allows local transport authorities to decide whether they want to move to quality contracts. indeed, we have just had a notice from the Secretary of State today that the regulations giving extra powers to do that have been laid. I welcome that legislation because it will give the choice back to local communities through their elected transport authority members about how to run bus services in their local area. I have just put a survey out in my constituency asking people what they think about local bus services and this move, and I have already had more than 2,500 responses. That is a staggering response rate and it shows that people are interested and want to have a say. However, I understand that it is the policy of the Conservatives not to allow that and, if they get into power, to reverse the legislation. That is unfortunate and it goes against the grain of the principles of local democracy that they talk about.

I accept what has been proposed in terms of a power of general competence. It probably is better than the current powers of well-being, but of itself it probably does not go far enough. It fits in with the general thrust of the Lyons report that all that we have to do is to give local authorities a bit more power to prioritise the services in their area and that will be a significant step forward. Yes, it would be a step forward, but it is not sufficient. I would like to go further.

We have had the central local concordat, but it has hardly sparked the imagination of the British people or fostered a real debate about local democracy. Can anyone in the Chamber explain what is in the concordat? It is a secretive piece of work hidden away in some ministerial drawer—and probably in a Local Government Association drawer too. It ought to be pretty important, but instead this piece of paper has been signed, pushed to one side and forgotten about.

The report also mentions the European charter of local self-government, which is supposed to be in the constitution of every country that signs it. Obviously this country does not have a constitution in quite that form, but we do have constitutional law, and there is no reason why the central-local concordat and the European charter should not be put on a statutory basis. Why not go that far? If the Government believe in what they have signed, they should put it in statute. Then we could turn to the Joint Committee of both Houses that my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West suggested. It would be akin to the Human Rights Committee and could examine every piece of legislation that comes before the House to see whether it fits in with those two measures and the principle of subsidiarity.

Such a Committee would be a very healthy check, not just on the DCLG, which has signed up to the general principle and wants to get moving, but on other Departments that have not got the message. As my hon. Friend said, when we had before us witnesses from other Departments, they did not appear to get the message about local democracy. They seemed almost frightened of local government and of ceding any powers to it. Nominally, under the national health service, the Secretary of State is responsible for everything that happens in every part of the country in the health service. Clearly, that is nonsense, but legally it is where we are at. Let us put those measures into law and use them as a base from which to monitor all legislation from every Department.

As my hon. Friend said, in the report we suggested that powers could be devolved to local authorities. We could run pilot schemes under which, where local authority and primary care trust boundaries are coterminous, local authorities could become PCTs. That was a cross-party suggestion. I chaired another inquiry for the all-party group on local government, and Lord Hanningfield, the leader of the Tory-controlled Essex county council, supported that suggestion and said that Essex would volunteer to be one of the pilot councils.

There is great enthusiasm for joining up the commissioning of local health services—not the running of hospitals—with the local authority care services, not through the central mechanism of a national care service alongside a national health service, but by allowing things to be done locally. Of course, we will need local standards, and my hon. Friend is right about that. However, the public and politicians suffer from an element of schizophrenia in that no one wants a postcode lottery, but everyone wants local freedoms. Yet with local freedoms, different things will be done in different parts of the country. We just have to accept that. Central Government probably has a right to set minimum standards that everyone must follow, but some of the best services and service creation happen when people are free to develop and innovate at a local level and when other areas copy them and move on, rather than when central Government choose to be prescriptive from the beginning. That is the challenge.

We face a further challenge. We might be interested in local democracy, but it is not about creating more and more bodies, all of which appoint members through direct elections—directly elected police and health authorities, for instance—because that does away with the ability of local communities to choose their priorities. Local councils are elected and have a variety of responsibilities. They can make choices, based on their electorates and their manifesto priorities for different services, unlike what can be achieved by a series of directly elected bodies that cannot move resources between themselves.

One current criticism of the arrangements for local and multi-area agreements is that, although other Departments' officials often come to the table to join in the debate, they all do so with terms of reference dictated to them by their Departments. We do not get a real joining-up or ability to switch resources to different priorities, because each Department insists that its resources be spent on its services. That presents some challenges and some interesting ideas.

In the end we return to the issue of finance, which lies at the heart of much that we want to achieve. We can give local authorities the powers of general competence and sign up to as many agreements as we want, but in the end if central Government control 75 per cent. of the funding directly, it is a case of, "He who pays the piper, calls the tune." The Lyons report bottled out on one really important matter, although the Government's response was even weaker: how do we give more fundraising powers back to local councils? It seems obvious that re-localising the business rate is the way forward and would alter the balance between local and central Government to about 50:50.

Of course we need an element of central Government funding to deal with disparities in wealth, income and resources between one area and another. However, the calculations that we had done for the Committee in the past suggested that that element need only be about 30 per cent. of overall local government expenditure. Although Sweden has fewer disparities, as my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West said, 70 per cent. of local authority expenditure in Sweden is raised locally, so a 30 per cent. target ought to be one that we should try to achieve.

We probably need a local income tax element as a top-up, but I would warn hon. Members about that. We have to be careful about a local income tax for authorities that are not allowed to borrow for revenue purposes. Hon. Members should talk to authorities in the United States and even state governments, which are currently in the most awful financial difficulties—I recently visited the Pennsylvania state government. Of course they rely on a local income tax and local sales tax, but as authorities that cannot borrow, they are making massive cuts in their budgets in this recession, so let us not get to the point where a local income tax is the only tax that local authorities rely on. Local councils in this country would be in a complete mess if we implemented Liberal Democrat policy as I think it stands, although I am not absolutely certain about that. We have to be careful on that one.

I also welcome the fact that central Government are now moving away from ring-fenced grants, so that grants can at least be spent as local authorities wish. That is right. We had an inquiry into the supporting people programme, and people have concerns when the comforts of ring-fencing are removed, but it is right that such decisions are made locally. I remember having discussions about local government finance in the Committee some years ago when Ministers said, "Of course we want to remove ring fences". However, a few days later—this takes us back to different Departments doing different things—the Education Department, as it then was, decided that all school grants would be paid directly to schools and would not go through the local authority, thereby putting a ring fence around one of the biggest parts of local authority budgets. Again, that is the sort of thing that would be tested if agreements were put into law and a committee set up to monitor them.

Those points are the essence of the Committee's report. My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West referred to this, but the idea that the tragic death of one child could become a major debate in Parliament simply astounded the people we talked to in Sweden. They could not understand how Secretaries of State could be responsible for the actions of local

authority workers in one case, in one part of the country. They just did not get it. We have a completely different culture. My hon. Friend is right that the public in this country have a different perception, but perhaps they have had centralisation for so long that they have become accustomed to it. We now have to debate and raise the possibility of doing things differently and giving to local government genuine freedoms that are embodied in statute and monitored by a committee, and greater financial control to local councils. If we have that debate and move in that direction, we will have a much healthier democracy in this country than we do now.

4.43 pm

**Mr. Robert Syms (Poole) (Con):** I have been a Member of Parliament for about 13 years. I have also served for four years as a district councillor and for 12 years on a county council, and it is my perception that local government is good and efficient, and delivers services rather better than we do nationally.

One of the key things about local government is that it is much more effective at controlling money. A perfect example of that is today's estimates day debate. We have a vast tome setting out changes in Departments, with surpluses and deficits, and money being swished and switched about. However, on estimates days we debate sport or sports centres, and so on—that is, anything but money. If we as a Parliament want to re-engage the public on a national level about the importance of MPs in these difficult times, Parliament must do something, involving this House and the other House, about controlling money.

From my experience of local government, the one thing I am sure of is that local councillors are much better at looking after money. When I was in local government, if we ever had an overspend on a budget, an officer had to explain it. I have seen a number of officers hauled over the coals because they made certain judgments or misjudged the bill for a project. Local government is much better in that regard.

We have had a series of reforms, but we always seem to get structural reforms and financial reforms out of kilter. I agree that it is vital that the national business rate be localised again, so that at least 50 per cent. of that revenue can be controlled at local authority level. It would also be rather good if the proceeds of some of the development that we have had to have in our areas stayed with local government in the form of a tariff on development. We have a lot of section 106 agreements, which need time and lawyers, and sometimes the money stays in bank accounts for donkeys' years. I would prefer a much simpler tariff system on development in which the money could be used in a variety of ways by local authorities.

A quarter of all public spending is spent by local authorities, but about 80 per cent. of it is controlled by central Government in one way or another—by specific grants, for example. We need to knock down a lot of the boundaries and put more trust in local people to deliver local services. If we did, we would have a much more efficient, effective local sector.

The hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey) mentioned primary care trusts. It has always amazed me that we have set up a separate structure to deliver primary care, as it involves important

[Mr. Robert Syms]

local issues. We could still have a national health service while allowing a great deal more involvement by local authorities. This would be a good area in which to give greater powers to local authorities, and I hope that those on my Front Bench are listening.

It has been my experience over a number of years that there has been far too much interference from not only the Department for Communities and Local Government but the Department for Transport. Doing anything relating to transport regulations requires permissions, costings, and so on. It is not so much about putting the lines on the roads as about applying for the necessary permissions to do so. We see the same thing happening in education—in relation to admissions processes for schools, for example. Everything has become too bureaucratic.

If we are serious, as a Parliament, about reviving local government and making it more important, we need to look at the way in which we put too many controls on local authorities and impose additional costs by expecting them to produce endless reports. My officers in Poole spend their money on bidding for endless things that they often do not have much chance of doing. They also spend an awful lot of time looking into whether they can do private finance initiative schemes. In this national Parliament, we ought to be aware that we need to cut down the burdens on local authorities wherever possible.

My experience is that it is better to deliver at local level. People usually feel a degree of identity. In our country, that is sometimes to a county or to a borough, to England and to Great Britain. I agree with what the hon. Member for Sheffield, Attercliffe (Mr. Betts) said about regions in our nation. In England, they are mainly administrative areas, although there might be a slight difference with Yorkshire—or perhaps not. People feel no great affection for a region; they are more likely to identify with their county or their borough.

People also pay attention to what goes on, but if central Government control too much—particularly in relation to money—what incentive is there for local people to turn out in any numbers to elect their local authorities? What incentive is there to get good local people back into local government? The key is to give a greater proportion of the revenue going through local authorities to those authorities and to take the hand of the Government off them.

We need to reach a stage at which national politicians do not panic whenever there is a crisis, and feel that they have to have a plan. The hon. Gentleman asked why we, as a nation, behave in such a way. I suspect that it is because we have national newspapers. Our press is highly centralised in relation to the regional and local press. Anyone following the Chancellor's pre-Budget report, for example, will see a range of papers that have been written predominantly in London. Any kind of crisis will be on the front pages and on the BBC, which still tends to be somewhat centralised in London. Other countries have not only devolved local government but have a much more vibrant regional and local press. That is certainly the case in the United States, which has a large geographical area.

That centralisation is probably one of the factors involved. The immediate question to Ministers is, "What are you going to do?", and it is terribly difficult for them

to say, "Nothing, actually. I am going home to have a bath and prepare for dinner." They always have to have a plan, and the plan leads to a Green Paper, a White Paper, legislation and reports. The consequence of all that is that we end up putting burdens on local government. I do not know whether we need a constitutional mechanism to deal with that problem. We almost need a Bill of Rights for local authorities.

In Germany, the Länder are represented in the upper House. If we ever complete the reform of the next Chamber, there would be a logical argument for larger cities or counties to be represented there to temper some of the national enthusiasms that we get in this Chamber and to bring things back to questions of "What does it cost? What does it mean for local people?"

I finish where I began. I am a great believer in local government. There are some tremendously talented people in local government. There are some very good and very conscientious councillors of all parties who put a lot into their communities. As a Parliament, we should trust them more. I agree with the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South-West on policing and fire services. There has been a tendency to pull powers away from local authorities. Power should be going the other way, but that means that we have to accept failure and differences. If we accept that there will be bad authorities, weak authorities, better authorities and perhaps different services in different areas, we will start to have more independent local government and, in some respects, a more vibrant local government. If we do not allow failure, if we cap or if we interfere, it will level everybody down, which would be the worst solution.

There is a lot to be said for the report, which gives a great deal for us to think about. The relationship between local and national Government is crucial, and if we get it right, we will deliver better services at greater value and will reinvigorate local authorities, with more people turning out to vote and better quality people wanting to get involved.

4.51 pm

**Mr. Neil Turner (Wigan) (Lab):** I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the debate. In the new year I shall be taking up a position as a Parliamentary Private Secretary within the Department, so this is my last opportunity to speak. I thank the Chairman for her good offices and all the guidance that she has given to me while I have served on the Committee, and I particularly thank the staff, who have done a tremendous job in drawing up the report and in getting our sometimes rambling discussions into order.

The hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) seemed to be painting a picture of local government pre-1997 that was all sunny uplands. I was a local authority member for more years than I care to remember, certainly during the 1980s and 1990s, and that was not how I remember it. The then Conservative Government saw local authorities as theirs to command, and if they did not do as commanded, the Government abolished them, as they did with the metropolitan counties, or they starved them of funds, as happened year on year in the 1980s and 1990s. In Wigan, we had to make £10 million of cash cuts every year for three years on the trot; that was 1980s pound notes and not 2010's pound coins. We had to make a considerable reduction.



There was almost no notification whatever of those cuts. In February, we were given the figure. By April we were starting a new financial year. It was a fire-fighting exercise in which we rushed around trying to make cuts and balance the books. There is no way in which local authorities can plan properly in those circumstances. We found that programmes were being cut halfway through. Money was being wasted on those programmes and no benefit came out of it. My view of the last Conservative Government's local authority relationships is different from that of the hon. Gentleman.

On top of that, we had micro-management. My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Attercliffe (Mr. Betts) mentioned compulsory competitive tendering. I was chair of the committee that had to implement CCT in Wigan. It reminded me of the French education system, under which every child in every school in every village in France would open their book at the same page at the same time on the same day. The micro-management of CCT meant that every council had to do everything in a certain way, and a week later they had to send out another letter and so on. It was more like a French farce than French education.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned inspection regimes. I seem to remember that inspections were brought about by the Audit Commission set up by the then Conservative Government; I checked that with my hon. Friend, whose memory is better than mine, and he agreed. I do not disagree in principle with inspections; I think it is right for local authorities to be properly inspected, and to be shown, in a proactive and positive way, where improvements can be made. However, I do not like the prescriptive system we had in the past, under which authorities that did not do as they were told got clobbered. That was very difficult.

One problem was that targets were applied everywhere, so there was no relationship with local need or a local authority's resources, but we now have a different system. Under the new regime, targets are agreed by the local authority, which means that they have relevance to the area. More importantly, because local authorities are engaged in strategic partnerships that involve people and sectors across the entire community, such as commerce and voluntary organisations, targets—whether to do with sport, industry or regeneration, for instance—are part of an overall package bringing together all the sub-partnerships. That enables councils to promote their area on the basis of targets and priorities set by the local community, which is a very different way of dealing with things.

We can now also work in strategic partnerships with primary care trusts. The Conservatives deprived local authorities of such influence in the 1980s and 1990s when they took their members off area health authorities, which resulted in a complete split between local health provision and local government provision. We have now addressed that, however. We can meet hospital and other health trusts and the family care trusts, and therefore we can draw together those elements of local government service that are particularly relevant to the broader social services.

I do not know about other areas, but in Wigan we hold regular meetings—at least six a year—with health organisations and those involved in the local economy. The local MPs are also invited and can make a contribution. That works well and enables us to have better co-ordination.

My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey) said that her authority has a public health officer who is jointly employed by the local authority and the PCT. We have that in Wigan as well, and it serves to cement the ability of those employed in the social and health services to work together better.

There is also much pooling of resources between the two areas, so that people who are moving from social service care into health care do not fall between those two nets. There is not the problem of their being told, on the one hand, "No, you're not yet a health service problem; you're still a social services problem," and, on the other hand, social services saying, "No, her ability to look after herself is much worse, so she has to come under the health service." That happens where each service is protecting its own budget, so by pooling budgets we can prevent people from falling between those nets—or at least we can stop that happening often.

Another idea that the Government are taking forward which I warmly welcome is that of multi-area agreements, for which we have pilot schemes in city regions. In the Greater Manchester area, the Association of Greater Manchester Authorities is generally recognised as being foremost among city regions in the way that it has set up voluntary relationships since the Greater Manchester council was abolished. What was important initially was that all but one of the councils were Labour controlled, but that has changed over time. I pay tribute to the leaders of all those councils, from all parties, because what has not changed is their recognition that this is not a zero-sum game. They see that if Tameside gains a benefit, it is not at the expense of Wigan but to the benefit of the whole of Greater Manchester. Therefore, all the leaders come together to ensure that Greater Manchester is seen as the beneficiary. With multi-area agreements and city regions, it is important to ensure that that approach is built into the psyche of local authority leaders. They should not see the situation as a zero-sum game, but see that something that benefits one authority in a city region will roll out benefits to the others.

We have come a long way. I accept that the Government think that they have gone a lot further than the Committee thinks, but everyone on the Committee accepts that there has been significant movement in shifting the balance of power between central Government and local authorities. There is an awful lot more to do, but I perceive a willingness in the DCLG to ensure that that shift continues. That bodes well not only for local government but for citizens.

Let me make some final points about local government finance, which, as hon. Members have said, is crucial to the relationship between central and local government. One of the best actions that the Government have taken in that regard is to introduce the certainty of a three-year system in the comprehensive spending review. That certainty of funding will allow local authorities to plan much better and to institute programmes knowing that they can carry them through. Let me make a suggestion to the Minister that I hope she will take back to the Secretary of State for discussion in the Cabinet: rather than having three-year blocks, which means that at the end of a block there is certainty only for the next year, there could be a rolling three-year programme. With such a programme, one would have some certainty in

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the first year regarding the next two years, and in the second year, one would have some indication as to what the fourth year would bring. Such a system could be used in both local and central Government to allow local authorities and Departments to plan more effectively.

If finance is crucial to the relationship between central and local government, it is important to get the figures right, particularly the balance that central Government pays to local government. I think it is a universally acknowledged truth that a council in search of a revision of formula funding is a council in search of money. We must always recognise that there will never be a perfect funding formula, as there is no such thing. The idea of a perfect funding formula is a chimera, or a holy grail that can never be grasped. However, I think that our funding formula is reasonably reflective of the needs and resources of local authorities. If that is the case, it is incumbent on the Government to ensure that the formula is put into action as quickly as possible. It cannot be right that many local authorities are massively overfunded while others are massively underfunded. The needs of Kensington and Chelsea have been assessed at £89 million under the formula, but it is receiving £104 million in Government grant, whereas Wigan's needs have been assessed at £135 million, but it is receiving only £129 million. One local authority is receiving £14 million more than it is entitled to under the formula, while another is receiving £6 million less.

I spoke earlier about the relationships between PCTs and local authorities, and unfortunately the same problem arises with PCT funding. I shall again make a comparison between Kensington and Chelsea and Wigan. Kensington and Chelsea needs £277 million but gets a grant of £337 million, which amounts to overfunding of £60 million. Wigan needs £537 million but gets £512 million in grant, which amounts to underfunding of £25 million.

Adding together £6 million and £25 million makes a total of £31 million. That is the amount that the Wigan authority is not allowed to spend—last year, this year and next year—on the services that it wants to provide. Another way of looking at it is that it is money that is being taken out of people's pockets and, given Wigan's population of 300,000, that is a lot of money per head.

That brings me back to the earlier point about the existence of a postcode lottery. It is clearly very much easier for a place like Kensington and Chelsea, which is getting so much more funding than it is entitled to, to reduce council tax or increase services, or do a bit of both, than it is for a place like Wigan. People ask why Wigan does not have the same services as other authorities, but they have no knowledge of where we stand in relation to the funding formula and the amount of money that we get. It is extremely important that the Government move forward as quickly as possible on funding.

I do not want to return to the huge cuts that we used to get in the 1980s. Because of my experiences then, I am a big supporter of the damping process and the floors and ceilings that have been introduced, but the pace of change in funding for family care trusts and local authorities is far and away too slow. Speeding it up would help local authorities, and ensure that citizens were being treated fairly.

One last point on the financial history is that we surely have to recognise that council tax is inherently unfair. That is what it was designed to be, and one of the few achievements of John Major and his Government was to make sure that it was. It is quite wrong that a person who lives in 25-bedroom mansion should pay only three times as much council tax as a person who lives in a two-up, two-down terraced house. That is not the right way to organise finances. The Lyons review was at least an opportunity to open the debate about that, although my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Attercliffe suggested that it was a lost opportunity. The Government's response was far too timid, and we need to look at ways of ensuring that many more bands are introduced and that there is a much fairer relationship between bands. Finally, it is essential to have constant revaluations of houses in the council tax system, to ensure that the system does not get into the same untenable state that characterised the old rates.

This is an excellent report. I am glad that I was able to contribute to it, and sorry that I will not be able to help my colleagues on the Committee in compiling further reports for the House. I believe that this is an extremely important area, and it is one that I feel very strongly drawn to.

5.8 pm

**Mr. David Drew** (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I am delighted to be able to take part in this debate. I apologise for not being here at the start to hear the remarks made by the Committee's Chairman, my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey), but I was taking part in the Westminster Hall debate on pensioner poverty, a subject that is undoubtedly linked to this one. Although I will not spell those links out, I think it fair to say that two very interesting debates have been arranged for this Thursday afternoon.

I shall keep my remarks very brief, but I am delighted to be able to say a few things on this topic. My starting point is the fact that, when it comes to the relationship between central Government and local government, all is not well in the kingdom of Denmark. I want to turn these relationships on their head, because like my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Mr. Turner), I have a long history of involvement in local government. I am still a councillor in Stonehouse town council and I have much to say about how I admire what this first level of government does. It is often left out of all our discussions on local government, but I wish to put it on the record that we underestimate what parishes and community government can bring. I shall say something about that in a few minutes' time.

I want to turn this on its head, because although it is easy to blame central Government for all the ills that local government feels have been done to it, local government has much to answer for in its timidity in failing to stand up to central Government. In my 30 years of involvement with local government, it has often been too easy to blame the centre when local government could have done more to reform radically what is happening and to address the loss of power and responsibility.

That situation is potentially linked to the changes in structure and the movement towards a cabinet and scrutiny system. Such a system is not intrinsically wrong; what is wrong is the way in which many councils tend to

operate it. They tend to believe that once they have a cabinet system, their councillors have inherent powers that they accrete to themselves and, thus, other councillors can do nothing about that. Other councillors ought to use their scrutiny powers more. However, one of the failings occurs when a dominant political group appoints itself not only to the cabinet, but to the chairs of the scrutiny committees. Such an arrangement is wrong; just as we have a balance of power here, it ought to operate properly in local government. It is simply a scandal that a dominant grouping can use its own people in such a way as to not scrutinise what it is doing.

One thing that is wrong and that needs to be changed is that the professionalisation of local government has excluded, rather than included, a lot of people. There are those who argue that we should never allow people's means to enter into the question of whether they can stand for election as a councillor, but we have gone to the other extreme whereby their income is entirely dependent on whether they keep their seat. That should not be the way of it; people should go into local government because they believe in public service and want to serve their communities, not because it is a paid form of employment. It is sad that the question of money is entirely bound up with that of whether people stand for election and try to keep their seat.

**Sir Paul Beresford:** The situation is more difficult than that, because the power of the elected leader of the group over his cabinet is extreme as a result of the finances that accrue to those other cabinet members.

**Mr. Drew:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I do not wish to cast aspersions or try in any way to wish even more problems on Stroud district council, even though it is run by those with a different political persuasion from mine, but I should say that the groupings on that council have that problem. The Conservative group is split according to who has got a position and who has not. This is a worrying development and we need to see it as a whole, because it causes great disillusion among the local populous when they see that people apparently get elected because of the associated money. I regret that we have seen that happen. Local government could revisit the issue and do something about it. It does not have to have this system imposed on it, and it might feel that it wants anything but that.

The point about the public service ethos is referred to in the Library debate paper, and from memory, I think it is in the very good report from the Communities and Local Government Committee. It concerns the payment not only of councillors but of staff. We are now completely out of kilter with what some chief executives and senior council officials are paid, and that needs to be revisited quickly. If we must navel gaze at our own situations, it is only right and proper, in the light of the bonus culture, that others should re-examine what they can expect, morally as well as financially. Some of the salaries that are now being paid have achieved the opposite of what I would have liked—they have destroyed the public service ethos, rather than supporting it.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) would be staggered if I did not take this opportunity to mention the Sustainable Communities Act 2007. Some of us feel that it is a move in the right direction, because it is about re-introducing localism. I caught the

end of what my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West said, and we need to recognise that we cannot isolate local government from other aspects of the statutory and voluntary sectors. It is only right that the Sustainable Communities Act should be linked in with what the Government are doing with Total Place, which I find very exciting, to try to find an overall approach to the way in which we govern local areas. That must make its way through the morass of difficulties, which we all know about. If we can get it right, we will get a much clearer system for the accountability of local decision making, which can be made properly accountable, rather than being seen as local administration.

I welcome the efforts that are being made. I know that the Secretary of State makes many speeches nowadays about our planning and consideration of local spending reports. We can argue about how that is being done and whether it is being done quickly enough, but if the work of Tim Berners-Lee and Professor Nigel Shadbolt can be applied so that we can track funding appropriately and begin to share it in a different way, money can be saved. I am not interested in saving—I am interested in much more effective and efficient use of service provision. If we can do that, that will be very exciting. I think the hon. Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) has chosen the “sustainable communities Act mark 2” as his private Member's Bill. I shall be a sponsor of it, as I think he has stolen the Bill that I promoted. I am only too happy to lend it to him.

I want to make two more points, and then I shall not detain the House any longer. It is about time that we took a grown-up approach to moving forward the structure of local government. I ask those who think that it is quaint to have three-tier local authorities and who have moved to unitary authorities in their own area to please revisit the issue. We should have a structure that is fit for purpose for the 21st century.

We need some form of regional government in this country. It can either be unaccountable—as it was under the last Conservative Government—or it can be made more accountable. I have enjoyed being on the South West Regional Select Committee. It is a lonely existence, particularly because if I go out of the room, the whole Committee is disallowed because it becomes inquorate. We need to recognise that some form of regional accountability and scrutiny is necessary, and those Select Committees have, in their short existence, already done some invaluable work.

We need to move forward. We need clarity about proper strategic local government delivery, which I hope can be done through unitary authorities. If Cornwall can do it, please can Gloucestershire follow suit one day? We are so far out of the loop now and so far behind the times that it is just embarrassing. That would give greater powers to parish and town councils, which can be the delivery arm in many respects, and that would differ from the situation at the moment in which we are squabbling over who repairs the pavements. If hon. Members can explain who has responsibility to any member of the public, they are a better person than me, because all three layers of government squabble over a number of responsibilities, and that is not a happy situation.

During the summer recess and beyond, I conducted a survey on some of the reforms proposed by the Wright Committee—I was glad to have been elected to serve as

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one of its members. One of the questions in “Up for Debate”, as we called the survey, asked whether the general public wanted local government to get more power and funding. That question produced one of the most disappointing responses, because there was strong opposition to giving more power and funding to local government, but that shows how far we have to go to rebuild local populaces’ trust in their local government. We received 7,000 replies to the survey, so we heard from a fairly good cross-section of the Stroud constituency, but the results show that local government is unpopular and not trusted. Although it is easy, as I suggested at the start of my speech, to blame the centre for that, local government must do a lot more in its own right to rebuild trust. I hope that the Committee’s report and what happens on the back of our debate will go some way towards achieving that.

5.21 pm

**Dan Rogerson** (North Cornwall) (LD): It is a shame that more hon. Members have not had the opportunity to participate in this important debate, but pressing business is taking place elsewhere. However, those of us who have been able to discuss the report and hear colleagues’ contributions will feel that we are getting to the heart of what government ought to be about: dispersing power and involving people in the decisions that affect them.

The report presented by the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey) on behalf of her Committee makes several key recommendations. It is clear that the Committee’s work on several areas all relates back to the fundamental points of how local government works, its relationship with central Government, and its ability to deliver on local people’s agendas.

The hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) gave us a history lesson although, as we heard from other hon. Members, it seemed to begin in 1997 and there is a tale to tell from before that. However, I accept some of the hon. Gentleman’s points, especially about the burden that targets and the inspection regime have placed on local authorities. He had less to say about capping, the centralising of business rates and other measures that were introduced on his party’s watch during its time in government, but we move on, and I hope that the Labour and Conservative Front Benches will be able to reassure us that they are looking at those things anew.

The speeches made by Labour Members with a long experience of local government showed that there was no recent golden age because problems have been faced over some time. However, as the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South-West said, there has been a centralising tendency, so we urgently need to rebalance that and to bring back a sense of freedom to those who are engaged in local government. The hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) said that people, sadly, sometimes have low regard for local authorities. That is a function of the way in which local authorities are unable to deliver on aspirations as they would like, because they do not have the necessary powers, and also arises because there is a lack of transparency and no link between funding and accountability, which has been a key aspect of our debate.

I am delighted to say that a lot of what is in the report has been my party’s policy for a long time. I point that out not to say, “I told you so,” but because if a group of distinguished Members considers the evidence and comes back with a set of policies that concur with the ones I promote week in, week out, that is a nice place to be. I accept that the Committee does not agree with us on every matter, because there were a few problems with local health boards and elected responsibility for police oversight. I accept what the hon. Lady said, and, as she heard from Liberal Democrat councillors, I recognise that democratic accountability is still the subject of debate in our party, even though our policy is moving in that direction at the moment. The issue stems from the need to get around, at least initially, the problem with the public’s perception of local authorities. However, if we introduce democratic accountability, first, to the local health service, longer term there may be opportunities to bring in other measures.

I certainly support a power of general competence, and I was very pleased to hear the hon. Lady say that in light of recent events, the Committee’s position would have been stronger had it issued the report today. That is welcome, because such a power would clearly demonstrate that local government was able to innovate, consider local factors and come up with solutions. Currently, without that power or the freedom to be more innovative on finances, whatever the priorities that are identified locally, there are real limits on how much can be done to meet them.

Finance issues were raised, and I was pleased to hear that the Committee wanted to re-localise business rates, because, again, the Liberal Democrats have argued for that for a long time. We need to consider the issues associated with equalisation, because some local authorities will do very well out of it. However, that measure would restore the connection between what is going on in the local economic sphere and what the local authority is doing. It would be a huge step in the right direction.

I was also interested in the fact that the Committee favoured a form of local income tax, if only on a supplementary basis to council tax. Although my party has favoured a local income tax for some time, we have been up front in saying that it could not be done overnight. It would take a long time to introduce and enact in a way that did not cause huge upset to the delivery of public services locally. However, we are sticking to that aspiration, and we want to introduce it.

**Mr. Betts** *rose*—

**Dan Rogerson:** I sense that the hon. Gentleman is ready to jump in on that point.

**Mr. Betts:** The hon. Gentleman tempts me, and I thank him for giving way. It is interesting that local income tax is now an “aspiration”—I heard the word—but how long is a long time? Does he accept, moreover, that if local authorities had to rely on a local income tax for their major source of funding in the current economic circumstances, many would be in deep financial difficulties?

**Dan Rogerson:** When I say a long time, I am not talking about decades but, ideally, within the period of a Parliament. It might take longer than that, as the experience of Scotland is showing—whatever the aspiration might be to introduce a local income tax there. Nevertheless, I would certainly want to look at local pilots as a way of

bringing forward the proposal. I accept that with all taxation systems there are winners, losers and issues to address, but we must tackle the fundamentals of equity and inequity, which the hon. Member for Wigan (Mr. Turner) mentioned, and the problems of the current council tax system. In my party's view, the council tax system is not delivering and is not fit for purpose.

I was also pleased to hear the hon. Member for Wigan mention revaluation. My party would rather this country did not stick with the council tax system, but if we do, revaluation is the logical way to keep it relevant. That presents a problem for parties that want to stick with council tax but either put off revaluation or argue that it is unnecessary.

**Mr. Betts:** When the hon. Gentleman answered—half-answered—the question in my previous intervention by saying that a long time is not decades, he did not address the buoyancy of a local income tax during an economic recession. If people's incomes fall and people lose their jobs, there will be a real problem for an organisation that relies for its main source of funding on a local income tax, particularly when compared with council tax, which is fairly stable despite the current economic difficulties. Is that not a fair point? How does he answer it?

**Dan Rogerson:** That is a fair point. Obviously, there need to be equalisation measures. As the hon. Gentleman has said, if unemployment was rife in particular parts of the country, they would be worse affected by a falling off of incomes. Such things would need to be reflected in the formula. However, I do not consider that an argument for discounting local income tax altogether, and I am pleased that the Committee was prepared to consider it as a supplementary local taxation system.

In her introductory remarks, the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South-West was giving marks out of 10 to other Government Departments in respect of how they engage with the issues in the report. That is crucial, too; we have to have a commitment right across the Government to agree that local government plays a vital role in delivering services—sometimes on a sort of agency basis, as other hon. Members have said, but, I hope, increasingly in their own right and as part of a constitutional set-up. Unlike most democracies, we do not have a written constitution, but I hope we will make the move to having one; during my political life, that has been at the heart of what I want to see as part of constitutional reform. That could allow the position to be set in a more concrete way.

I noted that the recent publication "Putting the frontline first: smarter government" took the opportunity to discuss the proliferation of quangos and the amount of public money that they spend. At the moment, it seems that the solution is to merge and amalgamate quangos. We will wait to see how that agenda develops, but that would not get us around our need to bring some of the funding to local authorities, which are well equipped to spend the money and be accountable for it. The Local Government Association has been giving traffic-light markings to quangos, which shows that it is keen to discuss how it could do more to influence how quangos deliver spending locally.

I appreciate that I am moving slightly off the subject of the Committee report, but it is important to see how

things are perceived right across the Government. There are a few gems in "Putting the frontline first"; for example, I love this:

"We will align the different sector-specific performance management frameworks"—

that sentence, of course, is a fantastic way of engaging people and increasing understanding. On the issue of quangos, the document states:

"We will, as a first step, rationalise the ALB landscape".

If we want to encourage people to engage and feel confident that they can have a role, we need to make sure that things are as accessible as possible.

We have to hear from the other Front Benchers. In conclusion, the report makes a great contribution to our debate. It is a shame that in their response, the Government do not pick up on as many of those issues as we would have liked. The clock is ticking, of course, on their ability to respond—at least in this Parliament; we will see what happens in the next one. I am pleased that the members of the Committee have undertaken this work and presented it to Parliament and Government in this way. It takes us a little further forward.

5.33 pm

**Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con):** Like the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Dan Rogerson), I think this has been a useful, interesting and thoughtful debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey) and her Committee on their report. It is interesting and raises a number of important and serious issues. It is a shame that more Members have not come to participate in the debate. I am sure, however, that what has been said will be circulated and come to the notice of people beyond those who are in the Chamber this afternoon. It deserves that.

Virtually all of us in the Chamber today might be termed "local government usual suspects", because we all have a background and track record in it. Most of us would probably say that we were unashamed local government enthusiasts. Part of the task for those of us who willingly wear that hat is to persuade to our point of view many other hon. Members and people outside the House who may not have our direct experience of the value of local government and the efficient and effective way in which it delivers many crucial public services.

The report and the debate are worth while on several levels. All hon. Members who have spoken have followed the tone of the report. They have a wealth of experience, and they made some very constructive points. Although I might not agree with them all in detail, it is striking that there were several themes on which Members on both sides of the House could find a degree of commonality—an awful word that sounds rather as though it has come from a DCLG report.

I do not think that we will ever reconcile entirely the views of my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) and the hon. Member for Wigan (Mr. Turner) as regards the historical background. I was in local government at much the same time as both of them. However, we can all see that there has been a kind of ratchet effect of centralisation that goes even further back, almost to the post-war period. If Professor George Jones and others came along to give evidence,

[Robert Neill]

we would probably get some alternative starting points. There is a cumulative effect that often occurs when individual initiatives seem to make sense at a particular time in a particular set of circumstances. That has created what is generally accepted as being the most centralised of all the advanced western democracies. The fact that there is pretty much common ground on that view among informed opinion is an important step forward in our seeking to move forward and address it.

Let me go through some of the issues raised by hon. Members, starting with the point made by the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South-West—and by the hon. Members for Sheffield, Attercliffe (Mr. Betts) and for North Cornwall, among others—about the power of general competence, which I firmly support. The Government had taken the view that the power of well-being was adequate, but events demonstrated that whatever the intentions behind it, it was inadequate. In particular, the judgment in the London Authorities Mutual Ltd case, which was not available at the time, has shown very clearly that the power of well-being is not enough to give local authorities the degree of legal competence that they need. At the time when the Bill that became the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009 was going through the Commons, the Government did not support Opposition proposals to amend it to create a power of general competence. I have had the opportunity to listen to the Minister talk about this in the past, but I urge the Government to reconsider it in the light of the developments in the LAML case. I think that if they did, they would have the support of all major parties in the House.

The power of competence is a key issue, but there is a general lack of power in other respects, with a needless degree of micro-management of local authorities. The hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) talked about local authority internal governance structures. I do not entirely agree that the unitary option is necessarily always the answer, but I do not have a problem with the patchwork quilt approach, to some extent. However, I share his concern about the straitjacketing of local authorities into certain limits in relation to their own internal governance arrangements. Not everybody would want to return to the committee system that most of us grew up with when we were in local government, but that option should be available.

I have never been fully convinced by the argument that the fairly rigid form of cabinet governance for all but the very smallest local authorities is absolutely necessary and has to be imposed centrally. When I was a fairly senior member of my London borough council and when my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley was leader at Wandsworth, I suspect that most big authorities—including Wigan, no doubt—had, in effect, a cabinet system. Our cabinet system comprised the leader and the committee chairman; we got together and drove the policy agenda and gave the officers direction. The slight difference was that we had to get matters through our committees and take at least our own group with us, but we could achieve political direction without having to go through the rigidity of imposing a cabinet structure. If we are serious about giving local authorities back power in their own house, one modest but pretty obvious thing to do is say that it is up to local

authorities to determine their internal arrangements. Similarly, where there are third-tier councils—parish and town councils—it ought to be open to the local authority to determine the delegation and consultation arrangements. A measure of internal freedom is consistent with my party's position and the Select Committee's report. I hope that the Government will take that on board earnestly.

There is concern about intrusive inspection arrangements, which have grown significantly. The Local Government Association has published a couple of important documents recently on the cost of the inspection regime. Each regime succeeds another. At one time we had compulsory competitive tendering, which the hon. Member for Wigan mentioned, and we now have comprehensive area assessments. Each regime brings its own burdens, and depending on where on the spectrum one comes from, one may like or dislike a particular regime, but the costs are real. The LGA has calculated the costs to local authorities of reporting upwards at something like £2 billion, which is a significant burden. The emphasis should be on reporting downwards to their electors.

**Sir Paul Beresford:** I have read the report, or a report on the report, and it suggests that there could be savings of £4 billion to £5 billion annually.

**Robert Neill:** That is entirely right, and compared with the total costs of reporting that is modest and achievable. I hope that the Government will take the opportunity of this debate to welcome and take on board that report, which is consistent with their own "Smarter Government" document and could be seized upon and worked with. My hon. Friend makes an important point, because the LGA is a cross-party organisation and its report comes from local government practitioners. I hope that it will be taken on board.

Linked with that is a matter on which I agree with both Labour Members and my hon. Friends, which is the fact that we should not regard a postcode lottery as always indicating a problem. It is undesirable if it is the result of arbitrary allocations, but where a difference in out-turns is the result of an informed, democratically driven decision, it is something not to condemn but to praise and encourage as it reflects the working of local democracy. An important cultural shift needs to be taken on board, and I am glad that it was addressed in the Committee's report.

Another real concern is the growth of the quango culture, which, again, has happened under Governments of both persuasions and over a period of years. The number of unaccountable agencies, and more to the point the degree of public spending that they take up, has grown exponentially. That is now a real obstacle between the elector—the informed and interested resident—and the governance systems, central or local, intended to represent them. I have seen one estimate that there are 1,152 quangos, including the small regional ones. There are a massive number, and they administer something like £43 billion.

I saw an interesting figure, I believe again from an LGA source, that of every £7,000 of expenditure, only about £350 is spent by democratically accountable bodies. That indicates the degree to which we have slipped into a form of centralisation and unaccountability. Many of the functions of quangos could readily be carried out

by local authorities, and I hope that we can look forward to finding consensus between the parties as a means of achieving a transfer of many of those functions back to democratically accountable bodies. Examples have been given by Members of all parties, and many of us who have worked in the field know that greater alignment of the working of primary care trusts and local authorities could produce significant benefits. There is no doubt that good local authorities could take on valuable roles in commissioning, particularly in the local public health services. The question of acute hospitals is different, but a natural synergy could be achieved with good will and collaboration. That might not only save money, but get better results for the resident and the patient. That is significant.

Linked to that, we could simplify the number of funding streams and agencies that local authorities have to deal with. I have looked at some of the detail. It is striking that in Durham, there are 47 funding streams for social housing. How is anyone going to navigate their way through that? In Luton and Central Bedfordshire—one established and one new unitary authority next door to each other—there are 49 different public sector agencies. Such proliferation gets in the way of making government either joined up or comprehensible to the citizen. The alternative is to concentrate those agencies wherever possible—the obvious place to do that is in the democratically accountable forum of the local authority. If the Minister indicates that the Government are prepared to move in that direction, she would certainly find support elsewhere in the House.

I want to give the Minister ample time to respond to this very useful and constructive debate. I am very impressed by much of what has been said. There are some areas where more work needs to be done, but I hope we will have the opportunity to continue to raise local government issues. Sometimes we do that in rather technical terms, in relation to finance settlements and so on, as we did earlier in the week, but in a sense, they are but the mechanisms by which we try to drive the broader agenda of making services responsive to the needs of local communities. That is why the topics we have debated today are particularly important.

5.47 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Barbara Follett):** I thank all the members of the Select Committee on Communities and Local Government for this timely and relevant report on the balance of power between central and local government in England. Since the Committee first raised the issue, at least three Ministers in the Department for Communities and Local Government have had the chance to comment on it—I am happy to be the fourth.

First of all, despite the somewhat discouraging comments made by the hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford), I believe that very significant progress has been made over the past 12 years in the move away from centralisation. Such centralisation has happened for more than a century, as other hon. Members pointed out, and in many levels of government—it applies not only to the relationship between local and central Government. My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey), the Chairman of the

Committee, alluded to centralisation in her speech and made some telling points on the need to balance it with the variable delivery on the ground that could happen without it. That is at the heart of the problem that we are addressing today. Centralisation was at least in part driven in an attempt to reduce variation in delivery and increase accountability in the public services, which make such a huge difference to the lives of everyone in this country. The public services that local government delivers are the ones that make us angry or happy—they are the ones that touch our lives most personally.

I pay tribute to the way in which local government has risen to the recent downturn. Specifically in the region for which I have ministerial responsibility, the East of England, but also across the country, I have seen the magnificent response by local authorities as they rally round to help individuals and businesses at this very difficult time.

**Sir Paul Beresford:** I did not mention it, but several Labour Members did, pointing out that if there is a certain minimum level, variations could and should be the choice of the local population and the local authority. I think that she is wrong on that point.

**Barbara Follett:** I agree with the hon. Gentleman that variations up to a certain point can and should be the choice of the local authority, but it is the extent of those variations and people's varying expectations that were alluded to in the debate.

Over the past 12 years, after an initial period that hon. Members have rightly categorised as intensive and centrally directed targeting—designed to get services that in many cases were of varying quality to come together and for agreement to be reached on what quality was—central Government are changing gear and reducing the number of strategic performance measures and re-emphasising the importance of local leadership and local decision making. As a result, councils have been given greater powers and freedoms and, thanks to the first ever three-year settlement, greater financial stability.

I am glad that my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Mr. Turner), whom I look forward to welcoming to the Department in the new year, recognises the benefits of this settlement and I am sure that he, like me, will discuss the benefits of rolling settlements with the Secretary of State in the new year.

We have also reduced ring-fencing and devolved powers, which, as I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew)—once a member of my local authority, Stevenage borough council—will agree, has allowed the proliferation of parish councils. That can only be a good thing. In my own constituency and region, they have really grown and begun to flex their muscles locally. These increased powers have also led to councils making and enforcing some byelaws and getting increased choices in the democratic processes, both electorally and on leadership matters.

As the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) will be glad to hear and as he knows from previous interactions with me, discussions on the general power of competence are ongoing within Government. Although they are at a very early stage, this space is definitely worth watching. We are also looking at ways in which councils can raise money for specific local

[Barbara Follett]

economic projects, and a great deal of work is being done—as yesterday’s pre-Budget report alluded to—on ways in which councils can raise money with things such as tax increment financing, renewable heat and light incentives and feed-in tariff revenue streams.

Most recently, the Government introduced the Business Rate Supplements Act 2009, which only received Royal Assent last month, so that county and unitary authorities and the Greater London authority could retain the proceeds of a supplement levied on their business rates to invest in additional projects aimed at promoting economic development—I emphasise the words “economic development”—in their area. As some hon. Members mentioned, we have also introduced the business improvement districts.

We have given local councils an enhanced role in leading their communities, shaping their area and bringing their public services closer together. Indeed, since 2007, we have given this co-operation a statutory underpinning in the shape of local area agreements. Despite the remarks of the hon. Member for Mole Valley—in future we should call him the grand old duke of Mole Valley—we have reduced the performance management burden on local authorities, working alone or in partnership, by reducing the national indicator set to a suite of 188 measures and setting a cap of 35 on the designated improvement targets set by local area agreements. In 2011, we hope to review and consult on the indicators set and to reduce their number even further, and under sustainable communities legislation, citizens can put forward proposals for change in their areas through their local councils.

Alongside those improvements, we have introduced extended scrutiny arrangements to give local councils and their electorate a powerful tool with which to influence the decisions that affect their daily lives. Measures in the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009 will further extend those, and we will use the Act to change the law to allow local authorities, and other “best value” organisations, to enter into much-needed mutual insurance schemes. In those and many other areas, the Government have demonstrated regularly how seriously they take their relationship with local government. Our ratification of the European charter of local self-government in our first 12 months in office is a good illustration of that commitment. The central-local partnership and the joint signature of the central-local concordat in December 2007 are further clear indications of the value that the Government place on their special relationship with local government.

The debate about the balance between central and local government is not, however, just an academic exercise; as I said earlier, it is about getting the highest quality services for local people. That is where the Total Place approach, as outlined in this week’s White Paper, entitled “Putting the Frontline First: Smarter Government”, will help to make a real difference on the ground by giving local areas more control over what they spend their money on and by reducing burdens, especially where the cost of national performance monitoring, assessments and data collection outweighs the benefits to local areas.

Once again, and despite allegations, we have made a very serious attempt to reduce burdens, and I hope that

in putting the front line first, we will go even further through the commitments to reduce burdens. Our measures to put the front line first will go hand in hand with a new drive to make more comparative performance data public and to allow the Government and the people to hold service providers to account for the safety, quality and cost of the services they provide. The new comprehensive area assessment, also announced this week, has a part in that openness and transparency. Unlike its predecessor—the comprehensive performance assessment—the CAA focuses on outcomes delivered by councils in partnership with other local service providers, rather than just on the performance of individual councils.

Despite councils in some areas performing very well, internally and externally, some areas have been flagged up—for example, my county council of Hertfordshire and the provision of social housing—as causing concern. Those areas have been given a red flag. Making data available to the public empowers the public. Total Place is a revolution and will revolutionise how we deliver public services locally, regionally and nationally. We are looking at a huge change, some of which I have seen beginning on the ground. And it works!

Places such as Margate are delivering a comprehensive range of services through the portal of the local library. People can go and talk about refuse or their housing benefit, or attend a sexual health clinic while simultaneously taking their children to the local library. I am glad to say that the number of children attending that library has trebled over the past few months. We are making a huge assessment of assets in areas such as Kent. It is this kind of drive—

6 pm

*Debate interrupted, and Question deferred (Standing Order No. 54(4)).*

*The Deputy Speaker put the deferred Questions (Standing Order No. 54(5)).*

## VOTE ON ACCOUNT, 2010-11

### DEPARTMENT FOR BUSINESS, INNOVATION AND SKILLS

*Resolved,*

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2011, for expenditure by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills—

(1) resources, not exceeding £9,653,466,000, be authorised, on account, for use as set out in HC 33, and

(2) a sum, not exceeding £11,071,732,000, be granted to Her Majesty out of the Consolidated Fund, on account, to meet the costs as so set out.

### DEPARTMENT FOR COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

*Resolved,*

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2011, for expenditure by the Department for Communities and Local Government—

(1) resources, not exceeding £17,434,832,000, be authorised, on account, for use as set out in HC 33, and

(2) a sum, not exceeding £17,433,673,000, be granted to Her Majesty out of the Consolidated Fund, on account, to meet the costs as so set out.

*The Deputy Speaker then put the Questions on the outstanding Estimates (Standing Order No. 55).*



**ESTIMATES, 2009-10 (NAVY) VOTE A***Resolved,*

That, during the year ending with 31 March 2010, an additional number not exceeding 400 all ranks be maintained for Naval Service and that modifications in the maximum numbers in the Reserve Naval and Marines Forces set out in HC 7 be authorised for the purposes of Part I of the Reserve Forces Act 1996.—(*Lyn Brown.*)

**SUPPLEMENTARY ESTIMATES AND NEW ESTIMATES, 2009-10***Resolved,*

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2010—

(1) further resources, not exceeding £6,617,232,000, be authorised for use for defence and civil services as set out in HC 18 and 24,

(2) a further sum, not exceeding £23,998,577,000, be granted to Her Majesty out of the Consolidated Fund, to meet the costs of defence and civil services as so set out, and

(3) limits as set out in HC 24 be set on appropriations in aid.—(*Lyn Brown.*)

**ESTIMATES, 2010-11 (VOTE ON ACCOUNT)***Resolved,*

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2011—

(1) resources, not exceeding £191,087,107,000, be authorised, on account, for use for defence and civil services as set out in HC 14, HC 19, HC 21, HC 25, HC 27 and HC 33, and

(2) a sum, not exceeding £190,506,334,000, be granted to Her Majesty out of the Consolidated Fund, on account, to meet the costs of defence and civil services as so set out.—(*Lyn Brown.*)

*Ordered,* That a Bill be brought in upon the foregoing Resolutions;

That the Chairman of Ways and Means, Mr. Chancellor the Exchequer, Mr. Liam Byrne, Mr. Stephen Timms, Sarah McCarthy-Fry and Ian Pearson introduce the Bill.

**CONSOLIDATED FUND BILL***Presentation and First Reading*

Mr. Stephen Timms accordingly presented a Bill to authorise the use of resources for the service of the years ending with 31 March 2010 and 31 March 2011 and to apply certain sums out of the Consolidated Fund to the service of the years ending with 31 March 2010 and 31 March 2011.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Monday 14 December, and to be printed (Bill 12).*

**Business without Debate****REGIONAL SELECT COMMITTEE (LONDON)***Motion made,*

That Ms Karen Buck, Jeremy Corbyn, Clive Efford, Siobhain McDonagh, Mr Andy Slaughter and Mr Andrew Pelling be members of the London Regional Select Committee.—(*Lyn Brown.*)

**Hon. Members:** Object.**SITTINGS OF THE HOUSE***Motion made,*

That—

(1) Standing Order No. 14 (Arrangement of public business) shall have effect for this Session with the following modifications, namely:

In paragraph (4) the word 'eight' shall be substituted for the word 'thirteen' in line 42 and in paragraph (5) the word 'fifth' shall be substituted for the word 'eighth' in line 44;

(2) Standing Order No. 90 (Second reading committees) shall have effect for this Session with the following modification, namely:

In paragraph (2) the word 'fifth' shall be substituted for the word 'eighth' in line 21; and

(3) Private Members' Bills shall have precedence over Government business on 29 January; 5 and 26 February; 5 and 12 March; 23 and 30 April; and 7 May.—(*Lyn Brown.*)

**Hon. Members:** Object.**PETITIONS****Badman Report (Poole)**

6.3 pm

**Mr. Robert Syms (Poole) (Con):** The petition is presented on behalf of very concerned parents who electively home educate their children and who are concerned about the Badman report and its implications for their undertaking of that education. I do not intend to read out the petition, as many similar petitions were presented earlier in the week, but it joins a long line that will eventually lead, I hope, to the Department for Children, Schools and Families.

*Following is the full text of the petition:*

*[The Petition of persons resident in the Poole parliamentary constituency,*

*Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.*

*The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.*

*And the Petitioners remain, etc.]*

[P000568]

**Badman Report (Uxbridge)**

6.4 pm

**Mr. John Randall (Uxbridge) (Con):** I would like to present a petition on behalf of my constituents in Uxbridge that is in the same vein as that presented by my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) and all those that were presented earlier in the week.

*Following is the full text of the petition:*

*[The Petition of persons resident in the Uxbridge parliamentary constituency,*

*Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.*

*The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.*

*And the Petitioners remain, etc.]*

[P000624]

### **Badman Report (Blaby)**

6.4 pm

**Mr. Andrew Robathan** (Blaby) (Con): I beg to ask leave to present a petition on behalf of 28 petitioners in my constituency of varying ages who are similarly very concerned about the Badman report on home education. I share many of their concerns.

*Following is the full text of the petition:*

*[The Petition of persons resident in the Blaby parliamentary constituency,*

*Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.*

*The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.*

*And the Petitioners remain, etc.]*

[P000459]

### **British Nuclear Test Veterans**

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

6.4 pm

**Siobhain McDonagh** (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): When I called for a debate on nuclear test veterans, I did so purely as a constituency MP. I wanted to highlight the case of a constituent of mine whom I have been helping for more than 11 years. I raised this case in Parliament just over seven years ago and I had hoped that the matter would have been resolved by now, but it has not.

My purpose in raising this issue is to persuade the Government finally to settle the case of the nuclear test veterans. I want them to show the same compassion, humanity and generosity that has characterised so many of their policies over the past 12 years, and to prove again their commitment to our armed forces. The families of nuclear test veterans are not convinced by that record, however. They believe that their husbands, fathers, brothers and grandfathers were expected to do something that was wrong, and something that we would not ask anyone to do now, which has badly affected their health. They also believe, rightly or wrongly, that the Government are unwilling to say sorry or to act as though they were sorry. For many years, they feel that the Government have had to be dragged kicking and screaming towards giving the veterans the recognition and recompense that they deserve.

I cannot judge whether the families are right or wrong on that. However, since news of this Adjournment debate came out, I have been contacted by lawyers acting for the families of nuclear test veterans, and they have made serious allegations about the Ministry of Defence's approach. If true, something outrageous is taking place. If false, that raises serious questions about the integrity of those lawyers. I hope that the Minister will be able to reassure me that the MOD has been doing all that it can.

As I have said, I am raising this issue as a constituency MP, on behalf of a constituent. Shirley Denson is a remarkable woman who has suffered more than her fair share of misfortune. I first met Shirley as long ago as 1998, when she told me about the tragic life of her late husband, Squadron Leader Eric Denson. When he was just 26 years old, Flight Lieutenant Denson captained one of the three Canberra aircraft that were deployed to collect samples while flying through the mushroom cloud created by a 3 megaton nuclear detonation on 28 April 1958. It has been estimated that, while in the cloud, just 49 minutes after detonation, Flight Lieutenant Denson and his crew would each have been exposed to 13,000 rads of radiation.

Flight Lieutenant Denson was ordered to keep the plane there for six minutes. Because of a fault on one of the dosimeters, this was four minutes longer than the aircraft should have been inside the cloud. When the plane landed, the ground crew said that it was the hottest aircraft they had ever handled. Then, back on the ground, the crews would have been exposed to massive radiation fallout from the water that they drank, the fish that they caught and the food that they ate.

I understand the eventual total dosage that Flight Lieutenant Denson received could have been the equivalent of 40,000 X-rays. His vomiting started almost immediately

and became so severe that he was forced to delay his return from the Pacific and to stay on in Fiji for a further three days. He was then told that his dosage had exceeded the legal limit and was sent home. He was not allowed to take part in further tests.

Even though Flight Lieutenant Denson was in obvious ill health, there were no medical checks or a medical follow-up on his return, and nothing was done to alert him of the probable cause of his progressive medical problems. Significantly, no mention was made in his medical records of his activities in the south Pacific in 1958. Given the sensitivity surrounding the tests in a period of global conflict that it is hard for modern Britons to comprehend, there were strict orders of secrecy and he did not discuss these events with anyone. His wife did not know the details of his high dosage of ionising radiation. Even though he suffered for many years with breathing difficulties, acute sinusitis, mood swings, anxieties and depressions, she knew nothing.

In obvious medical difficulties, Squadron Leader Denson ended his own life in 1976 at the age of just 44, after 18 years of pain and upset. He was the father of four children, three of whom were born after 28 April 1958. His health problems live on in these three children, who have all also experienced lasting health problems. Twenty years passed since his death, during which Shirley Denson brought up four daughters on her own. Then, in 1997, she was alerted to the latest scientific evidence about the Christmas Island tests and started her own investigations.

Slowly, Shirley began to learn the true effect of the radiation poisoning on her husband. She has had to fight to find out more. As I have said, she is a remarkable woman. She has faced difficulties at every turn. Officials have insinuated that her late husband was sickly and unbalanced from boyhood. They suggested that his suicide was somehow inevitable and had nothing to do with Christmas Island. But she has pointed out that her husband was pronounced among the fittest of his peers and was an expert pilot. He was a proud Yorkshireman, as proud as any before him, who joined the RAF because he wanted to serve his country, and was a credit to the squadron that he would eventually lead. Mrs. Denson has gathered a great deal of expert support. Most bluntly of all, one medical officer told her, "From the moment he flew into that cloud he was a walking dead man."

Since then, a study of the genetic status of New Zealand veterans, carried out by Dr. Rowland and his team at Massey university, has shown a very high frequency of translocations in the chromosomes of veterans. Dr. Rowland has made a very convincing case that the probable cause is exposure to radiation at nuclear tests. His report was wholeheartedly endorsed by a cross-party parliamentary inquiry two years ago. As a layman, it is hard to see how someone who was at or near the nuclear tests could not have experienced radiation or ingested it through the food they ate, the water they drank or the air they breathed. It is hard to see how this could not have led to health issues later in life, or to genetic changes affecting their descendants.

I am not a scientist; I am a constituency MP. Seven years ago, I spoke in the House to ask for justice for Eric and Shirley Denson. I hoped that progress would have been made. I hoped that there would be an apology for the families of these service men, who unquestioningly

and courageously followed orders—perhaps something that said, "We would not do anything like this again, and we are sorry for the suffering it has caused."

I had also hoped that people such as Shirley Denson would have received a modest recompense. Nobody wants to bankrupt the MOD; we just want something to provide some comfort to the families and to allow them to start to draw a line under the whole affair. But here I am again, seven years on, and the opportunity that the Government had to appear magnanimous and generous seems to have passed them by.

Millions of pounds have been spent in the courts and not a penny has reached the families of those who have suffered. Ministers have repeatedly said that they want to offer veterans and their families a settlement, but years and years and years have passed by, and so have many of the veterans themselves. They have not lived to see the apology or recompense they deserve.

Currently, more than 1,000 veterans and their families from all over the Commonwealth are bringing a group action case against the Government. Earlier this week, their legal representative asked to see me to give their side of where we had got to. The lawyer told me that the Ministry of Defence had chosen to defend the claim not on the grounds of whether the detonations had caused suffering, but on the grounds that the veterans had made their claims too late. There is a limit of three years after an injury has been discovered in which a person can make a claim for personal injury, and the MOD's lawyers chose to base its defence on the case being out of time. That is called a limitation defence.

Whether such a defence is correct within the law or not, it appears to a layman to be a very mean defence. Instead of looking at the merits of people's actual claims, the MOD seem to be saying that it would not pay out because people had missed an arbitrary three-year deadline. I still do not know why anyone with an underlying desire to settle would use a defence of limitation. I simply do not get it. In public relations terms, it is a disaster. At best, it looks like a way of delaying pay-outs. At worst, it looks like a way of slithering out of taking responsibility for something for which one really is responsible.

In June this year, Mr. Justice Foskett made a judgment that largely rejected the limitation defence. His ruling is disputed but, as I understand it, he used his discretion and ordered all parties to forget about limitation and just reach a settlement. He said:

"The Government is, of course, pledged to settle legal cases by alternative dispute resolution in all suitable cases whenever the other party agrees to it. In my view this is such a case."

He also ordered the Government to pay millions of pounds in costs to the veterans' lawyers. What has happened since is a matter of disagreement.

My hon. Friend the Minister, in a written answer in *Hansard*, said that

"genuine negotiations have taken place between the parties respective counsels and a settlement proposal was made by the Ministry of Defence, although I cannot disclose the amount. To date, no response has been received from the claimants' counsel or the law firm representing them (Rosenblatts). This is obviously disappointing, but we remain open to meaningful discussions."—[*Official Report*, 7 December 2009; Vol. 502, c. 98W.]

[Siobhain McDonagh]

However, the public affairs firm working with the lawyers has written to me, stating:

“The MoD say...that they have not received a response from the claimants counsel to the proposed settlement offer, but this is because we have never received such an offer.”

I understand that my hon. Friend has said that the contents of any settlement proposal cannot be communicated without breaching a confidentiality agreement. However, the fact is that Shirley Denson does not know the contents. There are more than 1,000 claimants, and they do not know the contents. It seems ridiculous that there can be any negotiations when nobody involved knows what they are. How can my constituent be sure her interests are being taken into account by the Government or by her lawyers when all proceedings are taking place in private? How can anyone know for sure that this Government have as their central aim doing their best for our veterans while everything is clouded in secrecy? Even if there ever were negotiations, they have obviously broken down, and the case will have to go back to the courts. It therefore appears that the next stage will be an appeal by the MOD against the limitation ruling. Even that will not take place until—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal):** Order. I do hope the hon. Lady will not be going into too much detail about a case that is currently before the courts.

**Siobhain McDonagh:** I certainly will not, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Even that stage will not take place until May, after millions more pounds have been spent by lawyers and after more veterans have passed away, and even then, that will only resolve limitation. Presumably, there will then be a court case about causation, which would involve more money going to lawyers, not to our brave servicemen.

I am just a Back-Bench MP. I want my constituent to have an apology and some recompense for what happened to her poor husband and their children. It seems to me that we are at an impasse. The Government say, “Oh yes, there have been genuine negotiations.” The lawyers say, “Oh no there haven’t.” The Government say, “Oh yes, we have made a settlement proposal.” The lawyers say, “Oh no you haven’t.” It might be pantomime season, but our veterans and their families are looking for a Prince Charming—except that this is not a pantomime, and nobody is laughing. This is really serious. In fact, it is a scandal.

Tens of millions of pounds have already been spent on lawyers alone. That money could, and should, have gone straight to people like Shirley Denson. Over the past few days I have heard about this from all sides, and I still cannot tell who is to blame: it might be the lawyers who are stopping a settlement being made, but the limitation trial and the ongoing secrecy surrounding the settlement proposals have done my hon. Friend no favours. They make it look like the MOD is using “due process” to avoid making a payout. However, I hope that he will be our Prince Charming. I ask him to use this opportunity to prove his commitment to our veterans. Let us agree to settle this now, through an apology to, and recognition of, nuclear test veterans and their families, and a modest recompense as thanks for their courage, commitment and loyalty to their country.

6.17 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Kevan Jones):** I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) for securing this debate on what is, as she said, a serious subject. The nuclear test veterans issue remains an emotive one more than 50 years since the first nuclear tests were conducted. Some 28,000 British servicemen were involved in the test programmes, the majority in logistic support. I certainly recognise the debt of gratitude we owe to those servicemen who took part in delivering those important nuclear tests.

I understand that last month Members received a letter from Mr. Neil Sampson, a partner in the law firm Rosenblatt, which represents The British Atomic Veterans’ Claimants Group. I believe that Mr. Sampson’s letter made several misleading assertions, and I wrote to Members on 4 December to refute them. I am glad to have the opportunity today to go into more detail and to make the Ministry of Defence’s position clear.

For some years, a number of veterans of the test programme have claimed that their health has been directly damaged by deliberate, or accidental, exposure to ionising radiation. The MOD, and successive Governments, have consistently rejected these claims. That is based on three comprehensive and exhaustive studies, none of which found a greater incidence of mortality or cancer in nuclear test veterans than in a matched control group.

Most critically, I want to focus Members’ attention on precisely what has happened in the litigation process, so that we are in no doubt about the current situation. Legal proceedings were served on the MOD in April 2005, and since April 2006 the veterans’ case has been handled by Rosenblatt Solicitors of London. The particulars of the claim were served in December 2006 and the MOD served its summary defence in January 2008. The MOD disclosed a list of 12,295 documents in June 2008, and the parties identified five lead cases each to be heard in the High Court that were considered to be representative of the entire claimant cohort. A High Court trial was held between 21 January and 6 February 2009 to rule on limitation only. I should explain that the Limitation Act 1980 sets out that personal injury claims should be brought within three years of the date of injury, or within three years of the injured person’s date of knowledge that the injury may have been caused by past events.

The Court was asked to rule on whether the MOD was prejudiced by the delay in bringing claims, given that many of its key witnesses are no longer alive or are not able, due to age, infirmity or loss of memory, to give evidence. The Court’s judgment on limitation was handed down on 5 June 2009 and ran to more than 200 pages. The main findings were that five lead cases were time-barred and five were not. Importantly, the judge exercised his discretion under section 33 of the Limitation Act to permit the out-of-time cases to proceed to trial. That means that the group action of 1,011 cases may now proceed to a trial on causation and breach of duty. I should like to clarify one point. Contrary to media reports, the veterans have not secured a ruling that compensation should be paid. The ruling was on the limitation point, which is subject to challenge in the Court of Appeal.

The judge expressed concern about the claimants' ability to prove that their condition was caused by exposure to ionising radiation in the tests. He said that he did not want them to be misled by his judgment into thinking that they will be successful at a causation trial. He acknowledged that the case law on causation as it stands, if strictly read, poses a potential problem for the claimants. He said of one case that

"in terms of apparent strength of this claim, on the evidence as it stands, it seems to me to be arguable, but not overwhelmingly so".

He was also of the view that the cases can be tried fairly on the documentary evidence alone, and that the absence of the vast majority of witnesses would not be unfair or prejudice the MOD's case. He acknowledged that it might be an injustice if the MOD had to pay the claimants' lawyers costs. I will cover that issue later.

Following submissions on 19 June 2009, the judge granted the MOD leave to appeal his decision, not only on the limitation issue but regarding legal costs. The judge concluded:

"The Government is, of course, pledged to settle legal cases by Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) in all suitable cases whenever the other party agrees to it. In my view this is such a case".

Despite what is claimed by Neil Sampson of Rosenblatt, I have taken great care in my dealings with this case to ensure that the MOD has adhered to the judge's wishes in all aspects of the case. We have attempted to settle the matter through ADR by holding counsel-to-counsel negotiations. My hon. Friend has mentioned confidentiality, and the ADR process is confidential between the parties, so I cannot reveal the details of those negotiations as that would breach the confidentiality agreement between the two parties.

I continue to respect the confidentiality of that process, but I cannot allow Rosenblatt's allegations to stand unchallenged, so I shall address them by setting out exactly what has happened. Between the hearings of 19 June and mid-November, genuine negotiations took place between the two parties' respective counsels—Benjamin Browne QC for the claimants and Charles Gibson QC for the MOD. I understand that Benjamin Browne is no longer the counsel for Rosenblatt. For the avoidance of doubt, let me make it clear that when I describe meetings between the parties, or meetings between the MOD and Rosenblatt Solicitors, I mean that the respective QCs representing the MOD and Rosenblatt have met. That is not unusual when settling a case such as this.

On 29 September I, as the responsible Minister, authorised a settlement proposal, although again I cannot disclose the amount. The proposal was conveyed to Rosenblatt's counsel. Whether or not he passed this proposal on to Rosenblatt is a matter for them, although it would be remarkable if he did not. It certainly appears that the veterans themselves were not told about it, and no response has been received to date.

I therefore gave instructions in early November that the claimants' lawyers be given another chance, and an e-mail was sent by Charles Gibson QC to Benjamin Browne QC. Again, it would be curious if counsel did not pass this on to Rosenblatt but, again, it has been met with silence. Therefore, no settlement has been achieved.

I think this demonstrates that the MOD, and myself as the Minister responsible, have made every effort to engage with the claimants' lawyers, but without success.

That left us with no option but to proceed with an appeal, which is listed for a three-week window starting on 4 May 2010.

I should also like to put on the record that Rosenblatt seem to have engaged in a remarkable amount of unusual activity outside the legal process, which I am concerned about. First, I find it quite remarkable that a public relations company was in attendance at the High Court trial, on behalf of the claimants. I understand from my team that that was the first time any of them had experienced that.

The second matter of great concern to me is that the parliamentary lobbyists who claim to represent Rosenblatt met a special adviser to the Secretary of State for Defence in an attempt to persuade him to change the Department's stance. Curiously, the lobbyists appeared to be as much in the dark as the veterans about the fact that a settlement proposal had been made.

Thirdly, I received a letter from Mr. Neil Sampson, who wrote to me in my capacity as a Member of Parliament rather than as Minister for veterans, asking to meet me. Interestingly, he signed the letter as legal counsel for the atomic veterans claimant group, but he did not use paper headed with the Rosenblatt name. When all those factors are taken together, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that there has been an attempt to circumvent the legal process.

I turn now to the question of costs. The High Court ordered the MOD to pay the claimants' counsel and Rosenblatt costs of £7.5 million, although the Department argued that costs should properly be reserved, until the outcome of the Court of Appeal hearing. That was based on the fact that permission had been granted for the MOD to take the case to the Court of Appeal, where some or all of the High Court judgment might be overturned. Even on the judge's own analysis, the claimants' causation case was weak, leaving the MOD in fear that some, if not many, of the claimants might discontinue their claims. The judge dismissed that argument, but added that the MOD can seek a refund in the event of any appeal succeeding.

An application will be made to the High Court tomorrow morning by the claimants' counsel—although that will not be Mr. Browne—and Rosenblatt about the litigation, and there will be a request for even more money. The claimants will say that they are substantially out of pocket in this case and will request a court order for a further £2 million on account. That would make an interim total of £9.5 million, which they claim covers about 80 per cent. of their costs, and it implies that the legal costs to date are approaching a staggering £12 million.

Indeed, Mr. Sampson devotes the first half of the witness statement attached to Rosenblatt's application to his costs.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** Order. I remind the Minister, as I did the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), that too much detail is not acceptable when a case is before the courts.

**Mr. Jones:** I accept that, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Only after making that application for costs does Mr. Sampson turn to his clients' case, and one may wish to draw one's own conclusions from that. By comparison, I confirm to the House that the MOD's legal costs, as invoiced on 27 November, totalled £2,661,225.

[Mr. Kevan Jones]

Finally, I turn to the medical research. Although we have not seen any medical or scientific evidence to substantiate the claims of ill health, we are determined to address the ongoing concerns expressed by nuclear test veterans. That is why I announced to the House on 21 April our intention to work with veterans and experts to investigate the particular health needs of nuclear test veterans and their offspring, with a view to identifying priorities and taking action to improve health.

Over the past few months we have sought to develop proposals for research that would generate practical results, be scientifically credible and be available in a reasonable time scale. We have identified an opportunity to work with academia in this area of health needs analysis, and of course, we will continue to work with the British Nuclear Test Veterans Association on taking this work forward. I have asked officials to draw up costings for the proposals, and I expect this work to be complete early in the new year. We will then put out a tender for the work to start in the first half of 2010. My officials will meet the BNTVA to discuss our proposals early in the new year.

Do I feel for these individuals? Yes, I do. Do I feel for my hon. Friend's constituents? Yes, I do, as she does. This is a legal case, but that case is really about only one thing: hard evidence. The hard evidence simply does not support the veterans' legal case. Grounds do not exist for compensation to be paid. That is why we are proceeding to an appeal. No amount of misleading statements by Rosenblatt, made privately or through the media, can alter the fact that we have made a genuine attempt to put forward a settlement proposal, but we have received no response. Rosenblatt's claimed ignorance of these facts does the veterans a great disservice by raising their hopes and dramatically raising expectations. As I say, I feel for people such as Shirley Denson, and I can only sympathise with the veterans that Rosenblatt claim to represent. Some veterans need to ask some hard questions about the way in which Rosenblatt have conducted themselves in this case.

*Question put and agreed to.*

6.32 pm

*House adjourned.*

# Westminster Hall

Thursday 10 December 2009

[HYWEL WILLIAMS *in the Chair*]

## Pensioner Poverty

[*Relevant documents: Fifth Report from the Work and Pensions Committee Session 2008-09 HC 411 and the Government response HC 1029.*]

*Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—(Mark Tami.)*

2.30 pm

**Mr. Terry Rooney** (Bradford, North) (Lab): Although this is the first time that I have served under your chairmanship, Mr. Williams, it does not make it any less of a pleasure.

Unusually, I should like to start by thanking the Government for their fairly positive response to our report, which is not something that we are used to in our Committee. It usually takes two or three years for our fantastically good suggestions to bear fruit, but this time the Government have accepted much of what we said. Moreover, we should recognise the many organisations that submitted evidence to us and the hard work that they, and the witnesses who gave evidence for the report, put in.

When considering pensioner poverty, we need to focus on three distinct groups: today's pensioners, people who are nearly retired, and the remainder of the population. In his report in 1948, which seems a long time ago now, Beveridge said that the state pension on its own would never be enough on which to live in retirement, and that it would always have to be supplemented by savings or insurance. It is that last bit that most people forget. All the letters that we get as constituency MPs say, "I can't live on the state pension; it is not enough. You should put it up." Somewhere along the way, we lost that behavioural imperative of providing for our retirement through those two additional vehicles. It was partly in response to that situation that we got the 1975 Castle revisions, which brought in, among other things, SERPS and earnings-related elements.

By the 1980s, many of those changes had been eliminated or significantly reduced. The Social Security Act 1988 had the unfortunate consequence of what we now know as pensions mis-selling, with many people being deluded into coming out of relatively good final salary schemes into personal pension arrangements. In 1994, post-Maxwell, we had the 2,000 page Goode report, which, rather oddly, made no mention of annuities. One of the main things to come out of that report was the minimum funding requirements. However, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when employers went into liquidation, it was discovered that a large number of schemes were deficient and that the minimum funding regime had never worked properly. The consequence of that was a financial assistance scheme, which, at the last count, would cost about £8 billion. It is clear, therefore, that significant sums of money come into play in such matters.

Those events led to the establishment of the Turner commission. It is very telling that the commission finally reported in 2005, four and a half years ago. Although we have moved a long way in terms of time, the same is not true of legislative responses. A number of changes are due to come in next year that should address some deficiencies. We were expecting personal accounts in 2012, but after yesterday, they look like being delayed for a year, which is sad and will have consequences.

So, who are the pensioners living in poverty? It is largely women, because, historically, most of that generation either never worked or had very short working lives, and that was the way in which society was organised at the time. Sadly, some of those who worked never came off what was called the married woman's stamp, so they never accrued pension entitlement themselves.

The second large group affected by pensioner poverty are black and minority ethnic communities. There is no obvious explanation for that other than, as a group, they tend to have lower earnings than the national average, and higher unemployment. The third significant group that suffers from pensioner poverty is those who live in inner London. No real insight has been given on why that is, but it may be due to a combination of a deep concentration of BME communities and large numbers of retired women.

One of the major responses—in fact, the principal response—to pensioner poverty has been pension credit. Never in the history of government has so much time, effort and finance been put into a take-up campaign as has been put into that for pension credit. All the evidence shows that the amount invested has diminishing returns. The vast majority of those who are entitled to the guarantee element receive it. However, we need to become more scientific about where we direct our effort on take-up, and particularly look at the BME community, those who live in inner London and any other blips that show up in the statistics.

Certain groups are likely to end up in poverty in retirement, including low earners, the disabled, carers and those with broken work records. The other thing that will lead to a lot of people suffering from poverty in retirement is longevity. Someone might retire at 65 with a reasonable or modest pension and an accumulation of savings, but savings run down over time. The longer they live, the more expenses they face to tackle the effects of ageing and poorer health, and the more their assets disappear. So, what initially was a comfortable retirement inevitably leads to a distressing situation.

Over the years, the accumulation of pension savings and assets has received enormous concentration and no end of debate in the House, but little attention has been given to "decumulation". There is a minimal amount of advice about what to do when one gets to retirement age, and that links back to some of the debates about annuities. Sadly, despite the legislative changes, the vast majority of people who have defined contribution schemes will, when it comes to retirement, take an annuity with the provider of the scheme. They do not use the facility to shop around. Evidence suggests that someone can get up to 15 or 20 per cent. more than what is on offer from their provider.

Another vehicle that will become increasingly important in the coming years in attacking pension poverty is equity release. Some of us will remember what happened in the early 1990s and, dare I say it, the West Bromwich

[Mr. Terry Rooney]

and, I think, Norwich Union. That was a scandal, but as long as we learn from the past, there is a role and place for equity release, providing people are able to get the proper advice and know exactly what they are getting into.

We have a problem in general in our society with financial literacy. A theme running through our report was the necessity for people who are nearing retirement to get appropriate, accurate and cheap advice on the options that they have to maximise whatever situation they are in. We still have not cracked that. I know that the Department for Work and Pensions have conducted some pilots on money guidance and that the Treasury are doing some things, but we need to pull those strands together so that people can maximise their situation and avoid being in poverty for the want of such advice.

**Mr. David Drew** (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Will my hon. Friend add to his point the need for independent advice? One of the real difficulties with equity release is that, dare I say it, families are not dispassionately interested in how that equity release might operate. It is not unknown for people either to advise their parents or, more commonly, to get someone they know to advise their parents. Sadly, that is where some of the family disputes come from. Therefore, it is necessary for older people to get genuinely independent advice.

**Mr. Rooney:** I take my hon. Friend's point. That is not a road that I particularly want to travel, but there have been some fairly scandalous examples of offspring being too eager to get their hands on their inheritance before there is a natural death—I think I will leave it at that.

In considering pensioner poverty, it is important not only to look at the income side but to look at the expenditure side too. There is no doubt at all that schemes such as free bus travel and winter fuel allowance have been major instruments in assisting retired people to reduce their expenditure and thus hold off the onset of poverty. The warm homes scheme itself has improved the heating systems of some 2.5 million pensioner households, through insulation, cavity wall insulation and so on. Again, that has the impact of reducing pensioners' fuel bills.

However, in our report we make the point that retired people are far less likely than the general population to switch their fuel provider. If someone has a basic acumen about the internet, they can switch their supplier online fairly easily, but the elderly are a group for whom that is not the norm. Retired people tend to stick with their supplier, which they may have been with for the past 20 or 30 years. Quite considerable savings can be made by switching supplier and, given that people's income gets lower and more fixed as they get older, the more important those savings are.

There is a long history of pensioner poverty. I am absolutely certain there will be more debates about it in the future. The changes that were introduced post-Turner were meant to ensure that we would have far less pensioner poverty in the future. I do not think that we will ever eliminate pensioner poverty. However, the principal instrument or change that is supposed to be introduced in 2012 is auto-enrolment, so that everybody hopefully would be in some scheme, even if it was only

the personal account with a fairly modest contribution of 8 per cent. to it. In that way, everybody would be on the building blocks of the basic state pension and the state second pension, which will continue.

Of course, that excludes people who are not in work. Frankly, all Governments have a pretty poor record of dealing with those people, particularly those with a disability. When somebody at birth has a very severe disability, it is not right to say to them, "You will be poor in childhood, you will be poor in your working age and you will be poor in retirement". Yes, we have built in assumptions that people with a severe disability are contributing to the state pension and the state second pension, but those people will still receive only an extremely modest income in retirement. As we move forward in the coming years, and hopefully as the public finances improve, we need to focus on that area and ask ourselves what we can do better for those disabled people, so that they do not experience a lifetime—from birth to death—of poverty.

2.44 pm

**John Howell** (Henley) (Con): I want to start by saying what a pleasure it was to serve on the Select Committee during this inquiry. Pensioner poverty is an important subject and, as people can see from the two volumes of the report that were produced and the evidence that went with them, it was a subject that we tackled in considerable depth, with assistance from a range of organisations.

I want to draw attention to four things in the report. The first is recommendation 130, which has already been mentioned by the Chairman of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Bradford, North (Mr. Rooney). It relates to the Committee's disappointment that there is an unacceptable level of pensioner poverty in some black and minority ethnic communities but pretty little in the way of information that explains why that problem exists and how it can be tackled. Having said that, the take-up of pensioner credit among BME communities must play a crucial part. So I want to echo recommendation 130, which showed the seriousness with which we viewed that issue, and to stress the importance of that recommendation.

Recommendation 199 is particularly helpful. My constituency is relatively close to London compared with the north of England, but it is still a very rural constituency. Of the 75,000 voters in my constituency, I think that only 14,000 live in towns; the rest live in small villages. Recommendation 199 brings out clearly the difficulty for pensioners, particularly pensioners in poverty, of living in a rural area. I think that too often we forget the difficulties that living in a rural area creates—both the extra costs and the physical difficulties of transport. Essentially, in many rural areas people are restricted to using their own transport, as public transport is weak. For example, my own village is considered sustainable on the basis that it has a bus stop, but there is only one bus during the week that takes people to the market to shop and then brings them back a couple of hours later. Of course, that leads to the other side of pensioner poverty in rural areas, which is the isolation that pensioners feel. Obviously, the financial aspect, combined with that feeling of isolation, makes for a sort of double hit on pensioners in rural areas. So recommendation 199 was one that I felt particularly strongly about.



The third recommendation that I want to underline is 315, which refers to the default retirement age. There was huge support for allowing the flexibility that the recommendation calls for. Retirement age must be a judgment for individuals; they must have the flexibility to decide when they retire, so that they can manage their retirement as they have managed their working life. The evidence that we found was that such flexibility was not a particularly onerous burden on employers. We found that people did not want to work for more than one or two extra years, but that the extra time made a big difference to them financially.

The fourth and last point that I want to emphasise is not one of the report's recommendations but the evidence from our visit to Canada. For me, that visit was a particularly useful exercise, because we were impressed with Canada's success story in the last 10 years in reducing pensioner poverty. A number of things struck me about that success story that we might want to think about.

The first was the way in which the Canada pension plan had been funded, or at least part-funded, in the good times. Obviously, the opportunity to do the same has now passed us by and it is unlikely to be a practical option in the future, so it is a source of regret that we did not go down that route.

One of the other things that I was struck by was that the fact that the Canadian pension plan funds were managed on a completely arm's-length basis, unrelated to any contribution that they might have to make to the Canadian economy. They were there to generate as much income as possible to fund pensions. That professionalism came out very strongly.

The last element of the Canadian experience was the recognition that there was no obligation in Canada to purchase an annuity, something about which we have probably all had correspondence from constituents during these recessionary times. The Canadians thought about it in advance and ensured that annuity purchase was not compulsory, a policy that we would like to see enacted for pensions here; I would certainly welcome it.

I stress those three recommendations. The evidence from the Canadian trips usefully brought together a lot of my experience of the matter. It was a useful trip and one that achieved an enormous amount for my own personal education and knowledge. I am grateful to the Committee for allowing me to be a part of it and for choosing this subject.

2.50 pm

**Mrs. Joan Humble** (Blackpool, North and Fleetwood) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr. Williams, and to follow my colleague on the Committee, the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell), as well as our Chair, whose introduction of the report brought to bear the knowledge that he has developed over the years. There is a lot of important background to the report.

To start on a positive note, I am sure that the Minister was pleased to read in our report that we acknowledge the hard work done by the Government. Pensioner poverty has decreased in recent years. As the Chairman said, we acknowledge the important role of pensioner credit, the winter fuel payment, the increase in cold weather payments and other elements that help pensioners'

lives, not least of which is free bus travel. I see many pensioners in my constituency taking advantage of free bus travel and enjoying themselves.

Those things have helped pensioners, but the two recent Pensions Bills have also contained lots of improvements that should help reduce pensioner poverty in future, including the introduction of a credit for carers, a reduction in the number of qualifying years of national insurance contributions to 30—that will help everybody, especially women, to retire with a full state retirement pension—a proposal to uprate in line with earnings and the introduction of new personal accounts. We all want those improvements to happen sooner rather than later so that people get used to saving for their retirement and build up a personal pension pot as well as their entitlement to a state retirement pension.

Nevertheless, the reason for the Committee's report is that we are all too aware that too many pensioners still live in poverty. We set ourselves a comprehensive task. Page 9 of our report sets out the terms of reference, the extent of which shows that the problem has many different angles that need to be considered. We wanted to know what the Department for Work and Pensions was doing to address the issue, but we also wanted to know what specific groups were more vulnerable to poverty in old age.

The terms include the impact of the financial crisis on pensioner poverty. Much of the debate about the global financial crisis has focused on people in work, but it also affects pensioners, some of whom, of course, are also in work. Other issues include benefits take-up, the basic state pension, disability living allowance, attendance allowance and carers' allowance, which all affect the problem. Are lump sum payments such as the winter fuel payment the right way to address pensioner poverty? Also, of course, there is the Government's overall welfare reform programme. That is why the report is comprehensive. We received a huge amount of evidence from a variety of different people.

**Mr. Nigel Dodds** (Belfast, North) (DUP): I congratulate the Committee on its excellent and comprehensive report. The hon. Lady mentioned a range of issues, including benefit take-up. One problem is that many people—I meet them in my constituency and elsewhere—do not get what they are entitled to, whether through lack of knowledge or due to difficulties filling in forms and all the rest of it. What more can be done to encourage and incentivise people to take up the benefits to which they are entitled rather than losing out on the £5 billion that Help the Aged says older people go without?

**Mrs. Humble:** The hon. Gentleman raises a key point. My contribution to this debate will concentrate on two areas. The first is simplifying the system, which includes enhancing take-up. One reason for low take-up of some benefits is that pensioners see them as too complicated and do not understand not only individual benefits but how benefits are inter-related. I shall address that issue.

The second issue that I will concentrate on is people in retirement who are carers. More men than women are carers in retirement, and that gives rise to all sorts of issues that we address in the report and which I will talk about in more detail. As the Chairman said in his introduction, we investigated what groups were vulnerable to poverty in old age. They include older pensioners and

[Mrs. Humble]

women, and often older women: those aged 85 and over who did not build up an entitlement to the full state pension, and who often do not take up the benefits to which they are entitled.

Other vulnerable groups include black and minority ethnic and disabled pensioners—again, a lot of pensioners with disabilities do not take up as many benefits as they ought to—carers, whom I will discuss in a little while, and people in care homes. We often forget about those individuals, but their personal allowance for expenses is minimal. We think somehow that everything is provided for them, but it sometimes is not, so we need to remember them as well.

On simplification, it is important that we consider take-up and how to make the system more accessible and understandable for people, both before retirement age and on retirement. We received a lot of information about reasons for non-take-up of pension credit, which are discussed on page 35 of the report. One reason is lack of knowledge. Many people who retire had no contact with the benefit system while they were of working age and have little understanding of what they can claim.

Some people also believe that they are ineligible for benefits, especially owner-occupiers. I represent a constituency with a high percentage of pensioners who are owner-occupiers. Many people who choose to retire to the seaside buy bungalows by the sea. As the Chairman said, when they first retire, they often have a reasonable income, and they furnish their homes and have a nice lifestyle. But 20 years later, that is not always the case, and they do not always realise that they can claim additional support.

**Mr. Nigel Waterson** (Eastbourne) (Con): The hon. Lady is absolutely right, not least about people retiring to seaside towns. However, I urge her also to make a point about council tax benefit, to which the same considerations apply in spades. It has the lowest take-up of any of the means-tested benefits. My constituency—I am sure that hers is the same—is full of widows who live on their own and own their homes but are cash-poor, but who do not imagine for a moment that they are entitled to any help with their council tax.

**Mrs. Humble:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I will come to the issue of council tax and housing benefit in a moment.

People are reluctant not only to claim but to give out personal information. Many pensioners are proud and do not want to talk to people about their financial circumstances. We need to convince them that they ought to, because it involves their entitlement, something that the state thinks that they deserve to have. There is a difficulty, or a perceived difficulty, in claiming and there is a lack of support, particularly face-to-face support. We identified areas of non-take-up of pension credit and we must consider how we can make improvements.

The Select Committee looked at automaticity, although I dislike that word and am sure that there must be a nicer way of putting it. There are automaticity pilot schemes that are looking at whether people have an automatic entitlement. We looked at a pilot in Motherwell in which people who were in receipt of income support

were contacted five months before they reached the age of 60. They were asked to arrange a telephone call to claim pension credit. Our recommendations called on the Department to undertake a prompt evaluation of that pilot. The Department said that to bring in automatic entitlement, it might be necessary to change legislation. We all know how difficult that can be. However, adopting the approach of the Motherwell pilot would not require a change in legislation, although it would require work by officials in the Department. I hope we will hear more about that so that we can maximise the ways of simplifying the system. If we can identify the people who should be entitled to pension credit, we should do so. We should be proactive to ensure that those who should get the credit do get it.

The Select Committee considered council tax benefit and housing benefit. The Institute for Fiscal Studies told us:

“Pension Credit and Council Tax Benefit are the most significant benefits for the 65-and-over age group”.

There is a long list of recommendations in the report on increasing take-up. The clear way forward that we identified was having a single phone line for all three benefits. However, the response from the Department said:

“It will sometimes be more efficient for both the pensioner and the decision-maker to direct the pensioner to the local authority rather than a PDCA phone line.”

Why? It seemed to me and the Committee that having a single phone line would be a lot easier for pensioners.

Blackpool council in my constituency works closely with the Department and tries to simplify the interaction between council tax benefit and pension credit. That does not always happen, so we must do more to simplify the process.

**Kelvin Hopkins** (Luton, North) (Lab): I agree entirely that the process should be simplified. I think that Britain is the only country in Europe in which three major Departments are responsible for distributing benefits, and there are agencies below that. I have suggested many times that we ought to combine all benefits in one Department. That would solve the problems of complexity and difficulty for claimants, and save a lot of Government money.

**Mrs. Humble:** I refer my hon. Friend to the various Work and Pensions Committee inquiries on housing benefit. The Government are considering that issue and perhaps there is a way forward. The Department has a simplification unit that is aware of the complexity of the benefits system and is trying to simplify it. Every time the Committee looks into the matter—as we did in our report on benefit simplification, which suggested ways forward—we find that it is not easy to have a simplified system, particularly a simplified benefits system, because it tends to lead to a broad-brush approach that does not deal with the detail found in people's lives. We must therefore look at compromises. For example, we could respond to people using less detail and ensure that they get as much as they can, rather than have the situation in which some people do not claim and so do not receive anything.

**Kelvin Hopkins:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way again—she is most generous. She talks about ensuring that everyone gets the benefits to which they

are entitled and says that it is simple. Would it not be simpler to have one Department with responsibility for benefits and a one-stop shop that can deal with all of the details for every person in one place, by one person and at the same time?

**Mrs. Humble:** The Committee's reports on simplification, on carers and on tackling pensioner poverty have considered a one-stop shop. The answer is not necessarily to amalgamate everything into one Department, but could be to amalgamate it all into one telephone line or one door that people can walk through so that everything is dealt with together and there is the clearest possible analysis and response to each person's situation by an official.

The second area I want to touch on is carers. "Tackling Pensioner Poverty" refers back to our report on carers because many carers are of retirement age. If ever a system needed simplifying, it is the interaction between the state retirement pension and carer's allowance. I am not the only Member of Parliament to whom pensioners have come, saying that they have applied for carer's allowance and have received letters from the pensions agency saying, "You are entitled to carer's allowance and your reward is £0.00." Do people understand that? Of course not.

Pensioners cannot receive two income-replacement benefits simultaneously. They therefore cannot receive the state retirement pension and carer's allowance at the same time. However, the Government changed the rules a few years ago, so an exception is that people can receive a reduced state pension topped up to the level of the carer's allowance. In general, the two cannot be received together. Despite that, if people want to get the carer's credit, they must first apply for the carer's allowance. That is difficult to explain to some carers.

In the report on carers, the Select Committee came up with the good idea of dividing the carer's allowance in two. The first allowance would be the carer's allowance and the second would be a caring costs allowance that reflected the cost to the carer of the caring work they do. We recommended to Government that the second element, which is not an income-replacement benefit, should be paid whether the carer is above or below retirement age. We returned to that recommendation in the pensioner poverty report. I am pleased to say that the Government did not dismiss the idea out of hand. In response to the report on carers, Ministers said that they would look at carer's allowance as part of an overall review of benefits and benefit simplification. Will they consider it further and give a concrete answer to the problem? If not, pensioners who receive pension credit will continue to not receive carer's credit because they do not want to go through, do not think they have to go through or do not know about the rigmarole of claiming for carer's allowance in order to be told that they cannot have it, but that they can have something else instead.

The Select Committee's reports on carers and pensioner poverty said some very nice things about carer's centres. That relates to the point my hon. Friend the Member for Luton, North (Kelvin Hopkins) made about having a single focus. They are a place where people can go to learn about their whole benefit entitlement.

This comprehensive report covers lots of other things, including the issue of disability living allowance and attendance allowance, the default retirement age, which

the hon. Member for Henley mentioned, age discrimination, financial advice and choosing the correct annuity. Last but not least, it covers the importance of health and well-being—many poor pensioners experience ill health. We need to look at all the issues that affect pensioners. If we can lift pensioners out of poverty, we can help them to lead much fuller and healthier lives. That is why the Committee's report is a good one. I am proud to be a member of the Committee and I fully support our Chairman and the report.

3.10 pm

**Kelvin Hopkins** (Luton, North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr. Williams. I am glad that we have time to debate these important issues at appropriate length.

I welcome the publication of the report and the speeches in support of it by my hon. Friends the Members for Bradford, North (Mr. Rooney) and for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood (Mrs. Humble). I have to say, however, that we still have not faced up to the fact that the basic state pension and pensioner incomes are simply a disgrace. Compared with the rest of Europe, they are very low indeed, and more than 2 million pensioners still live below the poverty line.

About 10 years ago, a comparison was made of pensions across Europe. At the time, Britain had the absolute rock-bottom basic state pension in the European Union for a single person with no qualifications. The next lowest state pension was in Germany, where people received £150 a week, which was about £60 a week more than in Britain. When I told a group of pensioners, they gasped—they thought that £160 a week was an enormous amount. I said that it was rather less than a Member of Parliament got paid in one day—I had to put it in a context that they would understand. We are still in that situation.

I have to say at this point that I regularly sponsor the annual lobby of Parliament by the National Pensioners Convention and I have publicly supported many of the things that it has said, particularly in the pensioners' manifesto that it recently published.

The reason why we have got away with a low basic state pension is that so many people have benefited from occupational schemes. Indeed, I am in receipt of an occupational pension, even though I am working. Millions of people are in such a scheme. As a result, the low basic state pension has not affected a high proportion of the population, because people receive incomes from elsewhere. Many people also save privately, and private pensions have been another way of cushioning the impact of our disgracefully low basic state pension.

However, occupational schemes are dying; they are being cut off at the knees or are disappearing altogether, and many schemes are preventing new entrants from joining. Occupational schemes will not be there by the time that people such as my children retire, and members of my family who work in the private sector—they are not that well paid, but reasonably well paid—will not have the benefit of an occupational pension, which was something that we could look forward to in the past. Occupational pensions offer guaranteed payments after people retire and even the possibility of retiring early and getting very comfortable payments, but that system is dying and will not be revived.

[Kelvin Hopkins]

I suspect that the real reason why companies introduced occupational pensions, which were not transferable, was to hold on to workers. I am older than almost everybody here, and when I grew up we had something called full employment. Every factory had lists outside of the jobs that people could go in and get—that was certainly true in the south-east, where I grew up. As a result, companies wanted to hang on to their workers, and one way in which they did that was by providing occupational pension schemes. It was the same in local government and the public sector, where pay has often been quite low and people have been attracted into jobs by the knowledge that they will get a decent pension at the end of it. Attacking public sector pensions will not be to our advantage in the long term. With great respect for what my right hon. Friend the Chancellor said yesterday, we should look at the problem with private pensions, which are disappearing and being broken down. That is the problem—not the public sector pensions.

On private savings, we have had the Equitable Life scandal. I am a member of the Select Committee on Public Administration, which has supported the ombudsman in calling for those who were affected to receive compensation because regulation failed to protect them. Light-touch or non-existent regulation has led to hundreds of thousands and possibly millions of people losing out. Every year, 30,000 people die who lost out as a result of the Equitable Life scandal.

A high proportion of contributions to private pensions go on advertising and administration. About one third of what would go back to pensioners in a well-regulated state scheme goes to meet just advertising and administration costs, so private schemes are not good value. They are also subject to the vagaries of the stock market and interest rates, so we cannot guarantee that an annuity will be at a particular level, because we do not know what the economic situation will be when the annuity is paid.

The future will not, therefore, be a good private sector or occupational schemes. Increasingly, we will have to rely on a state pension for our fundamental income; indeed, for many working people or those who are unemployed and never have the chance to build up savings, it will be their only income.

The state pension is crucial, but we have seen what has happened to it since Mrs. Thatcher broke the earnings links getting on for 30 years ago. The state pension has dropped from about 26 per cent. to about 16 per cent. as a proportion of full-time earnings—a massive drop in real terms. Had we kept the link to earnings, the figure would now be about 40 per cent. higher than it is, and we could be getting close to the German level of 10 years ago. We still would not be where we should be, but we would be a lot better off. Of course, there would have been more contributions.

**Mr. John Baron** (Billericay) (Con): I accept that the state pension is important, as the hon. Gentleman says, but could the increase over the past 10 years in the number of pensioners living in poverty not be at least partly attributable to the fact that the numbers claiming housing benefit and council tax benefit have declined? If we could improve the take-up of the benefits that are

due, that could help to deal with pensioner poverty and to improve the numbers that the hon. Gentleman mentioned.

**Kelvin Hopkins:** Indeed. I should have said that the Government have taken some steps to improve pensioners' lot over the past 12 years, which I welcome. However, those steps have been marginal and, as the hon. Gentleman says, the numbers living in poverty have increased. With a high level of means-testing, however, there will always be these problems. The poorest and least able pensioners—those from ethnic minorities with poor language skills who feel nervous about claiming and who are not used to the system—will lose out. The report refers in particular to Bangladeshi and Pakistani pensioners, who are the poorest of the lot. I have a high proportion of Pakistani and Bangladeshi constituents, and they live in poverty. At this stage, most of them are young, but as time goes on they will become pensioners. Means-testing is part of the problem. The Government benefit to the tune of £5 billion a year because people do not claim benefits. Constantly urging people to claim benefits and giving help through citizens advice bureaux and advisers will not overcome the basic problem of means-testing. I would like us to move away from means-testing for pensions altogether and towards a much higher basic state pension. We should use the tax system, not means-testing, as a redistributive mechanism.

**Mrs. Humble:** I refer my hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Billericay (Mr. Baron) to page 11 of the report, which points out that the number of pensioners living below 60 per cent. of contemporary median income—the usual relative poverty line—has gone down from 29 per cent. in 1998-99 to 18 per cent. in 2007-08. Each of the three indicators that are used to describe poverty shows that the number of pensioners living in poverty has gone down.

**Kelvin Hopkins:** I thank my hon. Friend for that correction. I may have to look at the statistics more carefully, but the fact is that we still have more than 2 million living below the poverty line, and of course the number of pensioners is increasing. As we live longer, a much higher proportion of people will be of pensionable age. If we do not start to put the system right, and put more into it now, the level of poverty will inevitably increase. We need to do something serious about contributions.

**Mr. Baron:** I accept what the hon. Member for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood (Mrs. Humble) says, but the figures are open to dispute. Help the Aged, for example, would question those statistics, according to the evidence that I have. We must not just bandy figures around willy-nilly. The bottom line is, as the hon. Member for Luton, North (Mr. Hopkins) says, that the issue remains a key one. We can debate whether there have been slight rises or falls in number, but the simple fact remains: too many pensioners in this country live in poverty, and we must do something to put that right.

**Kelvin Hopkins:** As the hon. Gentleman says, we could debate the figures and argue about them, and no doubt the National Pensioners Convention has its own figures, although I do not have those to hand.

Had we not broken the pensions-earnings link, we would have solved much of the problem already, but the NPC suggests that to make sure that no pensioner lives below the poverty line we need a basic state pension of £165 a week, which is an enormous increase. Of course, I have suggestions about how we would achieve that. It would mean much greater contributions. However, for the future we must think about radical reforms. With the gradual—even rapid—demise of occupational and private schemes, we must look towards a compulsory state scheme for the long-term future, if people like my children and grandchildren are to have any kind of decent living in old age, assuming that they do not have enormous incomes from which they can save vast amounts.

For an adequate state pension, the NCP talks about £165 a week, and that is a fine place to start. One way in which we could achieve that would be, first, to roll up all the payments that are made at the moment—pension credit and the winter fuel allowance—and build them all into the basic state pension, so that there are not means-tested bits and little add-ons. The winter fuel allowance, much as I welcome it—it is very useful—is said to be targeted on the poor; but actually it is a benefit that is not even taxed, so the rich get it as much as the poor. It is regressive in that sense.

If the winter fuel allowance were to be built into the basic state pension, which, with total income, would be taxed, what was taken from the rich could be recycled to be built into the system at the bottom and help the less well-off. A taxed system is much better than one that is either means-tested or, indeed, not taxed or means-tested at all. I suggest a 54-week year for the payment of the basic state pension, with a double payment in January and December, which would have the same effect of extra income in the winter, when it was needed to help people. Instead of the winter fuel allowance, people would get that double payment in December and January, to overcome the problem, and pensioners would get the extra lump sum that they enjoy so much.

Such an approach to the basic state pension would, however, still mean a fairly basic standard of living for many people. I defy any Member of Parliament to sustain the standard of living to which they are accustomed on £165 a week; nevertheless, a lot of poor pensioners would think it a good start. Still, many people would want to save beyond that. Voluntary saving in the end does not work for many people. The only system that would work would be a compulsory one—a compulsory universal state earnings-related pensions saving system. That is the only way forward.

There would be two elements—the basic state pension and a compulsory state earnings-related pension scheme for everyone. The contributions would be substantial and people would know what they would receive in the end; it would not be subject to economic conditions, the stock market, interest rates or whatever. That is the way forward: voluntarism will not work. People live for today and there are pressures in daily living which mean that they do not save. The amounts that must be saved to provide a serious pension are enormous. People might say, “I’ll put away £50 a week.” That would not give very much over a lifetime; it would give something, but not enough. Many forecasts have been made about the kind of money that must be paid. Private schemes are inefficient, anyway. The great advantage of a national scheme is that it is easy to administer and very efficient,

and we could have a large national savings fund, which could be used for investment purposes and would generate its own income, particularly in public infrastructure, for example. It would be a comprehensive state scheme, with a large fund that would mean that people’s pensions were secure for the long term. That is the only serious way forward.

I do not believe that we have yet addressed the problem at all seriously, although I welcome the marginal changes that have been made, and the worthwhile suggestions in the report. We must be much more radical if our children and grandchildren are not to suffer poverty in old age.

3.25 pm

**Miss Anne Begg** (Aberdeen, South) (Lab): I apologise for being late to the debate, Mr. Williams. I am happy to be here to add to what has been said by other members of the Committee who put together the report, and I congratulate the Government on having done a huge amount in the policy area of pensioner poverty. Often when a Government achieve some successes, we pocket them and say, “Thank you very much,” and then add, “And what are you going to do for us now?” My remarks this afternoon will be in that mould as well; there are other things that the Government may want to look at.

I endorse the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood (Mrs. Humble), who covered much of the meat of the report. I do not want to repeat all that she said, but there is no doubt that the incomes and lives of women pensioners in particular have been transformed by the Labour Government, especially by the introduction of the pension credit. They are much better off than they were under any previous Government. That is partly because many of them did not qualify for the basic state pension, or had gone through a marriage break-up and so no longer had their husband’s contributions to their basic state pension. Also, women live longer, and there is an ageing population of women who, before the Labour Government were elected in 1997, were living on very modest means. I still find, particularly when I visit sheltered housing in my constituency, women who say that they have never been so well off, and that they are very pleased with what the Government have done.

However, the Government have also gone beyond what is in the report in considering the future of women as they reach retirement age. I am very pleased about what was done in the Pensions Act 2007 to ensure that the women pensioners of the future would not be in the same position as those of today—that they will be able to build up national insurance contributions and qualify for the national state pension, and will have an income in their own right. Society has changed and it is no longer good enough for a woman to depend on her husband’s pension contributions so that she will have an income. Those practices led to the issue that has never been properly resolved—I do not think that there is a resolution—of married women who paid the small stamp in the mistaken belief that it would not affect the pension they received. Of course, it did not affect them in terms of the 60 per cent. that they received through their husband’s contributions, but it did affect their contributions to a pension in their own right.

[Miss Anne Begg]

Those women feel particularly aggrieved when they get a letter from the Pension, Disability and Carers Service telling them that their basic state pension will be 12p a week. They cannot understand it; they have worked all their life and that is what they get—or rather, they get more, because they get the 60 per cent. from their husband's contributions and the 12p, but it still rankles. That was often sold on a false prospectus. Hopefully, the Government's more recent legislation will mean that future generations of women will not face that and will manage, even though they might still have roles as carers. I am glad that the Chancellor announced in this year's Budget that grandparents who look after their grandchildren would qualify for the carers element of national insurance credits. Those provisions are all really important.

I do not intend to speak for long, but I would like draw Members' attention to the personal expenses allowance, which my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood mentioned in passing. I appreciate that it is not the direct responsibility of DWP and that the Department of Health makes decisions on that, but our Committee recommended in another report that the allowance should be doubled. The Government did not quite say no in their response to that report, but they did say that doubling the allowance from £20 to £40 would cost £150 million.

I want to make another plea for an increase in that allowance, not just because my mother is now in a care home so I am slightly more attuned to it, but because there are other people, not just pensioners, who get caught. Some people who live in supported accommodation, who might now be pensioners, are disabled. Where local authorities have cut back on transport, entertainment or day centres, for example, the pensioners and disabled people who live in care homes are now expected to pay for all of their social life, all their clothes, all their toiletries, any presents, hair-dos or anything else out of £20 a week. That really is not enough. It does not give them the dignity to have an independent life.

We must remember that people are living longer and so are sometimes fitter when they go into homes than people in homes have traditionally been, so they expect to go out for a Sunday lunch with their family, for example, but they cannot pay for it. They cannot take their grandchildren out on their birthday because they only have £20 a week to spend. In any case, they could not afford the taxi if they lived in an area controlled by a council like Aberdeen city council, which has taken away their taxi as well. There is a need to address that issue. It is not a huge amount of money, but it could make a big difference to people who have worked all their lives and who are paying high costs for their care. It would be nice if they could hold on to a bit more to spend themselves.

Finally, I would like to ask about council tax benefit. We know that a large number of pensioners are put off claiming because it is a benefit. Those who probably need it most are owner-occupiers, and to them claiming any kind of benefit is anathema. In fact, it is a badge of pride that they have never claimed anything in their life. Sometimes they complain that they get nothing. On that point, I must pay tribute to the Government,

because at least we can now say to those pensioners who say they get nothing, "At least you get your winter fuel allowance and your free bus travel."

It is perhaps a slightly different point to that made by my hon. Friend the Member for Luton, North (Kelvin Hopkins), because sometimes we have to ensure that the middle classes feel that they are getting something for their money in order for them to pay the tax and help sustain our welfare state. I ask the Minister, when are we going to change the name of council tax benefit? It is almost as simple as that. I understand that the Government are already minded to change the name to council tax rebate, but when will that happen?

Thank you, once again, Mr. Williams, for allowing me to speak in the debate. The Committee members work extremely well together, which is why we have successfully produced a very good report, and I am happy to support it.

3.34 pm

**Mr. David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op):** I am delighted to take part in this debate on the excellent treatise from the Work and Pensions Committee. I apologise that I have to leave earlier than I had anticipated, because I wish to speak in the debate in the main Chamber, but I will make some brief comments.

I will start with two points of congratulation. One of them is addressed in part to the Department for Work and Pensions and in part to the Treasury. We would have many more pensioners living in poverty had the Government not bitten the bullet and introduced the financial assistance scheme and, latterly, the Pension Protection Fund. We had our arguments when that went through Parliament, but the scheme's benefit is shown when we talk to people who are now receiving moneys after funds to which they had contributed over their whole lives went into administration through no fault of their own. The sums are not necessarily as high as some of us would like, as we believe that they should be fully compensated, but as far as I can tell they are receiving money automatically—I do not like the word "automaticity". That particularly vulnerable group would have every reason to feel let down, principally by their employers, secondly by their trust fund administrator, and thirdly by the Government, potentially, had we not done something about it. That is something the Government ought to be proud of, because it is good news that it seems to be working, and that pride ought to be shared between the DWP and the Treasury, as they overlap on that.

My second point of congratulation, which I have mentioned on other occasions, is for the DWP directly, and I only wish that it would say more about it and take some congratulations. It is about the village agent scheme, which was pioneered in Gloucestershire. The DWP employed people in village areas to go out and proselytise—the aim being to find out whether people were fully taking all that they were entitled to in pension credit and various benefits. Despite criticism in the early days from some people in the localities who thought that those involved were interfering busy bodies, the scheme, which has now been taken on by Gloucestershire county council, because sadly the funding ended, has been an unalloyed success.

I hear nothing but good about what has happened as a result of the scheme. People who had no reason to believe that they were entitled to claim now do so just because someone came round, sat down with them and helped them fill in the forms, asking, "Are you sure you are not entitled to carers allowance?" For the first time they are receiving benefits that make a great deal of difference. I say to the DWP that when it gets it right it ought to be out there shouting it from the rooftops.

There is the argument about the £5 billion that is not claimed, as my hon. Friend the Member for Luton, North (Kelvin Hopkins) mentioned. That is why we are going out to try to get people to claim and going the extra mile in rural areas, because the people there are too old or incapacitated to ever go to a citizens advice bureau. Where we have done it, and done it right, let us say so. It might be a relatively small number of people, but they are eternally grateful—I know because I have met them. They are also shocked because they had not realised how poorly off they were. That is often the way—they often do not claim because they do not see themselves as particularly poor, even though they are struggling from day to day.

My third point is not one of congratulation, but of realism. We need to look far closer at the relationship between pensioner poverty and the low quality of life of many of our older residents, particularly in rural areas. The evidence, if Stroud is anything to go by, is that the oldest residents live in the oldest property and, sadly, face the most immense problems with heating and just with the daily grind of getting to the shops and so on. As much as that is to do with quality of life, rather than something we would necessarily term poverty, it is really about what many of our older people face day in, day out.

**Kelvin Hopkins:** Recent reports suggest that because of fuel price increases, several thousand more pensioners died last year than would have died if the prices had not gone up. We have to do more about fuel poverty in particular. Would my hon. Friend agree?

**Mr. Drew:** My hon. Friend makes the point only too clearly. I would argue that we have to get much smarter in ensuring that we are targeting not just benefits and credits but help with insulation grants and the boiler replacement scheme announced yesterday, if nothing else. I do not know exactly how that would work; I know that the budget is limited. We are now into a new scrappage scheme. I would like that to go principally to our older people because they are the very people who will not do it—they cannot necessarily afford to do it, but they really need to do it.

I have just a few other comments, although I do not want to speak for long. I entirely support my hon. Friend the Member for Luton, North—I am sure that he will be completely unshocked to hear that—on retying the state pension to average earnings. I go along entirely with what he says. I have a question for my hon. Friend the Minister. We are only two and a bit years away from when this is supposed to come in—it is supposed to happen in 2012. The parties are all agreed, although we can argue for perhaps a year either way. One presumes that an immense amount of work is being done to make it happen, yet I have seen relatively little published by the Government about the mechanism for moving to

retying, and the effect on pension credits and other benefits. I go along with what my hon. Friend said, but I believe that it will have to be done incrementally, to some extent. In effect, we are trying to turn back the clock how many years? It has been a great many years since the terrible decision was taken to break the earnings link.

I just want to be assured that we will not get to 2012 and then suddenly be told that the work is not done, the computer system is not ready or it is all too expensive, because if there is one thing that will detach pensioners from the voting population, given that they tend to vote in greater numbers than any other group, it is total disillusion over something that they have been promised and have fought for through the National Pensioners Convention and so on. It is now being realised after the political parties have agreed to it, but where is the mechanism by which it will happen?

Much as I agree with what my hon. Friends and the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) said on specific issues, I want to raise what I think is still a great unfairness: the failure to allow disability living allowance to be paid to pensioners who did not claim it when they were of working age. We discussed this during the proceedings on the Equality Bill, and there are hon. Members present who will remember some of those discussions.

We have to come up with a valid reason why we are doing what we are. My hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, South (Miss Begg) spoke about explaining to pensioners who have not made full contributions why what is happening is happening. The most difficult letters I get are from people who may be slightly over retirement age who have not claimed beforehand but suddenly feel that their disability is such that they need to claim. They are told, "Oh, no, you are entitled to attendance allowance only, and it is always at the lower rate," and so on. We need to see that as an issue.

The most important thing, of course, is mobility. The one thing that pensioners have really benefited from, as my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood (Mrs. Humble) said, is free bus travel, yet if one is in any way incapacitated and unable to get a mobility allowance, that is a somewhat pyrrhic victory as they cannot actually get places. We need to look at that carefully.

My last point is about the retirement age. This is difficult, because we all know that it will probably be increased further by current financial difficulties, but there is great unfairness around the operation of early retirement. I have always argued that there is a fundamental difference between the social classes because people of lower income, unless they go on early retirement for sickness reasons, are highly unlikely ever to be able to retire on such a scheme, whereas all manner of professional classes, whether in the private or public sector, have come up with advantageous packages and are able to go young.

I use my own cousin as an example. I hope that he does not read this. He was a head of department in a secondary school and retired at 50 because of a merger—one of them had to go. In effect, for ever and a day, he is on half his teaching salary with an enhancement. I am sure that nowadays we will have to get much tougher, but there is a hell of a disparity between people who

[Mr. Drew]

retired in the past and who have managed to do quite nicely out of it, compared with people who have had to go on.

We would welcome people going on, given how we attacked the matter in the Equality Bill. We would want to prevent people from not being allowed to go on post-state retirement age, whether it is 65, 66 or whatever. We allow and encourage that, but, for some people, it is not a choice but a reality. They have little or no pension, and they are not able to call on early retirement schemes.

I know the nuclear industry very well. We talk about its liabilities as though they are all to do with horrible stuff that we have to stick in the ground at some time, but they are not all that. Some are human liabilities incurred when the industry had a massive enhancement programme to allow people to go early—to get them off the books, which was considered to be helpful. Compare that with someone who has been in a low-paid job all their life who has to keep going because they have little or no pension.

That is a great unfairness, and the Government should do anything that they can to eradicate the gap, to address the poverty of those who have no choice but to keep going and to make sure that they do not do it when it is completely unfair. We should look at that and do something about it.

3.48 pm

**Paul Rowen** (Rochdale) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr. Williams. I congratulate the Chairman of the Work and Pensions Committee, the hon. Member for Bradford, North (Mr. Rooney), and the members of the Committee, who have produced an excellent report. It contains a great deal of information and many recommendations that I believe we can all support and accept.

I accept the point made by the Select Committee Chairman at the start of this debate that when one deals with pensions, one inevitably deals with issues that affect different people at different times, depending on where they are in the cycle. Nevertheless, the report mainly deals with pensioner poverty, and, although it deals with other aspects, it deals in particular with those people who are pensioners now.

The hon. Member for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood (Mrs. Humble) referred to the table on page 11 of the report. I believe that there is broad agreement on where we are in terms of pensioner poverty. As the hon. Member for Luton, South said—

**Kelvin Hopkins:** North.

**Paul Rowen:** We are all from the north. As the hon. Member for Luton, North (Kelvin Hopkins) said, 2.1 million pensioners, or 18 per cent. of the pensioner population, are still in poverty. The figure rises to 25 per cent. for the over-85s. It is clear in paragraph 17 that, from 1988-89 through to 2004-05, the Government's measures considerably reduced the numbers of pensioners in poverty. In 1998-99 29 per cent. of all pensioners were in poverty, taking the 60 per cent. median, and by 2004 the figure was down to 18 per cent. It is also clear that in 2007-08 the figure is still 18 per cent. The other

figure, which is often taken to be the real poverty line—those who are below 50 per cent. of median income—has not changed as much: it has only gone down from 13 per cent. of all pensioners to 10 per cent. That brings me back to the point that the hon. Member for Luton, North made about means-tested benefits, because those people comprising the 10 per cent.—Age Concern says that it is 11 per cent.—of all pensioners who have been in persistent poverty, below the poverty line, in the past three years are reluctant for one reason or another to claim the benefits to which they are entitled.

The submissions in the report mention many of the reasons for that. For example, pensioners may have a lack of knowledge, may not have contact with the benefits system and may have no history of being in that system. They may believe that they are ineligible for benefits. The hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) mentioned that in respect of his constituency, where people in a particular area did not know that they could claim. There is a general

“Reluctance to claim a benefit...Reluctance to give out personal information”

or

“Difficulty or perceived difficulty in claiming”.

People often feel that they lack support negotiating the labyrinth.

**Kelvin Hopkins:** Another major factor is that 20 per cent. of our fellow citizens are functionally illiterate, will use all sorts of strategies to disguise that, and would fear being discovered by having to fill in forms.

**Paul Rowen:** I agree. That is a clear issue, particularly for many older people.

The issues that I have mentioned also affect people applying for housing and council tax benefit. I welcome the proposal in the report that there should be a single phone line and that the Pension, Disability and Carers Service should work much more closely with local authorities. I also welcome the “automaticity” in the Welfare Reform Act 2009, which the hon. Member for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood mentioned—I cannot say that word, never mind that I do not particularly like it, but she made a good point. Despite 10 years of pension credit, 11 per cent. of people who are entitled to the benefit still have not claimed it, and the sooner we get such a measure up and running, the better.

Age Concern makes a clear, important point. This week in the House we passed the Child Poverty Bill, which sets clear targets and guidelines by which poverty for young people will be eliminated. I have to ask the Minister why can we not do exactly the same for pensioners? Why are they different? There is clearly a lot of merit in making such provision. We know what the problem is. The report answers and deals with some of the things that can be done to go about seriously eradicating that issue. Why are we not setting ourselves the same sorts of targets for older people that we think are appropriate for young people?

On other aspects of the state pension, hon. Members who were involved in consideration of the Pensions Bill will remember that, during its passage, some of us voted to support the principle of having a tie to income by 2012. Again, I agree with what other hon. Members



said. I hope that the Minister gives us a clear commitment: the tie should be not just to average earnings, but to average earnings or the retail prices index. There is an opportunity for pensioners to benefit, depending on inflation and earnings. I would not want to see a shift in that commitment beyond 2005. As Age Concern rightly says, the sums saved by that delay are relatively small: only £200 million a year. Although, in the current financial position, such a sum is relevant, it is not a large sum, given the amounts that the Government are spending. I hope that the Minister will commit to sticking to the deadline. My party is discussing its manifesto today and that matter is on its agenda: we want to be clear that that should happen.

I think that the hon. Member for Luton, North mentioned the National Pensioners Convention's commitment to a citizens' pension. The hon. Member for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson), the then Pensions Minister the right hon. Member for Doncaster, Central (Ms Winterton) and I had the pleasure of attending that convention in the Winter gardens in Blackpool earlier this year. I have never been in a cage of lions before, but it certainly felt like that. We know—the hon. Member for Luton, North mentioned it—how angry pensioners feel about the fact that they have not received such a commitment. In the current economic circumstances, I will not say that that can happen right away. However, moves must be made, and certain moves can be made.

**Mr. Rooney:** This should be an academic debate, because in reality the change to restoring the earnings link is being paid for by equalisation of the pension age. That is the reality of it. So the start date should not really be an issue.

**Paul Rowen:** I agree. Again, I pay tribute to the Government for reducing the number of years' national insurance contributions that people need to get their entitlement. Last year only 30 per cent. of women reaching retirement age were entitled to the full state pension. The Government's proposals in the previous two pensions Bills will eliminate many of those problems and ensure that people get what they are entitled to.

The Committee rightly raises the issue of the national default retirement age. It is an anachronism that people are forced to retire at a certain age, whether they want to or not. I cannot see how that national default retirement age can stand alongside an Equality Bill that would treat everyone as equal. It is right that people should have the opportunity to retire at a certain age, but that should not be forced on them.

**Kelvin Hopkins:** As a younger person I taught in further education. I was under 30, but I taught on a course called "Preparation for retirement". What did I know about retirement? The hon. Gentleman is right. Some people on that course had had hard physical jobs all their lives and they could not wait for 65. However, on the same course there was a legal secretary, a spinster lady, who was in tears because she was going to be forced to retire at 60.

**Paul Rowen:** I agree. In my constituency a head teacher who is 74 years of age is still working because the governors of the school, a Church of England

school, have agreed that she can do so. But she has had many problems with the teachers' pension scheme in terms of what she is entitled to do. The rules do not allow people like her to work for as long as they want to and are able to. She should be able to defer her pension and take a larger lump sum when she retires. However, that will not be permitted, which is completely wrong.

The Government, with all-party agreement, have set a policy of gradually raising the retirement age over a period to enable those who are currently working, but planning for retirement, to make the necessary provision. I do not want, and my party will not support, an earlier date for that raising of the retirement age. That might be Conservative party policy, but it is certainly not one to which I can subscribe. It would be totally wrong, after agreeing a pensions policy across the political divide, to break it now and to put at a disadvantage people who have made arrangements for their retirement based on what was agreed after the Freud report was accepted.

I want to refer to a couple of other issues that hon. Members raised about entitlements. The disability living allowance is important. If someone is disabled and is given an allowance to take account of the extra costs associated with their disability—Cancer UK is conducting an excellent campaign on extra heating costs—why should they suddenly, at the age of 65, become ineligible for DLA because they have a retirement pension? That is nonsense. I agree with the point that was made about splitting the components, so that the living component is not age-related, and I also accept the point that was made about the Equality Bill. How can someone who is disabled have different needs depending on their age? They either have those needs, or they do not, and they either receive support for those needs, or they do not. Support should not be, as it is at the moment, dependent on eligibility for a pension. Someone who is working would be entitled to DLA, so what is the difference?

Another issue is the attendance allowance. The Green Paper refers to dealing with that as part of the care and support system. Again, we need clarity from the Government, and no doubt there will be an opportunity to pursue the issues when discussing the Bill that is going through the House. That, and the issue to which the hon. Member for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood referred about carers, is important. The Committee's report makes excellent recommendations that I and my party can support.

4.3 pm

**Mr. Nigel Waterson (Eastbourne) (Con):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr. Williams. It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Rochdale (Paul Rowen). We are all excited to hear that the Liberal Democrats are finalising their manifesto. I look forward to reading it, and picking out the undoubted huge contradictions.

I pay tribute to the Select Committee, which has clearly worked hard in a spirit of great amity to produce two excellent volumes. The Committee's distinguished Chairman made an excellent speech with a tour d'horizon of many of the issues, and I apologise if I do not touch on every recommendation—if I did, we would be here for a very long time.

[Mr. Nigel Waterson]

I single out the hon. Member for Aberdeen, South (Miss Begg), who talked about women. With cross-party support, we have gone some way in recent legislation to tackle the historic outrage that less than one third of women receive a full state pension, but we are still left with some cliff edges and so on. However, I will not deal with that in great detail, but not because it is not important,

The debate is taking place against a dark background for pensioners. We have heard that 2.6 million live in official poverty, and 11 per cent. live in persistent poverty. Several speakers touched on the take-up of benefits, and it is tragic that, according to the latest figures, some £5.4 billion of means-tested benefits that are rightfully the entitlement of older people are not claimed. That money is left in the Treasury and does not benefit pensioners. Some estimates are that if all that money were claimed, up to one third of pensioners would be lifted out of poverty. The hon. Member for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood (Mrs. Humble) spoke about means-tested benefits and take-up, and I cannot improve on what she said. The overall answer is that, as Age Concern and Help the Aged said,

“reductions in pensioner poverty have ground to a halt in recent years. It is shameful that, in one of the richest countries in the world, one in five pensioners continue to live in poverty.”

That is a challenge not just for the current Government, but for a future Government.

One problem is that the Government do not treat the matter sufficiently seriously. Ministers have a habit of claiming—I have a shrewd suspicion that the Minister here will be no exception—that they are curing the problem of poverty. I shall not take the line of the hon. Member for Rochdale, because I do not believe that a law to abolish poverty, any more than a law to abolish the deficit, is the way forward, because that is just a politician’s response to a problem. I hope that he will not be too tearful when I say that I do not agree with what he said about introducing a Bill on pensioner poverty.

**Paul Rowen:** I accept that, but the point is that there should be targets. Does the hon. Gentleman accept that, and would a Conservative Government have clear targets to eradicate poverty?

**Mr. Waterson:** I certainly think we should have some clear policies on how we will reduce poverty. I totally agree with that, but legislation is not the answer. Legislation on child poverty seems to be merely a reaction to the fact that the Government are clearly missing their existing targets. Targets are one thing, but hitting them is entirely different.

The Minister for Pensions and the Ageing Society, the hon. Member for Wallasey (Angela Eagle), said only the other day on the Floor of the House that this is “the first Government ever to end the link between poverty and old age.”—[*Official Report*, 7 December 2009; Vol. 502, c. 12.]

I shall demonstrate why that is a ludicrous claim, particularly as well over 2 million pensioners still live in poverty.

The fact is that it all depends, as with so many things connected with the Department for Work and Pensions, and the Government, on which statistics are used. Let us

be precise. Ministers said at one time that under them pensioners were no more likely than any other part of the population to fall into poverty, but I think the current mantra is that pensioners are less likely than other members of the population to fall into poverty. One might be able to argue that if one set of statistics were used, but using the before-housing-costs income measure the figures are that 23 per cent. of pensioners and 18 per cent. of the population as a whole are in poverty according to the latest figures. So that claim is simply inaccurate, and I hope that it will not be repeated today.

Yesterday was a particularly grim day for pensioners, current and future. First, we had the pre-election con of an increase in benefits next year, to be followed by a cut the following year. The Government have put Tory benefit cuts into their own projections in the pre-Budget report, and it has not taken long for most commentators and most pensioners to see through a blatantly cynical manoeuvre.

Another issue is the yet further delay that was announced yesterday, rather diffidently and quietly, in implementing personal accounts. I shall return to that in more detail in a moment.

The third thing is the dog that did not bark, and the fact that we are still here with no firm commitment on when the Government intend to restore the link with earnings for the basic state pension. That point was touched on by the hon. Member for Rochdale.

I have already spoken in some detail about the pre-Budget report, but let me reiterate that the Government are committed to increasing benefits—which are normally uprated by the RPI—by 1.5 per cent. in April 2010. However, to help pay for that, benefits in 2011 will be uprated by 1.5 per cent. less than the RPI, which is a real-terms cut. That is extraordinary. We are now effectively in an election campaign in which the Government predict, using their own projections and figures, that the next Government will cut benefits and pensions in real terms.

I return to the issue of personal accounts, which are about trying to establish a solution to a problem that we all agree on—those millions of people, mainly middle and low-income earners, who have no existing pension provision. The Government have been talking about the issue since 1998, and the Turner review worked on the basis that the new system would start in 2010. A few weeks ago, an announcement came out of the blue stating that the implementation period for personal accounts would be extended from 18 months to three years. Many low-paid workers, particularly those who work in smaller firms which are at the end of the queue under the present plan, will not get their full employer contribution, or the full benefits of being auto-enrolled into personal accounts, until 2016.

That is bad enough. However, in an interview a couple of days ago, the Minister for Pensions and the Ageing Society said that as far as the Government were concerned, it was “full steam ahead” on personal accounts. From that, I assume that she was wholly unsighted of the fact that the Chancellor was about to announce a further delay in the implementation of personal accounts. As we know, a significant delay was announced yesterday. The delay is not in the commencement—personal accounts will still commence in 2012, but quite what will happen is a bit of a mystery. I suppose that one person might be auto-enrolled into personal accounts by 31 December

2012. Who knows? Something will happen in 2012, but it will be 2017 before employers are required to pay the full rate of contribution. Until then, the rate of contribution will be 1 per cent.

All sorts of problems are associated with that. It is bad news for Turner's target audience—those on low or medium incomes—who need to save for their retirement. It means several years at least of a sort of planning blight, during which people will not be making or receiving full contributions, or making any other arrangements for their retirement. It will be a period of contributions and benefits that they will never be able to make up over their working lives.

The Association of British Insurers said that the Government admit that

“this delay will save £2.4 billion”.

The delay has nothing to do with the efficient introduction of personal accounts, or trying to avoid what has been called “a terminal 5 moment” in introducing them. We have always accepted that there should be no big bang in introducing such a measure, and we always accepted a period of around 18 months for its introduction. However, this has nothing to do with that; it is about saving the Treasury £2.4 billion.

The ABI goes on to say:

“This money will be saved at the expense of getting the low-paid into long-term pension saving which is absolutely vital for the future welfare in retirement of the workers of today. The Government's changes to the timetable will mean that employers joining the scheme in 2012 will be able to pay just 1 per cent. contribution for a full four years with Government backing. This will create a dangerous incentive for employers to join the Government's scheme and level down from the typical private sector Defined Contribution scheme of over 6 per cent. This will lead to a fall in overall savings levels for the employees affected.”

We are looking at potential pensioner poverty in the future as a result of this measure.

Tom McPhail, from the financial advisers Hargreaves Lansdown, has said:

“This move is all about sacrificing the long-term interests of people's retirement plans for the sake of digging themselves”

—that is the Government—

“out of a hole the economy has got into.”

Our position is clear: this is yet another setback to rebuilding savings and pensions in this country. The Government have already been forced to delay the scheme's implementation, by phasing it in over several years. Now, we find out that the 3 per cent. employer contribution will not be reached until October 2017. Yet again, it is low and middle-income earners who will pay the price for Labour's debt crisis, with the delays taking £2.4 billion out of the pension pot.

All that is against a background of existing damage to final salary schemes. Active membership of final salary schemes has halved since 1996, and there have been problems associated with the Pension Protection Fund and the financial assistance scheme, which the hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) referred to. There have been considerable problems in getting compensation for people in all the schemes that have collapsed since 1997, which at the same time undermines people's confidence in the process of saving for retirement. That is the key to all this; we must make it worth while for people to save for their retirement. If some experts are right, and one in four babies born today will live to see

their 100th birthday, a potential king-sized problem of pensioner poverty looms in the future, as we try to pay for many years of retirement, far more than we have at the moment.

**Kelvin Hopkins:** The hon. Gentleman rightly says that occupational schemes are declining. Is it completely unrealistic to expect people voluntarily to save the sort of amounts that will be required in order to have a decent pension in old age? Does he have a serious alternative to my state scheme proposal, which would be efficient and would work?

**Mr. Waterson:** As the hon. Gentleman might imagine, we are a bit dubious about any state-based solution. However, we think that auto-enrolment harnesses inertia—that is the problem; people are not interested in finding out the options. Furthermore, apart from not being a very conservative thing, straightforward compulsion means forcing people to do something that might not be in their best financial interests. A huge question mark hangs over personal accounts regarding the interaction of means-tested benefits.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Helen Goodman):** Would the hon. Gentleman repeal the legislation introduced by the Government in 2007-08, which enacts automatic savings and places a savings obligation on all employees? Is that what he means when he says that he does not want a state-based solution to encourage savings?

**Mr. Waterson:** I was saying that I did not want the state-based solution proposed by the hon. Member for Luton, North (Kelvin Hopkins). I am not saying that we would repeal that legislation. Let me be precise: we are in favour of automatic enrolment. We were in favour of it before the Turner review or personal accounts were dreamt about. It was in our last election manifesto, and we are signed up to the Turner consensus which, as far as I am concerned, includes an easy-to-access, cheap pensions saving vehicle for people who do not have pensions at the moment. Whether that is precisely the right model is another matter. We have said that if we win the election, we will review how far the Personal Accounts Delivery Authority has got with designing personal accounts, and I have mentioned one or two of the issues that the review would cover.

**Paul Rowen:** The hon. Gentleman says that he is wedded to the Turner consensus. Does that also mean the retirement age, and the agreement that there will be a progressive raising of the retirement age?

**Mr. Waterson:** I was coming to that issue, but I shall deal with it now. We think that anyone who tinkers with the Turner consensus does so at their peril. It was a painfully achieved consensus, and is the only game in town as far as long-term pension reform is concerned. The shadow Chancellor felt able to bring forward the timetable for raising the state pension age because Lord Turner has subsequently said that he wished he had been more radical. That is our reason for the line that we take, which I know is different from that taken by the hon. Gentleman's party.

I have a couple more points. Decumulation is a dreadful word, but it is an important issue that one or two people have touched on. People must know more

[Mr. Waterson]

about the choices that are available to them as they approach retirement, particularly those about finding a better deal for annuities—the open market option, or OMO as it is called.

To return to the point made in the last intervention, it is important to have good thinking about whether people choose to work longer. Already, 1.3 million people are working beyond the state pension age. There are problems with the default retirement age. The situation is particularly bad in parts of the public sector and particularly local government, where as soon as someone is 65, it is goodbye. Many people resent that. Those points were made by my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) and by the hon. Member for Rochdale.

There are benefits from working longer. Boosting incomes is an obvious one. There are many health benefits for some people. There are clear issues about longevity, physical jobs and so on that need to be examined, as I am the first to accept. It is a question of choice, but it is a good way of boosting incomes, apart from the other benefits to be had. Of course, one of the things that we did—in the Pensions Act 2004, I think—was to allow people to defer their state pension for five years and take a lump sum. That is one of the best deals around, as far as I can make out, as long as people are around to collect it.

I have a final quick thought on restoring the earnings link. The hon. Member for Luton, North particularly talked about that, as did other hon. Members. The Select Committee recommended that it should happen in 2012. My understanding is that the Government are currently committed to it happening some time in the next Parliament, if they are in power. It is about time that they came up with a specific promise on that.

This has been a bad few days for the Government's flagship policies. Tuesday saw the imploding of their Green Paper on social care. Yesterday saw a further undermining of personal accounts and pensions policy generally. This Government, like their flagship policies, are holed below the waterline and it is time for a fresh start.

4.21 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Helen Goodman):** It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr. Williams. I apologise on behalf of my hon. Friend the Minister for Pensions and the Ageing Society, who obviously has responsibility for this area of policy. Because of the combination of the timetabling of this debate with the uprating statement in the main Chamber, she was unable to be here, so I am speaking on behalf of the Government on this matter today.

I congratulate the members of the Work and Pensions Committee on an excellent and, as has been noted already, extremely comprehensive report on pensioner poverty. In particular, I congratulate the Chairman of the Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford, North (Mr. Rooney), who once again brought to the discussion not just his huge knowledge, but his great commitment to the people affected by the pensions and benefits system. He began by reminding us of the position as set out by Sir William Beveridge. Of course,

he is absolutely right: Sir William Beveridge always envisaged that the state pension would be supplemented by people's own savings—by people taking responsibility for themselves.

The reforms that the present Government have introduced in the Pensions Acts of 2007 and 2008 are among the most significant reforms of pensions legislation that any Government have undertaken since the second world war. They will deliver a fairer and more generous state pension. As a result of the reforms, three quarters of women reaching state pension age in 2010 will be entitled to a full basic state pension, compared with less than half now. The introduction of auto-enrolment will result in between 5 million and 9 million people newly saving or saving more for their retirement. Those are fundamental changes in our pensions system, which will allow people to take more responsibility for themselves.

The 2007 Act provides a fairer and more generous pension. The changes will help to tackle the historical inequalities in the state system—in particular, by reducing to 30 the number of qualifying years that people need for a full basic state pension for both men and women. The Government have made it clear that we will restore the link between the basic state pension and earnings. Subject to affordability and the fiscal position, that will begin in 2012 but will in any case be completed by the end of the next Parliament.

**Paul Rowen:** I am interested in the Minister's comments about beginning in 2012 and ending within the Parliament. Could she clarify what she means by that?

**Helen Goodman:** We have said that we will do it at some point from 2012 but in any case by the end of the next Parliament. That is the position that the Government take.

We are replacing home responsibilities protection with a new system of weekly credits for those pensioners receiving child benefit for children up to the age of 12, approved foster carers and those who spend at least 20 hours a week caring for severely disabled people. That is to ensure that there is provision through the state system for those whom the Committee has identified as the ones who are particularly liable to suffer pensioner poverty.

From 2010, an extra 1 million people will build up entitlement to the state second pension. Uprating the basic state pension in line with earnings from 2012 should roughly double its value by 2050, compared with the value if current uprating policies continued.

**Kelvin Hopkins:** Although I welcome that, as I am sure we all do, the reality is that the slippage since 1980 has been so substantial that there should also be substantial increases in the pension—not just the re-linking with the earnings index but substantial increases—to compensate for what has been lost.

**Helen Goodman:** I intended to finish by saying something about the general record of the Government, but as has been pointed out to my hon. Friend by other hon. Members, the fact is that by introducing the minimum income guarantee and the pension credit, the Government have lifted 900,000 pensioners out of poverty in the past 12 years. I am sorry about the fact that the previous Administration cut the earnings link, but it would not

be realistic for the present Government to undo what was done more than 30 years ago, within the timetable that my hon. Friend seems to be suggesting.

**Kelvin Hopkins:** I have some figures from 2007; I agree that they have changed slightly since then. The figures, from Aon Consulting and published in *The Guardian*, show the UK at the bottom of the European league table, with the European average for the basic state pension at 60 per cent. of average working pay and ours at just over 30 per cent. In terms of making up that gap, even the National Pensioners Convention figure would still be below the EU average.

**Helen Goodman:** It is misleading to focus on the state pension alone. I think that my hon. Friend was referring to the OECD report published in June. That report shows that the replacement rate for the average earner, taking account of private pension provision, rises to 70 per cent., which is above the overall OECD average. The European Commission's report on social protection and social inclusion this year showed that the median income of those aged 65 and over in the UK rose from 15 per cent. below the EU average in 1997 to 9 per cent. above it in 2007. So my hon. Friend should give credit where it is due.

Let me say a few words about the Pensions Act 2008. For the first time, all employers will be required to contribute a minimum of 3 per cent. to an eligible employee's workplace pension scheme. That will supplement the 4 per cent. contribution from the employee and about 1 per cent. from the Government in the form of tax relief. It is planned to introduce from 2012 a new low-cost saving vehicle—the personal accounts scheme—aimed at employees who do not have access to a good-quality work-based pension scheme. In the main, those are median to low earners.

The Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson), suggested that this week there had somehow been a U-turn, or at least an S-bend. That is absolutely not true. The starting date for automatic enrolment is unchanged; it was always planned to be October 2012, and it is still planned to be 2012. Implementation was always intended to be staged, and it is still intended to be staged. We will announce in January the details of our full implementation path, in response to the consultation that we have undertaken.

I shall move on to the position of women in the pension system, because they were one of the key groups that the Select Committee identified as facing particular problems. Of course, the most important thing that has been done in the past 12 years is the introduction of pension credit, which means that pensioners need not live on less than £130 a week. Almost 60 per cent. of recipients of that credit are single women. As a result of the reforms that we have introduced, around three quarters of women reaching state pension age in 2010 will be entitled to a full state pension, compared to around half who would have been entitled without the reform, and the figure will have risen to more than 90 per cent. by 2025. Reforms in the Pensions Act 2008 will provide equality of opportunity for male and female workers to build up a private pension, thus tackling the long-term problems from which women in this country have suffered in the past two generations. We estimate

that around 3.5 million to 4 million women will be eligible for automatic enrolment in a workplace pension scheme.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bradford, North also raised the issue of people disabled in early life becoming poor old people—having a life totally lived in poverty. It is certainly true that that group has a high risk of living in poverty, but I would like to point to a number of policies that the Government are implementing that are intended to—and do—help to mitigate that situation. First, the gap between the employment rate of people with disabilities and that of the rest of the population has been falling, and that means that people with disabilities are able to build up their contributions record, which is what they need for their pension. Further to that, we have introduced reforms to the state pension, ensuring that more people with disabilities can build up a state second pension, as well as the credits for a full pension.

The hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) pulled out a number of issues from the report. The first one he talked about was the position of pensioners in rural areas. One of the things that the Government have done to support people in rural areas is to introduce free bus passes. I do not know the Conservative party position on that or whether it intends to maintain free bus passes.

**Mr. Waterson:** I am grateful for the opportunity to confirm that we are great supporters of concessionary bus fares for pensioners. We think that they have been liberating for pensioners, and have been a great success. I have only one caveat, which I suspect is shared by the hon. Member for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood. That caveat is that places such as seaside resorts end up spending a great deal of council tax payers' money running the buses, because the Government announced that bus travel was going to be free, but that did not come to pass in areas of high usage of bus passes, of which seaside resorts are a good example. The financing needs to be looked at, but we are great fans of the scheme and intend to continue concessionary bus travel.

**Helen Goodman:** I am sure that that is very welcome. The hon. Gentleman has not made it clear whether it will be financed by council taxpayers or from central taxation.

Issues relating to rural areas were also raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew). A large amount of work has been done to support take-up campaigns in rural areas and they have been, as my hon. Friend said, extremely successful.

The hon. Member for Henley also asked about poverty among black and ethnic minority groups. The Department is absolutely conscious of the need to address that problem, which is why the Pension, Disability and Carers Service has specific take-up campaigns for those groups, and is addressing the issue energetically at the moment.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bradford, North also talked about the importance of equity release and the quality of advice that people receive. The Government are extremely supportive of innovations that promote independence and well-being in later life, and our aim is to provide a well-functioning market in that area. More than 90 per cent. of that market is now regulated by the safe home income plan of the UK industry body for

[*Helen Goodman*]

equity release. He also talked about the importance of good-quality financial advice and information. Services such as money guidance and the one-stop shop must gain public trust to be fully effective, and that is why we are working with the voluntary sector. We are working with Citizens Advice and Age Concern, and have some pilots in the north-east. Those groups already have the confidence of the communities and are, therefore, extremely effective not just in giving independent advice but in being understood to give it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood (Mrs. Humble) talked about the position of the personal expenses allowance and her desire to see it increased to £40 from £21. Her concerns were echoed by my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, South (Miss Begg). As colleagues from other Departments have pointed out on previous occasions, although that is a worthy objective, it would be extremely expensive, and at the moment the Government's priority is to concentrate on improving the quality and level of social care. I cannot, therefore, offer an immediate solution to the problem that my hon. Friends have raised.

My hon. Friend the Member for Luton, North (Kelvin Hopkins) questioned why we were encouraging a system for pensions for the long term that was not simply state provision. That question really was answered by the Chairman of the Select Committee in his opening remarks. Surely the key point here is incentives. We have to set up a system that rewards people who have saved and encourages people to save for the future, and to do that alongside providing—which we have done—a minimum income guarantee, which enables people to have a proper and dignified old age.

**Kelvin Hopkins:** There is a constant emphasis on voluntarism. Many countries in Europe have compulsory contributions by employers and employees, and any attempt to tamper with that sees demonstrations in the streets, as has happened in France. What is wrong with a compulsory state system? If people who are very rich want to save on top of that, fine, that is not a problem at all. They would not be means-tested because there would be no means-testing in the system.

**Helen Goodman:** I think that my hon. Friend is calling for the Pensions Act 2008, which we have already implemented and which provides for automatic savings.

Several hon. Members have talked about the importance of the default retirement age, the introduction of which in 2006 was a significant step forward. For the first time, it meant that people had the right to remain in work until the age of 65. Proposals to raise or abolish the default retirement age will clearly need consensus between employers and employees for it to work properly. It is not the sort of thing on which we can change our minds, rewriting legislation every couple of years. That is why we are reviewing the matter.

Many Members spoke about the importance of take-up, and asked what we were doing to improve it. The significance of take-up can hardly be underestimated. That is why, every week of the year, the Pension, Disability and Carers Service undertakes 13,000 visits to pensioners. Earlier this year, my hon. Friend the Minister for Regional Economic Development and Co-ordination, then a DWP

Minister, wrote to nearly 250,000 recipients of pension credit about the passporting of benefits such as council tax benefit.

The importance of ensuring that no stigma attaches to people who claim benefits is well understood. That is why, following a campaign by the Royal British Legion, the Government amended the Welfare Reform Bill a few weeks ago—it has now been enacted—to take the power to rename council tax benefit “council tax rebate”.

Since November 2008, people have to make only one telephone call to claim pension credit, housing benefit and council tax benefit. We have also removed the need for people to give a signature, which was unnecessarily bureaucratic.

**Paul Rowen:** Will the Minister confirm whether there are still 0845 numbers, or are calls now totally free?

**Helen Goodman:** I am sorry, but I do not know. I shall write to the hon. Gentleman.

The majority of housing benefit and council tax benefit recipients are passported from pension credit. That is why we believe that it is right for the PDCS to remain the first port of call for such benefits.

**Mr. Waterson:** The Minister told us that the power had been taken in legislation to change council tax benefit to council tax rebate. When will it happen?

**Helen Goodman:** It will happen as soon as is practical. It is obviously a complex matter. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is aware of the fact, but council tax benefit and housing benefit are administered by local authorities, so it is not completely under the control of the Department for Work and Pensions. We need to set up a system that everyone can operate; computer systems will have to be changed and so on, and that cannot be done overnight.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood asked about automaticity. A national pilot will take place over six months during the next financial year to test how the concept works. I hope that it will provide the opportunity to build the evidence base necessary to support consideration of how we might use the information that we hold at the moment to increase take-up while minimising fraud and error. It is important that we have tight data-sharing systems, so that people can be sure that information that they give to one arm of government is used for appropriate purposes and does not get lost.

My hon. Friend asked about an adviser hotline, with only one telephone number. We now have a dedicated pension centre liaison officer in every pension centre. That person has a separate, dedicated phone number. We hope that that service is effective. It is bedding in at the moment, and we will evaluate it to ensure that it works properly everywhere.

My hon. Friend also spoke about the needs of carers. The Government have taken a number of steps to improve the position of carers. The first will benefit them disproportionately—it will benefit them more than most groups. It is the decision to reduce the national insurance contributions requirement to 30 years. One reason why carers do not have full contribution records is that they have been out of the workplace caring for relatives.

Secondly, from April 2010, we will introduce the carers credit; people will be credited with NICs if they are caring for a member of the family for at least 20 hours a week. Thirdly, we have enabled people over the age of 65 to receive the carers allowance, although it will be offset against their basic state pension. As a result, they will receive an extra £30 a week. That is significant for the quarter of a million people who are entitled to it.

One thing that really concerns people of working age is that they should be able to combine their caring responsibilities with a job. We are therefore having people trained to ensure that every jobcentre has someone on the staff who understands the needs of carers and can advise them specifically on finding work that will fit with their caring responsibilities. My colleagues in the Department of Health have done much to improve the availability of respite breaks.

My hon. Friend pointed out that the administrative arrangements for applying for carers allowance in order to qualify for the additional pension credit, even if unsuccessfully, is not quite the model of streamlined government that one would expect in the 21st century. We have said, and I reaffirm it today, that we will look carefully at the Committee's proposals for carers in the long term. We are also considering how to improve the process in the shorter term for pensioners in receipt of pension credit, in order to make it more straightforward. As I said about housing and council tax benefits, there are IT issues, but we wish to address them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud spoke about the quality of life of pensioners. In addition to enhancing the pension, the Government have introduced bus passes, free swimming, support for the television licence fee and the Warm Front scheme; and we have maintained the level of the cold weather and winter fuel payments this winter. On Monday this week, the Energy Bill received its Second Reading; it will introduce social tariffs, from which poor pensioners should benefit.

I turn to the question of why we do not have targets for pensioner poverty like those that we introduced for child poverty. Essentially, we come back to the incentives point that I made earlier. The fact of the matter is that, in most cases, pensioners have had the opportunity to take actions to enhance their income in retirement. We want to set up a system that removes the barriers to people doing that, which is why we have placed such emphasis on the changes to the rules for carers and women who have had particular difficulties because the

rules were not structured to acknowledge their different life patterns. Moreover, the system should be forward-looking so that we provide incentives for the future. That is the essential difference between pensioners and children.

The hon. Member for Eastbourne concluded with a speech of such negativity that I wondered whether we were living in the same country. The benefits uprating statutes normally link benefits to the retail prices index. Although the September RPI was minus 1.4 per cent., the Chancellor has decided to increase the basic state pension by 2.5 per cent. from April next year, which is almost a 4 per cent. increase in real terms. He has increased other benefits by 1.5 per cent., which means bringing forward 1.5 per cent. of the following year's increase. There is no question of a cut in benefits under the Government's plans for April 2011. That can be clearly seen in the Green Book, and in table B4 in particular. Paragraph 5.19 states:

"To provide additional support to households during the early stages of economic recovery, the 2009 Pre-Budget Report announces that the Government will bring forward a proportion of the increases expected in April 2011 a year earlier, thereby providing a 1.5 per cent increase next April for those benefits and tax credits normally uprated by RPI. In April 2011, rates will be increased by the remaining amount necessary to make up the difference with the RPI for September 2010. This locks in the real increase that arises from not reducing benefits next April, but avoids a further permanent increase in expenditure that would reduce the amount available for frontline services in the next spending review."

I hope that that clarifies the fact that the Chancellor, instead of freezing rates, which he had the opportunity to do, has chosen to protect pensioners in this country to enhance their incomes in real terms. This year, we will be spending more than £13 billion more on pensioners than we would have done if the policies that were in place in 1997 had continued.

A recent report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation described an historic reversal in the fortunes of pensioners over the last decades, with people over state pension age now the age group at the lowest risk of poverty.

I hope that the Government and the Select Committee can continue to maintain a constructive relationship as we move forward to address the serious issues that pensioners face in this country.

*Question put and agreed to.*

4.53 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*





# Written Ministerial Statements

Thursday 10 December 2009

## TREASURY

### Financial Sector

#### **The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr. Alistair Darling):**

The Treasury has today published a discussion document on possible international options to reduce the cost to taxpayers of financial sector failures. "Risk, reward and responsibility: the financial sector and society" is a contribution to the international debate on the future of the global financial sector.

The document highlights the importance of the financial sector to the UK economy alongside the risks it poses to society. While some risk-taking is inherent in financial sector operations, the recent financial crisis has shown the high cost to taxpayers when risk-taking becomes excessive. The document considers ways in which the financial sector might contribute to the potential costs of any residual risks it poses to taxpayers and to broader social objectives.

I have placed copies of the document in the Library and the document is also available on HM Treasury's website.

## CHILDREN, SCHOOLS AND FAMILIES

### Early Years Funding

#### **The Minister for Children, Young People and Families**

**(Dawn Primarolo):** This Government have transformed the provision of early years education and childcare in this country, increasing investment sevenfold since 1997 and creating a universal free offer for three and four-year-olds.

As a result there is now nearly universal take-up of the 12½ hours of free early learning and childcare available to three and four-year-olds, and we remain on course to extend the provision to 15 hours per week from September 2010. The commitment and endeavour of early years providers across the country have been crucial to this success.

In 2007 we announced plans to introduce a single local Early Years Single Funding Formula (EYSFF).

This aims to provide greater consistency and transparency in local decision-making concerning the funding of the free entitlement for three and four-year-olds.

The necessary paving legislation for the EYSFF was included in the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009, which has recently completed its passage through Parliament. The introduction of the EYSFF was welcomed by Members on all sides of both Houses.

Our intention has been that every local authority should implement the EYSFF from April 2010. In anticipation of this many local authorities have been working hard to prepare for this and have engaged positively with local providers.

However, during the summer it became clear that a significant number of local authorities were experiencing difficulty in developing their EYSFF. More recently, parents and providers, from both the maintained and the PVI sectors, have expressed concerns about the potential adverse impact on provision if the EYSFF is introduced now.

In response to these concerns the Department acted quickly to survey all local authorities, to establish how much progress they had made. This was completed towards the end of November and found considerable variation in terms of their readiness.

The data and information we have collected now suggests that less than a third of local authorities will be in a secure position to implement their EYSFF from April 2010. While it is difficult to generalise about the underlying reasons it seems clear that some local authorities have experienced serious difficulties in obtaining accurate data from their providers, while others have simply found the task extremely challenging.

I have therefore decided to postpone the formal implementation date for the EYSFF by one year until April 2011.

I have asked my officials to invite all local authorities that are confident they are ready to implement their new formulae in April 2010 and who wish to do so to continue as planned. These local authorities will be able to apply to join a pathfinder programme, which currently involves nine local authorities but which we will now expand.

This expansion will increase the capacity of the pathfinder programme to develop practice from which other local authorities can learn.

The Government remain strongly committed to the introduction of the EYSFF in all areas from April 2011. We believe that it is only through the effective implementation of the EYSFF that all providers across the sector can have confidence in local decisions about funding. This 12-month delay should provide sufficient time for concerns to be addressed, without incurring a risk of drift. It will also allow time for more dedicated support to be offered to those local authorities that need it in order to complete the development of their formula.

### Revised Schools Admissions Code

#### **The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children,**

**Schools and Families (Ms Diana R. Johnson):** Today I have presented to Parliament a revised School Admissions Code ('the Code'). Subject to the usual Parliamentary procedure, this revised Code will come into force in February 2010.

This statement follows on from previous statements I have made accepting recommendations made by Sir Jim Rose from his primary curriculum review in April 2009, in particular those designed to help improve outcomes for summer-born children, by enabling them to start school from the September following their fourth birthday.

Sir Jim Rose recommended that, subject to parents taking into account their child's maturity and readiness to enter reception class, summer-born children should

be entitled to start part school in the September after their fourth birthday. This could be at part-time basis if parents prefer.

A study for the primary curriculum review by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) found that admissions policies do matter and that, in general, summer-born children are slightly better off in terms of cognitive outcomes at Key Stages 1-3 if they start school in the September following their fourth birthday. The IFS study also reported that summer-born children risk being treated as 'immature' in comparison with their older classmates, giving rise to lack of confidence and low self-regard that may limit expectations of them and their expectations of themselves. Furthermore, a literature review by the National Foundation for Educational Research concluded that children who start school later will spend less time in reception class prior to entering Year 1 of primary school, and therefore they may lose some of the educational experience that will develop and prepare them for their school careers.

The majority of local authority areas already operate an entry point in September following a child's fourth birthday so summer-born children don't have the same education opportunities across the country. Implementing this proposal will therefore provide a fair system for parents, which also gives them more choice to meet their own child's needs. Research conducted by Sir Jim Rose found that 61 per cent. of parents of children currently in part-time maintained provision and 63 per cent. of parents with summer-born children would move to a full-time provision once offered.

The aim of the policy change is to enable parents to choose between school or other early learning provision for their four years olds. Some parents have a strong preference for their child's early years experience to take place outside a school setting. I am therefore also making arrangements to enable all children to receive full and part time provision in private, voluntary, independent and maintained nurseries from the September after their fourth birthday up until compulsory school age.

Parents who prefer to delay their child's starting school would be able to defer a school place until compulsory school age—as they can already do now. But it's right that all children should be in school—playing and learning and developing—from age five.

The four years olds proposal is just one of many recommendations made by the primary curriculum review aimed at giving greater parental choice and improving transition and outcomes for all children, particularly summer-born children and vulnerable groups such as those with SEN, who Sir Jim felt would benefit most from starting school early. We are already reforming the primary curriculum to encourage a smoother transition from early years foundation stage (EYFS) into school by arranging the curriculum in six areas of learning (similar to EYFS areas of learning and development) and free it up for teachers. This supports my proposal by creating an appropriate school environment for all four years olds.

Continuing play based learning into primary schools and ensuring children receive learning experiences appropriate to their age and circumstances is a key feature of the new primary curriculum. Whether in

reception classes, or in nurseries, four year olds will benefit from receiving the early years foundation stage full-time.

Also in line with my earlier statement, over the next few months, we will provide information to parents and local authorities about the optimum conditions, flexibilities and benefits to children of entering reception class in the September immediately after their fourth birthday.

Following a consultation on relevant changes, this revised Code will require all admission authorities to provide for the admission of children following their fourth birthday, from September 2011 onwards.

## ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

### Food Labelling (Occupied Palestinian Territories)

**The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Hilary Benn):** DEFRA has today issued advice to retailers and importers who wish to respond to consumer demand for information about the origin of food that has been produced in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT).

Importers, retailers, NGOs and consumers have asked the Government for clarity over the precise origin of products from the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPTs). The label "West Bank" does not allow consumers to distinguish between goods originating from Palestinian producers and goods originating from illegal Israeli settlements.

Rules on the labelling of produce are set by the European Union and require that the place of origin or provenance should be supplied on foodstuffs where omission of such information might materially mislead the consumer about true origin or provenance of the foodstuff.

Since the "West Bank" is a recognised geographical area within the OPTs, labelling produce with the "West Bank" does not infringe EU labelling rules. However, retailers have informed us of consumer demand for more detailed information.

Therefore, in March, the Government arranged a round-table discussion between interested parties to look at how retailers could make labelling clearer for consumers.

We have taken these views into account, and have today issued advice to retailers and importers. This will help them consider how best to respond to consumer demand for information about the origin of food that has been produced in the OPT.

The Government will keep their policy on labelling food imports from the OPTs under review, in conjunction with the European Commission and other EU member states, and in the light of developments in the middle east peace process. The Government believe that that existence, and continued growth, of Israeli settlements poses a significant obstacle to peace in the middle east. At the same time, the clear position of the Government is that we are opposed to boycotts of Israel or Israeli goods. We do not believe that boycotts help engage or influence Israel, or lead to progress in the middle east peace process.

Copies of the advice will be placed in the House Library and on the DEFRA website: [www.defra.gov.uk](http://www.defra.gov.uk).

### South Downs National Park

**The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Hilary Benn):** On 12 November, *Official Report*, column 32WS, I informed the House that I was confirming the designation of the South Downs national park and signing the orders which set the precise boundary. I am now proceeding to establish a national park authority for the new national park.

On 16 July 2009 I consulted on the membership of the future South Downs national park authority, proposing that the authority should have from 29 to 37 members. I am most grateful to all those who have taken the time to submit a response to that consultation.

There was a diverse range of views expressed, not only on the size of the proposed authority, but also on its composition, and on the representation of those who live in and around the new park. Although several people offered views on how parish seats might be allocated, this is a matter for the parish councils within the park to determine.

The main reasons cited by those in favour of a 37 seat authority or larger were that it would enable proportional representation of all local authorities, as well as enable more “grass roots” representation with parish councils having several seats. While I understand the reasons for many respondents favouring such a composition, it is the case that, once selected to serve on the park authority, members are expected to act in the best interests of the park in its entirety, so any emphasis on weighted representation is not really consistent with that principle.

A number of respondents favoured a “medium” sized authority of around 31-33 members, in preference to the two ends of the range laid out in the consultation paper. While appreciating that this might draw together the best features of both a large and small authority, it would not be large enough to allow it to be fully weighted nor would it be small enough to minimise the additional administrative burden which a larger authority might create.

Those supporting a smaller, 29 seat authority saw it as creating an efficient, cost-effective authority, with faster decision-making, and at a lower cost to the taxpayer. The suggested composition was generally 15 local authority, eight national and six parish seats. Although a smaller authority would mean weighted representation wouldn't be possible, it would still allow every local authority one seat.

A further option emerged in the wake of the consultation which is for a 27 seat authority. This is made possible because two local authorities have stated they wish to share a seat. This would reduce the minimum number of local authority seats from 15 to 14. As I have previously confirmed my view that local authorities should have an absolute majority, this would require the Government to respond to the reduction in local authority members by reducing the number of “national” members from 8 to 7. So the overall composition could be 14 local authority, seven “national” and six parish seats.

Having considered each of the above options carefully, and being satisfied that it would be appropriate for Worthing and Adur councils to share a seat, I have decided to opt for a 27 seat authority. In order to ensure that the national park authority keeps in close touch

with communities and is able to respond to their concerns, I expect the authority to place a big emphasis on community and stakeholder engagement. I shall now include the 27 member authority in the statutory instrument which I shall lay before Parliament around the turn of the year. With Parliament's consent, this will allow the national park authority to be established from 1 April 2010 and to become operational from 1 April 2011.

A summary of the responses, plus a list of all respondents, can be found on the DEFRA website at: <http://www.defra.gov.uk/corporate/consult/south-downs-membership/index.htm>.

## HEALTH

### Autumn Performance Report

**The Secretary of State for Health (Andy Burnham):** I have today laid before Parliament my Department's autumn performance report for 2009 (CM 7776). The report is in the Library of the House and copies are available for hon. Members from the Vote Office.

The autumn performance report provides the second public report of progress on our public service agreements, departmental strategic objectives and value for money targets set for this comprehensive spending review period.

### NHS 2010-15

**The Secretary of State for Health (Andy Burnham):** I have today laid before Parliament “The NHS 2010-15: from good to great. Preventative, people-centred, productive” (Cm 7775). The paper is in the Library and copies are available for hon. Members from the Vote Office.

“The NHS 2010-15” maps out how we will build on the achievements of the last decade to create a more preventative and people-centred NHS—a service that is better for patients, but also more productive. It is intended to give the NHS time to plan for the challenges of a new era.

In the past, a tougher financial environment has meant that patients have paid the price through longer waits. But this will not happen this time. We will not back away from the NHS. The Pre-Budget report confirms that we can lock in the achievements of the last decade, while protecting staff and the service as a whole.

The document also sets out how we will continue to improve the NHS, according to the principles set out in the next stage review. It outlines the following key steps:

- a new payment system which puts patients first, and ensures they get the high quality care they deserve. A growing proportion of hospital's income will be linked to patient satisfaction, rising to 10 per cent. of their payments over time. Poor or unsafe care will not be tolerated—payments will be withdrawn if care does not meet minimum standards;

- more choice for patients—giving them the right to register with a GP wherever they choose, a guarantee of seeing a doctor in the evenings and weekends in every area, and more access to services—like chemotherapy and dialysis—at home or in the community;

- dedicated carers for patients with cancer or serious long-term conditions who can benefit from a more personal approach to nursing. We expect all parts of the NHS to review continually the way long-term conditions are managed and to seek out and adopt best practice. Where appropriate this should include the

provision of personalised one-to-one support by a health professional, particularly for the more complex conditions. We will consider and cost the possibility of a patient entitlement in this area. This will benefit millions of people;

new rights to high quality care—including the right for patients to die at home. Enshrining the right to a “good death” is the mark of a civilised health system. The NHS will ensure a dying patient can choose where they wish to spend their final days;

more freedom for hospitals. The best NHS foundation trusts will be free to work across a wider area. We will encourage high-performing foundation trusts based in one area to provide both acute and community services in other areas, if the PCTs in those areas want to commission from them; and

greater emphasis on prevention—we want the NHS to intervene earlier and prevent more disease. We will provide access to personal care plans and health-checks for anyone suffering with a long-term condition. Patients will be invited to discuss and agree their care plan with their clinician, giving them a greater say in their care.

Under this plan services will be reshaped around the needs of patients more radically than ever before. The NHS and its staff will need to adapt as they strive to make the changes necessary, but they will be supported in doing so. The results will be better patient safety, better health outcomes, more satisfied patients—and, ultimately, a stronger NHS.

## HOME DEPARTMENT

### Intercept as Evidence

**The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Alan Johnson):** The Government have no higher duty than to protect the public. A critical tool in this is the warranted interception of communications that allows law enforcement and intelligence agencies to gather intelligence about those individuals who seek to do us harm.

Intercept material obtained under a RIPA warrant cannot currently be used as evidence in criminal trials. It has been, and remains, the Government’s objective to find a way to make this possible. In February 2008, the Prime Minister accepted the findings of a Privy Council review, chaired by Sir John Chilcot, which recommended that intercept should be admissible as evidence subject to meeting nine operational requirements, which the review judged to be necessary to protect the public and national security. He set in train the necessary implementation process and established an advisory group, comprising the right hon. Sir John Chilcot, the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Sir Alan Beith), the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard), and my right hon. And noble Friend Lord Archer of Sandwell, in order to help safeguard intelligence capability and protect the public.

In my written ministerial statement to the House of 16 July I provided an update on the progress of the implementation programme. I said that I would make a formal report to Parliament on the results and conclusions after end of the summer recess.

I am today publishing a Command Paper setting out the work programme’s findings and conclusions. Copies will be available in the Vote Office. I am also placing in the Libraries of both Houses copies of a separate report to my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister by the advisory group. The Prime Minister and I are grateful to the advisory group for its work. I echo their recognition

both of the complexity and sensitivity of the work programme and the commitment and thoroughness of officials in undertaking it.

Any implementation of intercept as evidence must, as set out in the original Privy Council review, ensure that trials continue to be fair and that the operational requirements to protect current capabilities are met. As noted in the advisory group’s interim report to the Prime Minister, reported in my predecessor’s written ministerial statement of 12 February and placed in the Libraries of both Houses, there is an intrinsic tension between these legal and operational requirements.

The work programme set out to develop a model for intercept as evidence that successfully reconciled these requirements, based on the approach recommended by the Privy Council review. This model has been subject to extensive practical testing, with the close involvement of senior independent legal practitioners. This testing has demonstrated that the model, if fully funded, would be broadly consistent with the operational requirements. However, it would not be legally viable, in that it would not ensure continued fairness at court. This has been confirmed by a recent European Court of Human Rights case (*Natunen v Finland*). The result would be to damage rather than enhance our ability to bring terrorists and other serious criminals to justice.

These findings are disappointing. In the light of them, the Government conclude, as does the advisory group, that the model does not represent a viable basis for implementation. However, the Government also share the advisory group’s view that the potential gains from a workable intercept as evidence regime justifies further work. We therefore welcome the group’s suggestion of three areas of analysis, beyond the scope of the original work programme, intended to establish whether the problems identified are capable of being resolved. These areas are to examine:

Further enhancing the judicial oversight available.

Full retention of intercept material alongside alternative review requirements.

Advances in technology which might make full retention and review more manageable.

The Government agree with the advisory group that while continuing to seek innovative and imaginative approaches, these should not be at the cost of the operational requirements, and hence national security or public protection. I am grateful for the advisory group’s agreement to continue in its current invaluable role and for agreeing to be similarly engaged on interception related matters that have arisen in the context of the Coroners and Justice Bill.

The Government will report the results of this activity to Parliament before the Easter recess.

### UK Border Agency

**The Minister for Borders and Immigration (Mr. Phil Woolas):** A revised version of the framework agreement for the UK Border Agency is being published today. The framework has been updated following the passage of the Borders Citizenship and Immigration Act 2009. The new document reflects, in particular, the transfer of customs functions and staff to the Home Office from HM Revenue and Customs. Copies are available in the Libraries of both Houses.

## JUSTICE

### Freedom of Information Act 2000

**The Secretary of State for Justice and Lord Chancellor (Mr. Jack Straw):** I have today given the Information Commissioner a certificate under section 53 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 ('the Act'). The certificate relates to case FS50100665 from 23 June 2009 in which, in my opinion, the Information Commissioner wrongly found that the Cabinet Office had failed to comply with section 1(1)(b) of the Act by withholding copies of the minutes of the Cabinet Ministerial Committee on Devolution to Scotland and Wales and the English Regions (DSWR) of 1997. The consequence of my giving the Information Commissioner a certificate is that the Commissioner's decision notice ceases to have effect.

A copy of the certificate has therefore been laid before each House of Parliament. I have additionally placed a copy of the certificate and a detailed statement of the reasons for my decision in the Libraries of both Houses, the Vote Office and the Printed Paper Office.

This is only the second time this power (the 'veto') has been exercised since the Act came into force in 2005 and over that period of time central Government have received approximately 160,000 non-routine requests for information. The decision to exercise the veto in this case was not taken lightly but in accordance with the statement of Government policy<sup>1</sup> on the use of the executive override as it relates to information falling within the scope of section 35(1) of the Act.

In accordance with the policy, my conclusion rests on an assessment of the public interest in disclosure and non-disclosure of these Cabinet minutes, and of the exceptional nature of the case. While the convention of collective Cabinet responsibility is only one part of the public interest test, in my view disclosure of the information in this case would put the convention at serious risk of harm. As an integral part of our system of Government the maintenance of the convention is strongly in the public interest and must be given appropriate weight when deciding where the balance of the public interest lies.

Having done that, and having taken into account all of the circumstances of this case, I have concluded that the public interest falls in favour of non-disclosure and that this is an exceptional case where release would be damaging to the convention of collective responsibility and detrimental to the effective operation of Cabinet Government. Consequently, this case warrants the exercise of the veto.

<sup>1</sup> Annexed to 'Statement of Reasons' at: <http://www.justice.gov.uk/news/announcement240209a.htm>

## LEADER OF THE HOUSE

### Parliamentary Standards (Legislative Proposals)

**The Leader of the House of Commons (Ms Harriet Harman):** The Committee on Standards in Public Life (CSPL) published its report on MPs' expenses and allowances on 4 November. The Government are grateful to the Committee for its work and welcome the Committee's recommendations.

The House has sought clarification on the question of what further legislation the Government will bring forward in the light of the CSPL's recommendations, which I set out in this statement today. The House will wish to be aware that in preparing this statement the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice has had constructive discussions with both Sir Christopher Kelly, Chairman of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, and Professor Sir Ian Kennedy, Chairman of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority. I am pleased, on behalf of both the Lord Chancellor and myself, to be able to report to the House that both Sir Christopher and Sir Ian are in agreement with the proposed approach to further legislation and on the amendments set out below.

Many of the CSPL recommendations relate to the substance of a new parliamentary allowances scheme. Others, however, relate to the scope and functions of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA), now being set up under the provisions of the Parliamentary Standards Act 2009 which passed into law earlier this year.

Those substantive recommendations of the CSPL report that relate to the drawing up of the allowances scheme are, of course, under the provisions of the Act, now a matter for consideration by and decision of the new independent authority. The IPSA will shortly be conducting its statutory consultation on a proposed new allowances scheme. Its chair has already made clear that the CSPL recommendations will be central to this consultation.

In relation to the recommendations identified as requiring legislation, the Government's proposals are as follows:

#### *Power to make deductions from resettlement grant*

The Committee recommends that

"where an MP is found to have seriously abused the expenses system or otherwise seriously breached the code of conduct, the Standards and Privileges Committee should always consider recommending that the House reduce or remove the resettlement grant from that MP as part of any sanctions to be imposed and should be prepared to do this for past as well as for future breaches of the rules. The new statutory scheme should empower the House of Commons to impose such a sanction by resolution".

(Recommendation 33).

The Parliamentary Standards Act already provides that the IPSA's power to pay MPs' salaries is subject to anything done in exercise of the disciplinary powers of the House. This enables the IPSA, for example, to give effect to a resolution of the House following an S&P recommendation that an MP should lose salary for a specified time. The Government will bring forward legislation to make the same provision in relation to allowances (including resettlement grant).

#### *Statutory duty of efficiency, cost-effectiveness and openness*

The Committee recommends that

"the independent regulator should have a statutory duty to support MPs efficiently, cost-effectively and transparently in carrying out their parliamentary functions"

(Recommendation 41).

IPSA itself is already under a duty to carry out its functions efficiently and cost effectively and is subject to the Freedom of Information Act. The Government will also bring forward legislation to ensure that there is specific reference to supporting MPs to carry out their

parliamentary duties in an efficient, cost-effective and transparent way. (See also response to recommendations 49 and 60).

#### *Register of Financial Interests and Code of Conduct*

The Committee recommends that

“responsibility for maintaining the register of financial interests and the associated code of conduct should be removed from the independent regulator and returned to the House of Commons” (Recommendation 42).

The Government propose to repeal section 8 of the 2009 Act and the consequential references to it.

#### *Pay and pensions*

The Committee recommends that

“the independent determination of MPs’ pay and pensions should be entrenched in primary legislation in the same way as expenses. The independent regulator should therefore be given statutory responsibility for setting MPs’ pay levels and overseeing MPs’ pensions as well as for dealing with expenses” (Recommendation 43).

Provision for pay to be included in the IPSA’s remit was in an early pre-introduction version of the Parliamentary Standards Bill but was removed after representations made in the intensive cross-party talks.

Now there is a clear consensus that IPSA should take on responsibility for pay and pensions, the Government will bring forward legislation to give IPSA the power to set, as well as to administer, the MPs’ pay system, after consulting the Senior Salaries Review Body. The powers for both pay and pensions would therefore take effect in 2011-12. MPs’ pay in 2011-12 would then be set by the IPSA on the basis of the SSRB recommendation for that year. Pay in 2012-13 and subsequently would be set by the IPSA following consultation with the SSRB and others as appropriate.

#### *Breaches of the rules on expenses*

The Committee recommends that

“responsibility for investigating allegations about breaches of the rules on expenses should be vested in the independent regulator, which should be able to appoint its own compliance officer for this purpose. The compliance officer should be able to conduct an investigation on his or her own initiative, at the request of the independent regulator, or in response to a complaint from a member of the public or an MP”

(Recommendation 44).

Provision for the IPSA to appoint an officer responsible for investigations and compliance, who would act at arm’s length from the other functions of the IPSA, was included by the Government in the original draft of the Parliamentary Standards Bill but was amended after strong representations from the Chairman of the Standards and Privileges Committee. As there is now clear consensus on this, the Government propose to amend the Parliamentary Standards Act to provide for a compliance officer to be appointed by the IPSA through a process of fair and open competition. The compliance officer will be an independent office holder. The powers of the compliance officer to investigate complaints will be similar to those presently vested in the Independent Commissioner. The powers in relation to sanctions will be significantly different (see below).

#### *Enforcement powers of the IPSA*

The Committee recommends

“that the independent regulator’s enforcement regime should be strengthened by giving it the power to:

Compel MPs to cooperate with the new body, including through the provision of relevant information.

Require the repayment of wrongly paid or misclaimed sums, with associated costs if appropriate.

Impose, subject to the procedural safeguards laid out in the Act, its own non-parliamentary sanctions for breaches of the expenses regime (including where necessary of a financial nature) analogous to those available to HMRC and DWP, without the need to report to the Commissioner for Parliamentary Standards”

(Recommendation 45).

The Parliamentary Standards Bill which the Government presented to Parliament contained provisions allowing the IPSA to recommend sanctions. They were removed during the Bill’s passage.

As it now appears that allowing sanctions to be imposed directly by the regulator is acceptable, the Government will introduce amendments to the 2009 Act to give the compliance officer the power to impose sanctions, namely a civil penalty, as well as requiring restitution of wrongly paid allowances. Repayments, monetary penalties and costs will also be made recoverable as a civil debt. In addition, the Government will provide a route of appeal from the decisions of the compliance officer to the first-tier tribunal. Since allowances claims are not covered by privilege, there should not be any difficulty in this regard.

Cases could still be referred to the Committee on Standards and Privileges if it is felt that parliamentary sanctions are also needed or to the prosecuting authorities if the offence of making false declarations may have been committed.

#### *Lay members of the Speaker’s Committee*

The Committee recommends that

“the Speaker’s Committee on the independent regulator should include three lay members drawn from outside Parliament who have not previously been MPs or peers. They should be chosen through the official public appointments process and formally approved by the House”

(Recommendation 48).

The Government propose to bring forward legislation to provide for the appointment of lay members of the Speaker’s Committee.

#### *General duty to act openly and transparently*

The Committee recommends that the independent regulator should be placed under a general duty to act openly and transparently, to give reasons for any revisions to the expenses scheme, and to report, and take account of, the views of the general public as well as the House of Commons (Recommendation 49).

Section 5(4) of the Parliamentary Standards Act requires the IPSA to consult a number of people and bodies in preparing an allowances scheme, including “any person the IPSA considers appropriate”.

The Freedom of Information Act 2000 already applies to the IPSA, including a duty to issue a publication scheme.

The Government are however content to bring forward amendments to the 2009 Act to add an additional requirement that the IPSA must give reasons for its revisions to the allowances scheme, to give reasons for adopting a determination in respect of MPs’ pay, and to consult the general public. (See also response to recommendations 41 and 60.)

*Sunset provisions*

The Committee recommends that

“the sunset provisions in the Parliamentary Standards Act 2009 should be repealed”

(Recommendation 53).

The sunset provisions, set out in section 15 of the Act, were inserted in the House of Lords. They deal with the code of conduct on financial interests and the position of the independent commissioner for investigations. As both the role of the IPSA in relation to the code and the commissioner are to be repealed, the sunset clause has no further purpose and therefore can be similarly repealed.

*Publication of claims*

The Committee recommends that

“the independent regulator should continue to publish, at least quarterly, each individual claim for reimbursement made by MPs with accompanying receipts or documentary evidence. The information published should not be confined to claims actually reimbursed”

(Recommendation 60).

As part of the proposed amendments to the 2009 Act to give effect to recommendations 41 and 49, which require the IPSA to act transparently, the Government will bring forward legislation to place on the IPSA the duty to publish claims made and allowances paid, with such details as it considers appropriate. The 2009 Act already requires IPSA to determine procedures for the circumstances in which findings of investigations should be published. (See also response to recommendations 41 and 49.)

There are three further recommendations which would require legislation to achieve, but on which it has been accepted that immediate legislation is not necessary.

*Publication of electoral candidates' financial interests*

The Committee recommends that

“all candidates at parliamentary elections should publish, at nomination, a register of interests including the existence of other paid jobs and whether they intend to continue to hold them if elected. The Ministry of Justice should issue guidance on this in time for the next general election. Following the election, consideration should be given as to whether the process should become a statutory part of the nomination process”

(Recommendation 37).

The Ministry of Justice is working on the guidance. The Ministry of Justice will discuss the approach with the Electoral Commission and others as appropriate before guidance is issued, in time for the next general election. A decision about whether to implement this on a statutory basis will, as the Committee suggests, be taken in the next Parliament.

*Hon. Members who are members of devolved legislatures*

The Committee recommends that the practice of permitting a Westminster MP simultaneously to sit in a devolved legislature should be brought to an end, ideally by the time of the elections to the three devolved legislatures for May 2011 (Recommendation 40)

This is not strictly an issue about MPs' allowances. The Committee recommends that this provision should be in place by May 2011 and the Government will consult interested parties before implementing it in the next Parliament.

*Term of office of IPSA Chair*

The CSPL recommends that

“the chair of the new regulatory body should be appointed for a single, non-renewable five year term. The other members of the new body should in principle be appointed on the same basis, but some flexibility may need to be shown in relation to those appointed in the first round”

(Recommendation 47).

Paragraph 4(1) of schedule 1 to the 2009 Act provides for the chair of the IPSA to be appointed “for a fixed term not exceeding five years”. Paragraph 4(3) provides that “a person who has held office as a member of the IPSA (whether as the chair or an ordinary member) may be re-appointed as a member once only, for a further period (whether consecutive or not) not exceeding three years”.

The CSPL acknowledges the need for flexibility in relation to the first round of appointments. The Government accept the principle of the recommendation, but believes that amendments to the legislation are not required now. They could be made at a later date if still required.

**TRANSPORT****Autumn Performance Report 2009**

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr. Sadiq Khan):** My right hon. and noble Friend the Secretary of State for Transport, Lord Adonis, has made the following ministerial statement:

I have today published my Department's Autumn Performance Report for 2009 (CM7737). Copies have been laid before Parliament and placed in the House Libraries.

The report provides Parliament with details of progress on performance against the departmental strategic objectives, value for money and public service agreements, using data available up to November 2009.

**Consultation on HGV Testing Exemptions**

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Clark):** The Department for Transport has today issued a consultation document on our proposals to remove or modify some of the exemptions from the statutory annual roadworthiness testing scheme which currently apply to certain categories of heavy goods vehicles.

I have placed copies of the document in the House Library.

**Local Government Act 2008: Quality Contracts Schemes**

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr. Sadiq Khan):** The Local Transport Act 2008 includes provisions designed to make bus quality contracts schemes—the London-style model of bus contracts—a more realistic option for local transport authorities throughout England and Wales. The Government are today announcing that these provisions will come into force, in England, on 11 January 2010.

Supporting regulations will be laid before Parliament within the next few days and statutory guidance, applying in England from 11 January 2010, is being issued today. The Government are also today beginning the process of recruiting members of a panel of persons from

which members of QCS boards will be appointed. QCS boards are independent boards with a remit to provide an opinion on whether proposed quality contracts schemes in England meet the statutory public interest criteria, and on whether due process has been followed.

Copies of the statutory guidance, the Government's response to the consultation and the recruitment pack for QCS board panel members are being placed in the Libraries of both Houses and will also be available on the Department for Transport's website.

### Airport Economic Regulation

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Clark):** My right hon. and noble Friend the Secretary of State for Transport, Lord Adonis, has made the following ministerial statement:

In March, the Government consulted on a number of proposals designed to modernise the framework for the airport economic regulatory regime and put passengers at its heart. The review primarily seeks to ensure that economic regulation improves the passenger experience and encourages timely and appropriate investment.

Having considered responses to the consultation, I intend to introduce as soon as parliamentary time will allow a package of reforms that:

Modernise the statutory duties of the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) in this area. The Government will replace the CAA's existing duties with a single primary duty to promote the interests of end consumers of passenger and freight services at airports. In order to provide clarity about the additional factors the CAA need to take into account when making decision, the Government will also be introducing new subordinate duties.

Introduce a new licensing regime that is flexible and targeted. The new regime gives the regulator sanctions and enforcement powers to incentivise licensee compliance.

Introduce a new framework of merit based appeals to ensure the regulator is accountable for the decisions it makes.

Enhance passenger representation within the aviation sector. To ensure that passengers have an independent and influential advocate with an end-to-end journey perspective, the Government will introduce legislation to make Passenger Focus the passenger representative body for aviation. Passenger Focus will build on the firm foundations established by the Air Transport Users Council.

Promote the financial resilience of major airports. In October, this year I brought forward the announcement on financial resilience in order to provide as much certainty as possible for the industry and its investors, and support sustained investment. In this announcement I said that the Government intended to consult on two further financial aspects and this consultation is published today.

A few responses to the consultation raised the importance of connecting regional economies to London airports and international destinations. The Government recognise this issue and will commission research to gather further evidence.

This package of reforms is intended to provide a modern and flexible economic regulatory framework for airports which I believe reflects best practice in other regulated regimes and promotes the interests of passengers, investment, as well as the principles of Better Regulation.

I also intend to consult on further proposals to update the regulatory framework for aviation.

The Government commissioned Sir Joseph Pilling to carry out a strategic review of the Civil Aviation Authority to ensure that it remained able to meet current and future challenges. He described the CAA as a "highly successful organisation" and concluded that it remained appropriate to have a specialist aviation regulator, with a broad range of functions from safety to economic regulation. But he also identified that changes were needed to modernise the CAA's legislative and governance framework. In particular, he

considered it important that the CAA's role should be to safeguard the public interest, and he recommended that we make it absolutely clear in the legislation that the CAA's primary responsibility is to the public rather than the aviation industry.

I am consulting on proposals giving the CAA a clear statutory focus, consistent with our international obligations and aligned with Better Regulation principles, by assigning new objectives to the organisation. These will apply to most of the CAA's functions and will ensure that the CAA focuses its attention on pursuing the interests of consumers and seeking environmental improvements while maintaining a high standard of safety.

To support the CAA in delivering its objectives, I am also proposing to give powers to enable it to obtain relevant information and make arrangements for that information to be made publicly available where this is in the interests of consumers or those affected by aviation. The CAA would only be able to use this power where it could demonstrate that the benefits of publishing information outweighed the costs.

I also want to see the CAA's governance and enforcement arrangements aligned with modern regulatory practice. I am proposing to give the CAA access to a range of civil sanctions, which will address concerns previously expressed about the disproportionate and inappropriate nature of criminal sanctions for certain offences.

We have looked at financial protection for air passengers following the failure of the XL Leisure Group in 2008. This highlighted the need to reform the ATOL scheme which provides reimbursement and repatriation in the event of insolvency.

We are committed by European legislation to provide financial protection for passengers on package holidays. We decided in 2005 not to extend this to all flights. Although that remains the right decision, the concept of a package holiday has become blurred by the way many holidays are sold through mix-and-match components. Consumers must be able to make informed choices. My objective now is to create a clear boundary of protection, and this objective is shared by the travel trade. The consultation puts forward several options for this.

I am also consulting on a number of measures to rationalise the process for making airport byelaws. The main aims are to modernise and streamline the existing airport byelaw-making process and increase the level of consultation with interested parties during the preparation of airport byelaws.

The proposals in this consultation will provide strategic direction for the CAA and help it regulate the aviation industry in tune with modern needs.

Copies of the decision document, both consultation documents and associated publications have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

## WORK AND PENSIONS

### Equality 2025

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Jonathan Shaw):** In line with good practice on non-departmental public bodies, the Office for Disability Issues commissioned an internal review of 'Equality 2025: the UK Advisory Network on Disability Equality' in June 2009. The review recognised that Equality 2025's remit of offering Government advice and expertise on disability equality issues remains valid and recommended it should continue unchanged. The review also recommended developing Equality 2025's strategic role as an 'expert group' and streamlining its size. I have broadly accepted these recommendations and officials are now working towards their implementation. The full list of review recommendations is available on the Office for Disability Issues' website at: [www.officefordisability.gov.uk](http://www.officefordisability.gov.uk).



I am pleased to announce that the Office for Disability Issues intends to publish the report of the review of Equality 2025 in the first half of 2010. The document

will be available on the Office for Disability Issues' website and will also be placed in the Libraries of both Houses of Parliament.



# Petitions

*Thursday 10 December 2009*

## PRESENTED PETITIONS

*Petition presented to the House on Monday 7 December but not read on the Floor*

### **Badman Report (South Suffolk)**

*The Petition of persons resident in the South Suffolk parliamentary constituency,*

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Mr. Tim Yeo.]

[P000517]

*Petition presented to the House on Tuesday 8 December but not read on the Floor*

### **Badman Report (Aldershot)**

*The Petition persons resident in the Aldershot parliamentary constituency,*

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps

necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Mr. Gerald Howarth.]

[P000631]

*Petitions presented to the House but not read on the Floor*  
**Badman Report (North Essex)**

*The Petition persons resident in the North Essex parliamentary constituency,*

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Mr. Bernard Jenkin.]

[P000633]

### **Badman Report (North Swindon)**

*The Petition persons resident in the North Swindon parliamentary constituency,*

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

[P000630]

### Equitable Life (Stratford-on-Avon)

*The Petition of residents of the constituency of Stratford-on-Avon in the Warwickshire region of the U.K. regarding the Government's response to the Parliamentary Ombudsman's reports on Equitable Life,*

Declares that the Petitioners either are or they represent or support members, former members or personal representatives of deceased members of the Equitable Life Assurance Society who have suffered maladministration leading to injustice, as found by the Parliamentary Ombudsman in her report upon Equitable Life, ordered by the House of Commons to be printed on 16 July 2008 and bearing reference number HC 815; and further declares that the Petitioners or those whom they represent or support have suffered regulatory failure on the part of the public bodies responsible from the year 1992 onwards, but have not received compensation for the resulting losses and outrage.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to uphold the constitutional standing of the Parliamentary Ombudsman by complying with the findings and recommendations of her Report upon Equitable Life.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

[P000466]

## OBSERVATIONS

### FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

#### Middle East

*The Petition of the Brecknock Peace and Justice Group, and others,*

Declares great concern at the continuing conflict between Israel and the Palestinians.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs to do everything in his power to work for a lasting and just peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians; to suspend all military aid, co-operation and arms sales to both sides in the conflict until a lasting peace agreement is concluded; and to press both the European Union and the United States of America to adopt similar policies.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Mr. Roger Williams, *Official Report*, 1 June 2009; Vol. 493, c. 134.]

[P000337]

*Observations from the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs:*

The UK remains committed to the resolution of the conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis and we continue to focus our efforts on a negotiated agreement that can bring a lasting peace to the region. We are friends of both the Israelis and the Palestinians, and we believe that this close relationship gives us the opportunity to talk openly and frankly to both sides to more effectively encourage them towards peace. A comprehensive resolution, covering all of the issues (including - but not limited to - borders, compensation, a just solution for refugees, and the status of Jerusalem), is the only way to bring about a lasting, and fair, peace.

We do not believe that placing an arms embargo on either side would be productive to bringing about a settlement. The UK recognises that Israel faces real security threats and has the right to defend herself. We believe the best way to influence both sides is through the continued dialogue that our strong relationship allows. We believe that a lasting peace can best be achieved through negotiations and confidence-building on all sides, not through the threat of sanctions.

In relation to arms sold by the UK, the UK is committed to maintaining one of the most rigorous and transparent arms export control systems in the world. We rigorously assess all export licence applications, on a case-by-case basis, against the Consolidation European Union (EU) and National Arms Export Licensing Criteria.

The assessment takes into account the prevailing circumstances and UK government policy, at the time of application. The criteria make clear our commitment to assess the risk of exports being used for internal repression or external aggression. The UK has refused export licences to Israel in the past, and a small number of licences have recently been revoked following a review of exports after the recent conflict in Gaza.

We continue to work with both the European Union and the United States of America to bring the parties back to the negotiating table. Facilitating peace in the Middle East remains a high priority for the UK. With the support of our international allies, we will continue to pursue vigorously a comprehensive peace based on a two-state solution, involving a viable Palestinian state living alongside Israel in peace and security.

#### Sri Lanka

*The Petition of constituents of Hon. Dr. Vincent Cable MP for Twickenham,*

Declares that following the end of hostilities in Sri Lanka as announced by President Mahinda Rajapakse, more than 280,000 Tamil civilians, including at least 50,000 children, remain detained indefinitely in cramped, squalid military run camps in the north of the island in breach of international law; further declares that there is a severe lack of medical and humanitarian aid for the needs of these wounded malnourished and severely traumatised war victims; further declares that with the current flooding, spread of diseases and the onset of the Monsoon rains the conditions in these already dilapidated camps will worsen drastically resulting in further deaths; further declares that the detained Tamil people are being held against their will, without any freedom of movement, with the intention of making these camps permanent; further declares that the traditional lands of these people are being colonised and illegally occupied by the armed forces; further declares that it is suspected that thousands of Tamils who are not accounted for are being detained incommunicado by the Sri Lankan armed forces; further declares that the perpetrators of war crimes and breaches of international law in Sri Lanka remain free from prosecution.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges HM Government to press for the implementation of the following: the United Nations, International Red Cross and voluntary agencies must be given full access to care for and protect the civilians in the camps, and then help them to return to their traditional homeland in the north and east; a list of all those still alive and in custody should be published, so

that families can stop searching for loved ones who are dead; any who continue to be detained as alleged LTTE combatants must be treated in accordance with the provisions of international law, and urgently given access to legal representation; accountability processes must be established to ensure that international aid is not diverted to purposes other than those for which it was given; UN monitors must be given free access to all parts of the island; there must be a full UN investigation into war crimes committed during the war.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Dr. Vincent Cable, *Official Report*, 12 November 2009; Vol. 499, c. 3P .]

[P000422]

*Observations from the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs:*

Since the end of conflict in Sri Lanka in May 2009, the UK Government has remained actively engaged in working for an improvement in the humanitarian situation and for long-term reconciliation between Sri Lanka's communities.

Our priority has been the return of the more than 250,000 Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) to their homes as soon as it has become safe to do so. We have taken every opportunity both bilaterally and with international partners to urge the Government of Sri Lanka to resettle the IDPs without further delay. In recent weeks there has been significant progress in this regard, with over 150,000 IDPs having left the camps and resettling in their home areas. The announcement that IDPs would be granted freedom of movement as of 1 December is a positive step. Some IDPs have already left, and we believe the opening of the camps and granting real freedom of movement will enable the thousands still living in the camps to start to rebuild their lives. It is now imperative that humanitarian agencies are given full access to the IDPs so that they can provide them with the help they need both in the camps and in their places of return.

Since September 2008, the UK Government have allocated £12.5 million to support the work of international humanitarian agencies and NGOs so that they have been able to provide much needed assistance to IDPs. None of this money has been provided directly to the Sri Lankan Government. In order to assist the return of IDPs the UK Government has been funding de-mining agencies, transport and will provide help to returnees in rebuilding their livelihoods. UK Government funds have also been used to help the International Organisation for Migration with a registration scheme that has issued ID cards to IDPs. This is already helping them to access services and entitlements.

We continue to work with the Government of Sri Lanka and other partners in the international community to ensure that the end of the conflict leads to sustainable peace. We have urged the Government of Sri Lanka to make progress on securing an inclusive political solution to address the underlying causes of conflict. Genuine reconciliation between Sri Lanka's communities will depend in a large part on the Government promoting and protecting the rights of all Sri Lankans—Tamil, Muslim and Sinhalese.

Reconciliation will also require a process to address possible violations of international humanitarian law committed by both sides during the conflict. President Rajapakse made a commitment to take such measures following the visit to Sri Lanka of the UN Secretary-General in May. We continue to take every opportunity to urge the Government of Sri Lanka to live up to this commitment. The report issued by the US State Department in October into incidents during the recent conflict in Sri Lanka underlines the importance of establishing a credible process. We welcome President Rajapakse's decision to appoint an independent committee to look into the incidents cited in the US State Department's report. The credibility of the committee will rest on its independence.



# Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 10 December 2009

## CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

### Church of England: Green Issues

**Mr. Hurd:** To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners what payments the Church Commissioners have made to Green Issues in the last 12 months; for what purpose; and if he will place in the Library a copy of the contract under which such payments have been made. [305164]

**Sir Stuart Bell:** In promoting strategic development opportunities, the commissioners use a wide range of professional advisers, including public consultation consultants, and I can confirm that Green Issues is one of the firms used.

The firm's primary role is to organise the public consultation associated with the promotion of major development proposals, including exhibitions and workshops, as well as liaising with various third parties such as local councillors. However, the terms of engagement are commercially sensitive and therefore cannot be deposited in the Library.

Public consultation is, of course, part of the statutory planning process but we also view it as a welcome opportunity to engage with local communities.

## DEFENCE

### Armed Forces: Costs

**Sir Menzies Campbell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much his Department has charged (a)

other Government departments, (b) private sector companies and (c) foreign governments in employment costs for members of (i) his Department's civilian staff, (ii) the MOD Police Service, (iii) MOD Police and Guarding Agency and (iv) military personnel of the (A) Royal Navy, (B) Royal Marines, (C) Army and (D) Royal Air Force in each of the last five years. [304644]

**Mr. Kevan Jones:** This information is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Charges for personnel services are levied against outside bodies in accordance with the principles set out by HM Treasury in chapter 6 of Managing Public Money which requires that full costs should normally be recovered for any goods and services provided by MOD.

### Armed Forces: Manpower

**Mr. Jenkin:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) how many (a) officers and (b) personnel in other ranks in each regular infantry and Royal Marine battalion were unfit for duty at the latest date for which figures are available; [305723]

(2) what the (a) required and (b) actual trained strength is of each (i) regular infantry and (ii) Royal Marine battalion. [305724]

**Mr. Kevan Jones:** Unfit for duty has been interpreted as medically unfit to perform any duty. Personnel unfit for duty in their primary role but who can perform a role in an alternative capacity are not included in the following tables.

The figures given include personnel filling all roles within each battalion, not just infantrymen. Separate figures for infantry officers and soldiers are not held centrally.

As at 1 October, the figures requested for the infantry are provided as follows.

<i>Division</i>	<i>Unit</i>	<i>Required strength</i>	<i>Actual strength</i>	<i>Number unfit for duty</i>
Guards	1 Grenadier Guards	632	586	4
	1 Coldstream Guards	626	606	6
	1 Scots Guards	753	665	1
	1 Irish Guards	633	629	6
	1 Welsh Guards	626	608	12
SCOTS	1 SCOTS	630	556	2
	2 SCOTS	627	518	3
	3 SCOTS	630	625	11
	4 SCOTS	686	584	1
	5 SCOTS	657	542	2
Queens	1 Princess of Wales Royal Regiment	755	722	2
	2 Princess of Wales Royal Regiment	671	600	2
	1 Royal Regt Fusiliers	660	573	6
	2 Royal Regt Fusiliers	626	548	13
	1 Royal Anglian	713	734	9

<i>Division</i>	<i>Unit</i>	<i>Required strength</i>	<i>Actual strength</i>	<i>Number unfit for duty</i>
	2 Royal Anglian	629	628	2
Kings	1 LANCS	757	721	8
	2 LANCS	612	622	5
	1 YORKS incl. Gurkha Reinforcement Company 3	686	605	2
	2 YORKS	623	493	2
	3 YORKS	751	608	15
Prince of Wales	1 Mercian incl. Gurkha Reinforcement Company 2	731	648	2
	2 Mercian	623	614	10
	3 Mercian	678	606	4
	1 Royal Welsh	623	611	4
	2 Royal Welsh	751	687	6
RIFLES	1 RIFLES	623	712	5
	2 RIFLES	623	730	35
	3 RIFLES	623	662	12
	4 RIFLES	711	752	8
	5 RIFLES	752	770	3
Royal Irish	1 Royal Irish	650	586	9
PARA	2 PARA	650	624	14
	3 PARA	650	625	7
Royal Gurkha Rifles	1 Royal Gurkha Rifles	643	619	8
	2 Royal Gurkha Rifles	758	658	4

In addition to the battalions shown above there are three incremental guards companies which are primarily

for public duties but which can also be used to augment the other guards battalions as required;

<i>Unit</i>	<i>Required strength</i>	<i>Actual strength</i>	<i>Number unfit for duty</i>
Nijmegen Coy Grenadier Gds	108	107	1
7 Coy Coldstream Gds	108	97	1
F Coy Scots Guards	110	106	4

The figures in both tables include personnel filling all roles within each battalion, not just infantrymen.

Figures for Royal Marine Commandos units are shown in the table below. Due to changes in the way in which

the Royal Navy records its sick personnel, it is not possible to identify the number of Royal Marine personnel who are currently unfit to perform any duty.

<i>Unit</i>	<i>Required strength</i>	<i>Actual strength</i>
40 Commando	Officers	<sup>1</sup> 703
	Other ranks	<sup>1</sup> —
42 Commando	Officers	<sup>1</sup> 703
	Other ranks	<sup>1</sup> —
45 Commando	Officers	<sup>1</sup> 703
	Other Ranks	<sup>1</sup> —

<sup>1</sup> Represents a brace



## WORK AND PENSIONS

### Motability

**Danny Alexander:** To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many vehicles were (a) purchased by and (b) leased by people resident in (i) Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey constituency, (ii) the Highlands, (iii) Scotland and (iv) England and Wales under the Motability Scheme in each of the last five years. [304669]

**Jonathan Shaw:** Motability is an independent charitable company and is responsible for the administration of the Motability Scheme. They have written separately to the hon. Member with such information as they have available.

### New Deal for Young People

**Steve Webb:** To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions with reference to the answer of 11 November 2009, *Official Report*, column 583W, on work experiences: young people, how many places were available on each option in the New Deal for Young People in each of the last 24 months. [302239]

**Jim Knight:** The availability of places on the new deal for young persons is demand-led; therefore the new deal providers ensure there are sufficient placements to meet the needs of Jobcentre Plus customers requiring the support given by any particular option.

### New Deal Schemes

**Mr. Harper:** To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many bids her Department has received for Flexible New Deal Phase 2 contracts; and how many full-time equivalent staff in her Department are responsible for analysing and evaluating bids submitted for Phase 2 Flexible New Deal contracts. [304539]

**Jim Knight:** To date, the Department has not received any bids. The deadline for flexible new deal phase 2 bids to be submitted to DWP is 6 January 2010.

The number of full-time equivalent staff likely to be involved in the evaluation will be influenced by the number of tenders that are actually returned and will include staff from across several expert domains.

### Remploy: Public Relations

**Mr. Hurd:** To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what payments Remploy has made to (a) Portland PR and (b) Greenhouse Public Communication in each of the last three years; for what purposes; and if she will place in the Library a copy of the contract under which such payments have been made. [302301]

**Jonathan Shaw:** Remploy has made total payments to Portland PR of £174,680 between 2007 and 2009.

In 2007-08 the amount was £160,665 for public affairs strategy and communications work. £35,000 of this spend was specifically for factory closure communications.

In 2008-09 the amount spent was £14,015 for the public affairs strategy and communications programme.

In 2007 Remploy made a payment to Greenhouse Public Communication to a total of £12,277.50. This was paid for public affairs work.

## SCOTLAND

### Departmental Freedom of Information

**Sarah Teather:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many requests under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 his Department received in 2008; and how many of these received a substantive response within 20 days. [305490]

**Ann McKechin:** Statistics published by the Ministry of Justice on Freedom of Information in central Government for 2008 show that of a total of 111 non-routine requests received by the Department (based on aggregated quarterly data) 71 per cent. (79) received a substantive response within 20 days. 78 per cent. (87) of requests were dealt with 'in time', that is within 20 days by meeting the deadline or other permitted extension deadline.

The statistics can be found on the Ministry of Justice website at:

<http://www.justice.gov.uk/publications/freedomofinformationquarterly.htm>

and copies are available in the Library of the House.

### Departmental Official Hospitality

**Mr. Philip Hammond:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how much his Department spent on (a) alcohol and (b) entertainment in the last 12 months. [305532]

**Ann McKechin:** The information is not held in the form requested; however, in 2008-09 the Scotland Office spent £15,158 on hospitality.

### Departmental Publicity

**Mr. Philip Hammond:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how much his Department has spent on (a) Ministerial photoshoots and (b) production of videos in which Ministers appear in the last three years for which figures are available. [305524]

**Ann McKechin:** The Scotland Office has incurred no expenditure on ministerial photoshoots or production of videos in the last three years.

### Departmental Written Questions

**John Mason:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many questions tabled for answer on a named day his Department received in each of the last 12 months; and to how many such questions his Department provided a substantive answer on the day named. [305383]

**Ann McKechin:** Details of the number of questions tabled for answer on a named day and those that received a substantive answer on the day named are shown in the following table:

	<i>Number of named day questions tabled</i>	<i>Percentage of named day questions that received a substantive answer on the day named</i>
December 2008	2	100
January 2009	1	100
February 2009	0	n/a
March 2009	11	90
April 2009	5	100
May 2009	1	0
June 2009	0	n/a
July 2009	6	100
August 2009	0	n/a
September 2009	0	n/a
October 2009	0	n/a
November 2009	2	100

Central guidance on answering parliamentary questions is now available in the "Guide to Parliamentary Work", at:

<http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/parliamentary-clerk-guide.aspx>

In the response to the Procedure Committee Report on written parliamentary questions, the Government accepted the Committee's recommendation that Departments be required to provide the Procedure Committee with sessional statistics in a standard format on the time taken to respond to written parliamentary questions, accompanied by an explanatory memorandum setting out any factors affecting their performance. This will be taken forward as soon as possible.

### Hotels

**Anne Main:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how much his Department spent on hotel accommodation for (a) Ministers, (b) special advisers and (c) civil servants in each of the last five years. [305655]

**Ann McKechin:** The Scotland Office does not separately record expenditure on hotel accommodation from other forms of subsistence such as meal allowances, day subsistence, incidental expenses and motor mileage.

All travel and subsistence is conducted in accordance with the requirements of the Ministerial Code, Travel by Ministers and the Civil Service Management Code.

## HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

### Department of Resources: Finance

**Mr. Chope:** To ask the hon. Member for North Devon, representing the House of Commons Commission how much money was owed to the House of Commons Department of Resources by (a) hon. Members, (b) Officers of the House and (c) the Press Gallery Committee for expenditures incurred on catering and retail goods and services on 1 September 2009. [302830]

**Nick Harvey:** It is not possible to provide the figures requested as at 1 September, except at disproportionate cost. This is because the database changes every day and the figures are only readily available if the data for a

particular day have been retained. Reconstructing the data for a past day for which the data have not been retained would be an extremely time-consuming exercise involving a lot of manual adjustments to the data.

### Speaker's Adviser

**Kate Hoey:** To ask the hon. Member for North Devon, representing the House of Commons Commission whether Mr. Speaker's special adviser has claimed any expenses for travel since his appointment. [305840]

**Nick Harvey:** No expenses of any kind have been claimed.

## CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

### Creativity and Business International Network: Finance

**Mr. Hunt:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what proportion of his budget for c&binet for 2009-10 was spent on the event held at The Grove between 26 and 28 October 2009. [305622]

**Mr. Bradshaw:** The gross costs of planning and staging the event at The Grove accounted for approximately 40 per cent. of the budget allocated to c&binet during 2009-10. The investment to develop a network of key professionals in the creative industries also contributed to the success of the event. DCMS is currently in discussions with private sector companies to take forward the project. This has allowed us to reduce the overall budget from £3 million to £2 million over the period 2008-09 to 2010-11.

### Departmental Sick Leave

**Mr. Philip Hammond:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many days of sick leave were taken by staff in his Department and its agency in each of the last 12 months for which figures are available; and what the cost to his Department was of such sick leave. [305556]

**Mr. Simon:** The information is as follows:

*Number of working days lost due to sickness during the period from 1 December 2008 to 30 November 2009*

	<i>DCMS</i>	<i>The Royal Parks</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>2008</i>			
December	134	52	186
<i>2009</i>			
January	152	37	189
February	88	33	121
March	115	32	147
April	154	9	163
May	148	20	168
June	149	15	164
July	175	54	229
August	215	52	267
September	211	64	275
October	149	95	244

Number of working days lost due to sickness during the period from 1 December 2008 to 30 November 2009

	DCMS	The Royal Parks	Total
November	76	60	136
Total	1,766	523	2,289

Cost of sickness for the period from 1 December 2008 to 30 November 2009

	DCMS	The Royal Parks	Total
£			
2008			
December	23,852	9,256	33,108
2009			
January	27,056	6,586	33,642
February	15,664	5,874	21,538
March	20,470	5,696	26,166
April	28,182	1,647	29,829
May	27,084	3,660	30,744
June	27,267	2,745	30,012
July	32,025	9,882	41,907
August	39,345	9,515	48,860
September	38,613	11,712	50,325
October	27,267	17,385	44,652
November	13,908	10,980	24,888
Total	320,733	94,938	415,671

#### Film: Israel

**Mr. Byers:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when he expects to sign the co-production treaty concerning the film industry with the Government of Israel. [305358]

**Mr. Simon:** We hope to conclude negotiations with Israel on a film co-production agreement and to be able to announce arrangements for the signing of this agreement soon.

#### Grayling Political Strategy: Public Relations

**Mr. Hurd:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what payments Arts Council East has made to Grayling Political Strategy in the last 12 months; for what purpose; and if he will place in the Library a copy of the contract under which such payments have been made. [305135]

**Margaret Hodge:** Arts Council England has advised the following position on the subject of expenditure relating to Regional Cities East (RCE).

Regional Cities East is a partnership between Colchester borough council, Ipswich borough council, Luton borough council, Norwich city council, Peterborough city council, Southend-on-Sea borough council, Arts Council England East and the East of England Development Agency.

In 2008-09, RCE had an overall budget of £120,000 from the partners, including a £60,000 contribution from Arts Council East, to promote the world class arts and cultural assets of these key cities.

In November 2008 Colchester borough council, as budget holder for Regional Cities East, contracted Grayling

to deliver the first stage of this programme. Their fee was £90,876.00 + VAT for an initial 12 months from 1 November 2008 to 31 October 2009 and this resulted in press coverage equivalent to an editorial value of £334,000.

ACE East has had no contract with Grayling.

#### Olympic Legacy Board

**Hugh Robertson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what the membership is of the new Olympic Legacy board announced in his Department's press release of 2 October 2009; how many times the board has met; and on how many occasions (a) Sir Steve Redgrave and (b) each of the other six Olympic and Paralympic medallists has attended the board's meetings. [305790]

**Mr. Sutcliffe:** The Sport Legacy Delivery Board is made up of senior representatives from:

- London Organising Committee for the Olympic Games
- UK Sport
- Youth Sport Trust
- Sportscoach UK
- Sport England
- Sportscotland
- Sports Council for Wales
- Sport Northern Ireland
- Local Government Association
- Nations and Regions Board
- Paralympics GB
- British Olympic Association
- British Paralympic Association
- National Governing Bodies of Sport
- Central Council of Physical Recreation
- Department for Culture, Media and Sport
- Government Olympic Executive.

Sir Steve Redgrave is also a member, and the Department of Health and Department for Children, Schools and Families are auxiliary members.

The board has met twice since October 2009 and is due to meet again in January, February and March 2010. Sir Steve has attended one meeting; the School Sports Ambassadors have not attended either meeting.

#### NORTHERN IRELAND

##### Christmas

**Mr. Hunt:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how much his Department budgeted for Christmas trees in 2009. [306150]

**Paul Goggins:** The Northern Ireland Office (NIO), including its arms length bodies and the Public Prosecution Service Northern Ireland but excluding its agencies and NDPBs, does not hold the information required to answer this question because budget information is not broken down to this level of detail.

### Employment: Religion

**Chris Ruane:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many (a) Catholics and (b) Protestants were employed in the (i) private and (ii) public sectors in Northern Ireland in each of the past 30 years; how many Catholics and Protestants were employed in the (A) Fire Service, (B) Police Service and (C) Civil Service in Northern Ireland in each of the last 10 years; and what percentage of the working age population of each community each of these figures represented. [302336]

**Paul Goggins:** Employment figures for the total number of Catholics and Protestants employed by the private and public sectors in Northern Ireland and for the proportions of each community that these figures represent are a matter for the Northern Ireland Administration; figures relating to the Fire Service and Northern Ireland Civil Service are also a matter for the Northern Ireland Administration.

The Chief Constable has provided the following table which gives the number of Catholics and Protestants employed as police officers in the Police Service of Northern Ireland in each of the last 10 years.

	<i>Regular police officers</i>			<i>As a percentage of total economically active Protestants<sup>1</sup></i>	<i>As a percentage of total economically active Catholics<sup>1</sup></i>
	<i>Protestant</i>	<i>Catholic</i>	<i>Not determined</i>		
2000	7,517	713	286	1.87	0.24
2001	7,365	706	281	1.83	0.24
2002	6,334	642	251	1.58	0.21
2003	6,117	840	236	1.52	0.28
2004	6,088	1,018	226	1.52	0.34
2005	6,025	1,265	206	1.50	0.42
2006	5,868	1,427	197	1.46	0.48
2007	5,759	1,588	195	1.43	0.53
2008	5,480	1,743	185	1.36	0.58
2009	5,305	1,904	184	1.32	0.64

<sup>1</sup> This information has been derived from the Summary Report of Northern Ireland 2001 Population Census. Economically active persons are those aged 16 to 64.

Total number of economically active Protestants—401,473;

Total number of economically active Catholics—299,218.

### Irish Language

**Mark Durkan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland with reference to Annex B of the St. Andrews Agreement of October 2006, what steps the Government plans to take to fulfil the commitment to introduce legislation on the Irish language reflecting on the experience of Wales and the Republic of Ireland. [304265]

**Paul Goggins:** Annex B of the St. Andrews Agreement committed the Government to introducing an Irish Language Act reflecting on the experience of Wales and Ireland and to work with the Executive to enhance and protect the development of the Irish language.

The Government took forward this commitment through the publication of two consultation papers in December 2006 and March 2007 setting out their proposed approach to an Irish Language Act. The latter included draft clauses.

Following the restoration of the Northern Ireland Assembly on 8 May 2007, the responsibility in this area passed to the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive.

The Northern Ireland Executive was placed under a statutory duty, by the Northern Ireland (St. Andrews Agreement) Act 2006, to adopt a strategy to enhance and protect the development of Irish language. The Executive has a similar statutory duty to enhance and develop the Ulster Scots language, heritage and culture.

The Government recognise the close connection between language and identity issues, and understands the concern of individuals to see that the language in which they

were brought up, or which is used in their communities, is respected. It therefore believes that these statutory duties are of particular importance and encourages the Executive to complete and publish their strategies.

The Government reaffirmed, at the British-Irish Council on 13 November 2009, their commitment to work with the Executive to support the development and implementation of strategies for Irish language and Ulster Scots and is continuing to work with other Administrations through the British-Irish Council to share best practice on the enhancement and protection of minority languages.

In addition, the Government are seeking views in their consultation paper "A Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland: Next Steps" on what additional legislative protections in relation to the Irish language might be included in a Northern Ireland Bill of Rights.

Work is also being taken forward in relation to Irish language broadcasting. The British and Irish Governments hope shortly to sign a memorandum of understanding which will contain commitments to the continuing widespread availability of TG4 in Northern Ireland following the digital switchover, and to exploring the increased availability of RTE in Northern Ireland.

### Northern Ireland Courts Service: Public Relations

**Mr. Hurd:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what payments the Northern Ireland Courts Service has made to Stratagem in the last 12 months; for what purpose; and if he will place in the Library a copy of the contract under which such payments have been made. [305161]

**Bridget Prentice:** I have been asked to reply.

The Northern Ireland Court Service has not had a contract with Stratagem since March 2009. Between December 2008 and March 2009 the Court Service made payments totalling £1,479.50 to Stratagem for the provision of political monitoring.

#### **Northern Ireland Legal Services Commission: Public Relations**

**Mr. Hurd:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what payments the Northern Ireland Legal Services Commission has made to Weber Shandwick in the last 12 months; for what purpose; and if he will place in the Library a copy of the contract under which such payments have been made. [305160]

**Bridget Prentice:** I have been asked to reply.

During the last 12 months the Northern Ireland Legal Services Commission has made payments to Weber Shandwick—Belfast totalling £52,582.84 for communication services for the period May 2008 to August 2009.

A statement of the remit, scope and terms of reference for the contract has been placed in the Library.

#### **Offenders: Deportation**

**Andrew Mackinlay:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland with reference to the answer of 4 November 2009, *Official Report*, column 1039W, on devolution (1) whether primary legislation would be required to provide for a reserve power to block the repatriation of foreign national prisoners from Northern Ireland following the devolution of criminal justice and policing; and if he will make a statement; [304525]

(2) what circumstances would constitute grounds of national security for the purpose of exercising a reserve power to block the repatriation of foreign national prisoners from Northern Ireland following the devolution of criminal justice and policing; and if he will make a statement. [304526]

**Paul Goggins:** While the repatriation of foreign prisoners will become the responsibility of the Northern Ireland Minister for Justice after the devolution of criminal justice and policing, decisions on the grounds of national security will, however, remain excepted.

New primary legislation would not be required. The grounds of national security would be interpreted consistently with case law.

#### **Terrorism: Compensation**

**Sammy Wilson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how much compensation has been paid out to those affected by terrorist activity in Northern Ireland in each year since 1979. [305412]

**Paul Goggins:** The Compensation Agency is unable to provide the information requested, as the records held do not identify separately claims made as a result of terrorist activity.

## **ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS**

### **Climate Change**

18. **Jessica Morden:** To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what his most recent assessment is of the effectiveness of the UK's adaptation to climate change; and if he will make a statement. [305592]

**Dan Norris:** Since the Climate Change Act came into force earlier this year, we have:

launched the UK Climate Projections 09

established the Adaptation Sub Committee; and

set out the strategy for using the Adaptation Reporting Power

The Adapting to Climate Change Programme is driving work on the first UK Climate Change Risk Assessment which will report in January 2012, in line with the timetable set out in the Act.

### **Food Labelling**

21. **John Penrose:** To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what recent discussions he has had with Ministerial colleagues on country of origin food labelling. [305596]

**Jim Fitzpatrick:** I have regular discussions with ministerial colleagues and the Food Standards Agency to ensure that we have tighter, clearer and more accurate origin labelling.

### **Waste-to-Energy Plants**

**Simon Hughes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what steps are being taken to increase the use of waste-to-energy plants; and if he will make a statement. [305575]

**Dan Norris:** The Government's Renewable Energy Strategy sets out current and future policies to divert biomass waste from landfill, support the supply of biomass waste for energy, and drive the delivery of the necessary infrastructure.

DEFRA has established the Waste Infrastructure Delivery Programme to support local authorities and accelerate the building of the infrastructure needed to treat residual waste.

### **Biodiversity**

**Mr. Peter Ainsworth:** To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when his Department (a) concluded and (b) expects to publish its most recent assessment of the status of the Biodiversity Action Plan, Priority Species and Priority Habitats. [305797]

**Huw Irranca-Davies:** The most recent assessment of the status of Biodiversity Action Plan Priority Species and Habitats was published in April 2009, as part of the update to the UK Biodiversity Indicators in Your Pocket. This can be found on the website of the Joint Nature Conservation Committee.

**Mr. Peter Ainsworth:** To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what

measures he has put in place to halt biodiversity loss beyond the expiry of the EU's 2010 targets; and if he will make a statement. [305798]

**Huw Irranca-Davies:** We are fully committed to identifying a new challenging 'post 2010' biodiversity target and we are playing a leading role in establishing it. For example, earlier this year, we hosted an international workshop in Reading which reviewed the 2010 indicators and considered implications for post 2010 indicator development. We have also been feeding into key discussions at EU and global level on the development of the post 2010 framework. Linked to this, we will co-host an international workshop with Brazil in January. This will be a key stepping stone on the path to agreeing a post 2010 target, or targets, in Japan next October.

Within the UK, we have published targets to increase the population and range of our priority species and restore and expand priority habitats by 2015.

**Mr. Peter Ainsworth:** To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what assessment he has made of progress since February 2009 towards meeting the objectives set out in the EU's 2010 targets to halt biodiversity loss; and if he will make a statement. [305799]

**Huw Irranca-Davies:** The European Commission and member states are currently compiling data to allow an assessment next year of progress against the targets in the EU Biodiversity Action Plan. We measure our progress towards the EU's 2010 target to halt biodiversity loss through the UK Biodiversity Indicators. This was reported in the National Statistics publication "Biodiversity Indicators in Your Pocket 2007", which was updated most recently in April 2009. Statistics for wild birds were updated in October 2009 and those for sites of special scientific interest (SSSIs) are updated monthly.

Overall, 23 (72 per cent.) of the 32 measures that comprise the UK Biodiversity Indicators are "improving" or show "little or no overall change" since the year 2000. In particular, 89 per cent. of SSSIs are in favourable or recovering condition, agri-environment schemes are leading to significant improvements, and we have made great strides with the Marine and Coastal Access Act.

#### Fisheries: White Fish

**Tim Farron:** To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what consultation his Department undertook with the under 10 metre fishing industry regarding the introduction of the 500kg cod lottery draw. [306058]

**Huw Irranca-Davies:** No formal consultation exercise was undertaken with the 10 metre and under fishing industry about the allocation of the additional 18 tonnes of cod quota in area VIId. It was not possible given the very short time available to arrange access to the additional fishing opportunity and still allow fishermen a reasonable chance to catch the fish before the end of the year.

The Marine and Fisheries Agency did, however, consult a number of individual fishermen on the south coast of England on a strictly informal basis on alternative allocation approaches before the final method of allocation was decided upon.

**Tim Farron:** To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what his most recent assessment is of the likely effects on the under 10 metre fishing industry of the introduction of the 500kg cod lottery draw. [306059]

**Huw Irranca-Davies:** The additional 18 tonnes of quota the Marine and Fisheries Agency was able to obtain for the inshore vessels to fish for cod in area VIId will prove a valuable, if limited, fishing opportunity for those vessels that received the quota. It is estimated that the additional quota will have a total value of c.£36,000 at current market prices, or £1,000 for each vessel that receives an allocation of 500kg of quota. An allocation of 500kg of quota per vessel should allow those vessels to undertake normal fishing activity and minimise discards in a mixed fishery until the end of the year.

Given the strictly limited amount of quota available, it was not possible to open the fishery to all the licensed vessels that may have wished to take part in the fishery and remain confident of meeting the UK obligations in ensuring there is no overfish of this quota.

#### Flood Control

**Miss McIntosh:** To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what assessment he has made of the effect of Ofwat's final determination on the ability of water companies to provide alternative water supplies in the event of contamination of usual supplies by flooding; and what recent assessment he has made of the capacity of water companies to increase the resilience of their water treatment plants to flooding. [304954]

**Huw Irranca-Davies:** Water companies have to provide a safe and secure water supply. It is for the companies themselves to take responsibility and make decisions on how best to protect the essential services they supply.

In its final determination Ofwat included over £414 million to improve the resilience of water and sewerage services against external hazards such as flooding.

Companies are also obliged to have emergency plans in place to maintain supply either through network resilience or deployment of bowsers, for which Ofwat has also allowed funding.

**Miss McIntosh:** To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs for what reasons the chief engineers and regional engineers in each region of England are no longer in place; and what alternative structure is in place for the carrying out of their functions. [304955]

**Huw Irranca-Davies:** DEFRA has given the Environment Agency a strategic overview of flood and coastal erosion risk management and, in line with this, passed it the management of the capital improvements programme. The chief engineer and regional engineers were primarily focused on this work.

To facilitate this transition the Environment Agency has strengthened its role at both regional and area levels, for example, by recruiting additional coastal engineers. DEFRA also seconded staff to the Environment Agency to ensure continuity of work and training.

DEFRA retains a smaller cadre of engineers and other experienced professionals who provide input to policy development and an intelligent client function for the flood and coastal erosion risk management programme.

**Miss McIntosh:** To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many people are registered with Flood Warnings Direct. [305075]

**Huw Irranca-Davies:** The Environment Agency has over 450,000 registered users on Floodline Warnings Direct.

The Environment Agency's Floodline Warnings Direct is a free service that provides flood warnings direct to users by telephone, mobile, email, SMS text message and fax.

**Miss McIntosh:** To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when he expects a final national flood emergency framework to be implemented. [305076]

**Huw Irranca-Davies:** A fully developed National Flood Emergency Framework will be in place by June 2010, in line with the commitment given in response to Sir Michael Pitt's review on the 2007 floods. The Framework will provide the basis for Exercise Watermark—our planned national exercise in March 2011.

**Sarah Teather:** To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how much his Department has spent on flood defences in each of the last five years. [305230]

**Huw Irranca-Davies:** DEFRA provides funding to operating authorities for flood defences from the allocation of funding for flood and coastal erosion risk management. Over the past five financial years this allocation totalled:

<i>Financial year</i>	<i>DEFRA funding (£ million)</i>
2008-09	568.1
2007-08	507.5
2006-07	506.0
2005-06	514.8
2004-05	415.4

### Forests

**Mr. Jim Cunningham:** To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what representations he has received on the proposed sites for tree-planting as recommended by the National Assessment of Forestry and Climate Change. [305624]

**Huw Irranca-Davies:** The National Assessment of Forestry and Climate Change published on 25 November does not put forward any specific sites for tree planting and we have not received any representations.

Our Strategy for England's Trees, Woods and Forests puts a strong emphasis on planting the right tree in the right place and we will be taking an integrated approach to see where additional woodland can complement other activities.

### Forests: West Midlands

**Mr. Jim Cunningham:** To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs whether he plans to take steps to increase the area of woodland in the West Midlands. [305625]

**Huw Irranca-Davies:** As part of the Low Carbon Transition Plan announced in July, the Forestry Commission and DEFRA are working to develop the framework that would be needed to enable 10,000 hectares of new woodland to be created each year for the next 15 years. As part of this, the Forestry Commission will be working with partners in each region to identify the scope for increasing the area of woodland.

### Horticulture

**John Robertson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what measures he is considering to increase the amount of home-grown horticultural produce; and if he will make a statement. [305583]

**Hilary Benn:** On 21 October I chaired the first meeting of the fruit and vegetable task force. It will look at how we can boost domestic production and consumption of fruit and vegetables in England. This is in addition to the support already provided which includes funding up to £7 million of research and development last year on horticultural crops.

### International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources

**Mr. Jim Cunningham:** To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs whether he has made an assessment of the outcomes of the International Union for Conservation of Nature meeting held on 26 November 2009. [305623]

**Huw Irranca-Davies:** The Secretary of State co-hosted this roundtable event along with Ashok Khosla, the President of the International Union of Conservation and Nature, in support of the Global Partnership on Forest Landscape Restoration. In the co-chairs' summary, "The London Challenge", they recognise the progress made by the partnership since its establishment in 2003, the considerable potential for forest restoration globally and the important role of forest restoration in both climate change mitigation and adaptation. Work on restoration complements the work we are doing to tackle deforestation and forest degradation. The summary goes on to reflect issues raised by participants and actions to take forest restoration forward in the coming months. The final summary will be posted on the partnership's website following its distribution to participants.

### Marine Management Organisation

**Sarah Teather:** To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how much his Department spent on consultancy fees during the selection process of the headquarters of the Marine Management Organisation. [305085]

**Huw Irranca-Davies:** DEFRA has paid £6,900 in respect of property consultancy, including the site search and financial appraisal of the property options, for the Marine Management Organisation headquarters building in Newcastle.

**Sarah Teather:** To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what arrangements have been made for the temporary accommodation of Marine and Fisheries Agency staff in Newcastle before moving to Lancaster House; and what expenditure he expects his Department to incur on such temporary accommodation. [305086]

**Huw Irranca-Davies:** Since the beginning of October 2009, interim accommodation for Marine and Fisheries Agency staff based in Newcastle has been the Government Office North East. Additional accommodation from 14 December will be in city centre commercial offices. It is estimated that the cost of this interim accommodation will amount to approximately £150,000.

**Sarah Teather:** To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what expenditure has been incurred on recruitment agencies engaged to recruit staff for the Marine and Fisheries Agency in the last 12 months. [305087]

**Huw Irranca-Davies:** In the 12 months up to November 2009, approximately £153,000 of expenditure had been incurred on recruitment agencies as part of a continuing exercise to recruit Marine and Fisheries Agency staff.

#### Salmon: River Dee

**Ben Chapman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs whether his Department has made a recent estimate of the size of the population of salmon in the River Dee. [305341]

**Huw Irranca-Davies:** The Environment Agency carries out an annual assessment of the number of adult salmon entering the River Dee using data from a fish trap at Chester Weir. The latest available assessment indicates a population of 5,437 adult salmon entering the River Dee in 2008.

### TRANSPORT

#### Bridges: Workington

**Mark Hunter:** To ask the Minister of State, Department for Transport what plans there are to build a bailey bridge capable of taking wheeled vehicles across the River Derwent in Workington, Cumbria. [304488]

**Mr. Khan:** Following the recent floods in Cumbria an immediate priority in Workington is to improve transport links for communities on either side of the River Derwent, which have been significantly curtailed.

The Government are working closely with Cumbria county council on re-establishing those transport links. An additional rail station has been built at North Workington to allow a shuttle rail service to operate. The Army have also built a temporary footbridge, which opened on 7 December. These facilities are being supported with Government funding.

Cumbria county council are considering what measures would be appropriate to restore road vehicle links across the River Derwent at Workington. The Department for Transport is funding project management support to assist the authority with their infrastructure recovery planning. When Cumbria county council decides on how to restore road vehicle links, they will be able to include the costs in their claim to the Department for emergency capital highway maintenance funding.

#### Bus Services: Finance

**Norman Baker:** To ask the Minister of State, Department for Transport what bids for funding for new and enhanced bus services for local authorities and their partners he has received under the Kickstart Bus Funding Competition announced in January 2009; and when he plans to announce the successful schemes to be funded. [304274]

**Mr. Khan:** The Department for Transport received 105 bids for funding, totalling £63 million, from local authorities across England. An announcement will be made in due course.

#### Bus Services: Lincolnshire

**Mr. Austin Mitchell:** To ask the Minister of State, Department for Transport how much his Department has paid in grants to North East Lincolnshire local authority to provide free bus travel for pensioners in the last 12 months. [304428]

**Mr. Khan:** In the last 12 months, The Department for Transport has made payments totalling £614,039 in respect of concessionary travel special grant to North East Lincolnshire. The special grant provides funding solely to cover the extra costs that followed from the improvement to the statutory concession to all-England travel in April 2008. The Department for Communities and Local Government continues to provide the bulk of concessionary travel funding to local authorities through Formula Grant.

#### Crossrail Line

**Norman Baker:** To ask the Minister of State, Department for Transport how many lorry movements carrying waste from tunnelling as part of the Crossrail project he estimates will take place in each month in 2012. [304287]

**Mr. Khan:** It is estimated that there will be around 60 lorry movements carrying waste from tunnelling as part of the Crossrail project per day during 2012. The need to reduce the number of such movements during the periods of the Olympic and Paralympic Games is recognised and is being actively considered by Crossrail Ltd. in consultation with the Olympic Delivery Authority, although the precise details will not be known until nearer the time.

85 per cent. of the excavated material from the tunnel drives will be removed by rail and boat, removing an estimated 500,000 lorry movements from the streets of London during the life of the project.



**Norman Baker:** To ask the Minister of State, Department for Transport by what means (a) contaminated tunnel waste, (b) non-contaminated tunnel waste and (c) waste of indeterminate quality from the Crossrail project will be disposed of. [304288]

**Mr. Khan:** Virtually all of the 7.3 million m<sup>3</sup> of excavated material is expected to be clean and non-contaminated and can be reused elsewhere. A significant proportion of this material will be transported to Wallasea Island in Essex to enhance a nature reserve for the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB). This will be one of the largest new wetland nature reserves in Europe for some 50 years. Other sites being considered for this material include South East of England Development Agency (SEEDA) regeneration sites in Kent.

If any contaminated material or waste of indeterminate quality is found it will be transported to a specialist treatment facility.

**Norman Baker:** To ask the Minister of State, Department for Transport what requirements he has identified for the need to stockpile waste during the construction phase of the Crossrail project. [304289]

**Mr. Khan:** It is anticipated that all categories of excavated material will be transported straight to its intended destination without the need for stockpiling. However, each construction site will have limited stockpiling capacity in case of unforeseen incidents on the rail, water or road networks.

**Norman Baker:** To ask the Minister of State, Department for Transport what assessment he has made of the (a) carbon footprint and (b) environmental sustainability of (i) the construction of Crossrail and (ii) the completed scheme; and what benchmarking exercises his Department has carried out in this respect. [304290]

**Mr. Khan:** The carbon footprint and environmental impacts of Crossrail during both construction and operation were assessed and presented in the Crossrail Environmental Statement, which was published in February 2005.

As a sustainable transport project Crossrail forms part of the Mayor of London's 'London Plan' which was itself subject to a sustainability assessment.

In addition Crossrail has worked with the Building Research Establishment to develop a BRE Environmental Assessment Method (BREEAM) for its sub-surface stations and is using that and the Civil Engineering Environmental Quality Assessment and Award Scheme (CEEQUAL) to benchmark the environmental performance of its designs.

**Norman Baker:** To ask the Minister of State, Department for Transport what preparations have been made to reduce the effect of lorry movements associated with Crossrail construction during the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games. [304291]

**Mr. Khan:** Crossrail Ltd. and the Olympic Delivery Authority are working together to ensure that the Games proceed unhindered, and to ensure that the impact of Crossrail works is minimised during the Olympic/Paralympic Games periods.

The need to reduce the number of lorry movements during the periods of the Olympic and Paralympic Games is recognised and is being actively considered. The precise details will not be known until nearer the time.

### Departmental Plants

**Grant Shapps:** To ask the Minister of State, Department for Transport how much has been spent by his Department on (a) cut flowers and (b) pot plants in each of the last three years. [306145]

**Chris Mole:** The information is not held in the format requested and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

However, the Department for Transport spent £87,401 on pot plants and £3,419 on cut flowers in 2008-09. This excludes spend incurred at the Vehicle and Operator Services Agency as the information requested can be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Spend on pot plants includes provision, maintenance and replacement of plants.

All expenditure was incurred in accordance with the principles of Managing Public Money and the Treasury handbook on Regularity and Propriety.

### Departmental Public Relations

**Mr. Hurd:** To ask the Minister of State, Department for Transport what payments the British Transport Police has made to (a) Grayling Political Strategy and (b) Politics International in the last 12 months; for what purpose; and if he will place in the Library a copy of the contracts under which such payments have been made. [305129]

**Chris Mole:** This is a matter for the British Transport Police who can be contacted at 25 Camden Road, London, NW1 9LN, e-mail: parliament@btp.pnn.police.uk

**Mr. Hurd:** To ask the Minister of State, Department for Transport what payments Cycling England has made to Blue Rubicon in the last 12 months; for what purpose; and if he will place in the Library a copy of the contract under which such payments have been made. [305130]

**Mr. Khan:** Blue Rubicon has been contracted through the Central Office of Information (COI) to provide public relations services to Cycling England. The agency delivers a programme of activity targeting consumers and engaging stakeholders with the aim of getting more people cycling, more safely, more often. A key focus of Blue Rubicon's work is the promotion of Bikeability cycle training for children (supporting the Government's goal of training an additional 500,000 children by 2012).

In the 12 months from November 2008 to October 2009, £493,177 was paid to Blue Rubicon in connection with the provision of such services. A further £432,985 was spent on external expenses (such as the supply of Bikeability badges) associated with the Cycling England campaign and procured through Blue Rubicon. In total, £926,162 was spent over the 12 months. During this period, the contract was retendered and refocused. As a result, the total value of work for the seven months from April to October 2009 was just over £321,000.

Blue Rubicon's contract is with the COI who have released a copy of the terms and conditions of the contract and their brief for the work. These have been placed in the Libraries of the House.

**Mr. Hurd:** To ask the Minister of State, Department for Transport what payments the Civil Aviation Authority has made to (a) Waterfront Public Affairs and (b) AS Biss/Mandate Communications in the last 12 months; for what purpose; and if he will place in the Library a copy of the contracts under which such payments have been made. [305131]

**Paul Clark:** The Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) informs us that they have paid Waterfront Public Affairs a net amount of £96,019.80 in the last 12 months. This was for providing a public affairs and public relations consultancy service to the CAA. No payments have been made to AS Biss/Mandate Communications in the last 12 months. A copy of the Waterfront Public Affairs contract will be made available in the Libraries of the House.

#### Departmental Rail Travel

**Mr. Hurd:** To ask the Minister of State, Department for Transport with reference to the answer of 12 May 2009, *Official Report*, column 645W, on departmental rail travel, whether (a) his Department's travel policy and (b) the travel policy of his Department's agencies allows staff to make claims from the public purse for travel in first class rail carriages in circumstances on which there are no seats in standard class available. [305148]

**Chris Mole:** The travel policies of the central Department and of its agencies allow claims for first class travel in circumstances on which standard class seats are unavailable.

#### East Coast Railway Line: Rolling Stock

**Norman Baker:** To ask the Minister of State, Department for Transport what recent estimate he has made of the cost of refurbishing existing rolling stock on the East Coast Main Line to enable it to be used (a) up to and (b) beyond 2019. [301211]

**Chris Mole:** In order to provide a comparison with the costs of the new Super Express Trains, which will operate on the East Coast Main Line from 2014, the Department for Transport has prepared an estimate of the costs of the alternative: of continuing to operate the existing intercity rolling stock beyond that time. This includes the period leading up to as well as the period beyond 2019. Release of this comparator information at this stage would diminish the Department's commercial position in negotiations with the preferred bidder, Agility Trains. We therefore remain convinced of the value for

money of replacing the old rolling stock with the new Super Express Train, especially in the context of an extensive electrification programme.

#### Road Salting and Gritting

**Sarah Teather:** To ask the Minister of State, Department for Transport what guidance his Department has issued to local authorities on (a) contingency plans in the event of snow and (b) the stockpiling of road grit. [305562]

**Mr. Khan:** It is for each local authority to determine how best to set and deliver a winter service strategy for the highway network for which they are responsible. The Department for Transport has not issued formal guidance to local authorities on this, but endorses the UK Roads Liaison Group's (UKRLG) code of practice on highways maintenance management, "Well-maintained Highways", which includes guidance on winter service. The code is available free from:

[www.ukroadsliasongroup.org](http://www.ukroadsliasongroup.org)

Following the severe weather in February this year, the then Secretary of State commissioned the UK Roads Liaison Group to identify the lessons that should be learnt regarding highway authorities' preparedness for extreme weather events. I will respond to the UKRLG's report shortly.

#### Roads: Accidents

**Sarah Teather:** To ask the Minister of State, Department for Transport what estimate he has made of the number of road traffic accidents caused by partial parking on kerbs where the kerb is higher than four inches in the last 12 months. [305297]

**Paul Clark:** The information requested is not collected.

#### Transport: Expenditure

**Hugh Bayley:** To ask the Minister of State, Department for Transport how much his Department spent per capita on transport (a) revenue and (b) capital schemes in (i) England, (ii) each Government region and (iii) the City of York Council area in each year since 1996-97. [304547]

**Mr. Khan:** The Department of Transport publishes estimates of its total expenditure on services per head by region and country in its annual report. These figures rest on a number of assumptions, for example about how total expenditure on strategic highways and rail should be attributed to different regions, and figures are not available below regional level. The report does not include the split between revenue and capital schemes.

However, a further analysis showing the breakdown between revenue and capital schemes per capita for the Department since its formation in May 2002 is provided in the following table:

*Department for Transport revenue and capital expenditure per capita*

Region	CAP or CUR	2002-03 <sup>1</sup>	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08
North East	CAP	—	5	5	6	9	9
	CUR	65	79	70	77	111	109

*Department for Transport revenue and capital expenditure per capita*

<i>Region</i>	<i>CAP or CUR</i>	<i>2002-03<sup>1</sup></i>	<i>2003-04</i>	<i>2004-05</i>	<i>2005-06</i>	<i>2006-07</i>	<i>2007-08</i>
North West	CAP	—	8	9	9	14	16
	CUR	81	102	114	111	148	153
Yorkshire and the Humber	CAP	—	5	5	6	10	9
	CUR	67	82	73	76	119	114
East Midlands	CAP	—	6	7	8	10	9
	CUR	90	100	94	104	127	114
West Midlands	CAP	—	7	9	9	12	12
	CUR	85	105	125	121	143	142
East	CAP	—	5	5	6	8	8
	CUR	86	92	73	75	104	99
London	CAP	—	30	12	13	19	20
	CUR	135	285	116	107	141	142
South East	CAP	—	12	13	13	17	16
	CUR	90	155	153	146	182	175
South West	CAP	—	5	7	9	11	10
	CUR	71	89	100	113	148	134
England	CAP	—	6	6	7	10	10
	CUR	89	133	107	107	141	136

<sup>1</sup> The figures proved for 2002-03 are aggregate.

These figures do not include grant support provided by the Department to local authorities. Revenue support to authorities for transport is generally provided through

the Revenue Support Grant. Amounts provided to York city council in these years are as follows:

	<i>LTP funding</i>	<i>Pre-LTP funding</i>	<i>Major projects</i>	<i>Total capital funding</i>
	<i>£ millions</i>			
2009-10	4.856	—	—	4.856
2008-09	5.116	—	—	5.116
2007-08	5.560	—	—	5.560
2006-07	5.864	—	—	5.864
2005-06	6.225	—	—	6.225
2004-05	6.302	—	—	6.302
2003-04	5.981	—	—	5.981
2002-03	5.555	—	—	5.555
2001-02	5.995	—	—	5.995
2000-01	2.262	—	—	2.262
1999-2000	—	1.983	—	1.983
1998-99	—	1.127	—	1.127
1997-98	—	2.212	0.977	3.189
1996-97	No data	No data	2.262	2.262

### Transport: Per Capita Costs

**Greg Mulholland:** To ask the Minister of State, Department for Transport how much transport spending per person by (a) his Department and (b) its agencies there was on (i) light rail, (ii) heavy rail, (iii) bus and (iv) roads in (A) Yorkshire and Humber and (B) London in each year since 2005.

[305767]

**Mr. Khan:** The Department for Transport publishes estimates of its total expenditure on services per head by region and country in its annual report. These figures rest on a number of assumptions, for example about how total expenditure on strategic highways and rail should be attributed to different regions.

These figures exclude grant to local authorities, including Greater London Authority Transport Grant, as this

information is collated separately by the Department for Communities and Local Government, the Department for Children, Schools and Families, the Department for Work and Pensions and devolved Administrations.

The report does not provide a specific breakdown per capital for light rail, heavy rail, bus and roads.

To provide a detailed estimate of the figures on the basis sought would incur disproportionate cost.

#### Written Questions: Government Responses

**Andrew Selous:** To ask the Minister of State, Department for Transport when he will respond to question 301331, tabled by the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire on 19 November 2009, on departmental working practices. [305878]

**Chris Mole:** A reply was sent to the hon. Member on 9 December 2009.

### PRIME MINISTER

#### Departmental Security

**Mr. Heald:** To ask the Prime Minister how many security passes his Department has issued to contractors providing consultancy services in the last 12 months. [303940]

**The Prime Minister:** It has been the practice of successive Governments not to comment on security matters.

#### Dept for Business, Innovation and Skills

**Mr. Sanders:** To ask the Prime Minister what assessment he has made of the (a) advantages and (b) disadvantages of the merger of the Departments for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform and Innovation, Universities and Skills. [303932]

**The Prime Minister:** I refer the right hon. Member to the machinery of government press notice issued by my Office. Copies are available in the Library of the House and are also available on the No. 10 website at:

<http://www.number10.gov.uk/Page19525>

#### Iraq Committee of Inquiry: Disclosure of Information

**Mr. Dai Davies:** To ask the Prime Minister what protocols have been agreed between the Government and the Iraq Inquiry on the disclosure and publication of documents provided to the Committee. [304131]

**Tessa Jowell:** I have been asked to reply.

I refer the hon. Gentleman to the Cabinet Office press release of 29 October publishing the information sharing the protocol the Government have agreed with the Iraq Inquiry. This is the only protocol agreed between the Government and the Inquiry.

#### Members: Surveillance

**Norman Baker:** To ask the Prime Minister pursuant to the answer of 30 November 2009, *Official Report*, column 366W, on Members: surveillance, if he will

provide the information requested in respect of unreported interceptions since 1975. [304285]

**The Prime Minister:** I have nothing further to add to the answer I gave on 30 November 2009.

#### Trinidad and Tobago: Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting

**Andrew Mackinlay:** To ask the Prime Minister what (a) discussions he had and (b) conclusions were reached at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Trinidad and Tobago in 2009. [304527]

**The Prime Minister:** I refer the hon. Member to my written ministerial statement of 30 November 2009, *Official Report*, column 113WS.

### INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

#### Bangladesh: Climate Change

**Anne Main:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assistance his Department is providing to Bangladesh to help combat the effect of climate change; and if he will make a statement. [305288]

**Mr. Thomas:** The Department for International Development (DFID) works closely with the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) on climate change issues. DFID:

Assisted the GoB in developing a national Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan and provided £60 million to help implement them.

Provided more than £6 million since 2004 to support disaster preparedness in the regions of Bangladesh most vulnerable to severe climate shocks. We are providing a further £12 million to support this work over the next five year, covering a wider area. This programme is implemented by UNDP and co-financed by the European Union. It is also part of Bangladesh's Climate Change Strategy.

Providing £690,000 to research institutions and universities in Bangladesh to increase national capacity to assess the impacts of climate change and improve Bangladesh's climate adaptation strategy and activities.

Building the country's resilience to climate change through improved governance, health, education and job opportunities.

#### Bangladesh: International Assistance

**Anne Main:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assistance his Department is providing to Bangladesh for the construction of cyclone defences following Cyclone Sidr in 2007. [305290]

**Mr. Thomas:** The UK provided around £20 million in response to three natural disasters in 2007, including Cyclone Sidr. Approximately £2 million has been used to repair damaged coastal defences and build shelter homes in areas affected by Cyclone Sidr.

The World Bank has launched a special project called the Emergency Cyclone Recovery and Restoration Project (ECRP). This is a £138 million (US \$226 million) project of which £19 million (US\$ 30 million) has been specifically allocated to repair the embankments damaged

by Cyclone Sidr. The UK has contributed £19.6 million to this project through our support to the World Bank International Development Association 15 fund.

#### Departmental Telephone Services

**Mark Lazarowicz:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many telephone lines with the prefix (a) 0870, (b) 0845 and (c) 0800 his Department (i) operates and (ii) sponsors; how many calls were received to each number in the last 12 months; and whether alternative numbers charged at the BT local rate are available in each case. [305214]

**Mr. Michael Foster:** The Department for International Development (DFID) has one telephone number with the prefix 0845. This is used by the Department's Public Enquiry Point in our office in Scotland. DFID pay a fixed annual fee for this telephone line which includes rental and all outgoing call charges. This line is managed via the Governments Management Telecoms Service and DFID does not receive any payment for calls made to this number. Calls to this number are charged at the local rate.

DFID does not keep a record of calls made to the 0845 number, this information would need to be specifically requested from our supplier.

DFID do not have any telephone lines with the prefix 0800 or 0870.

### HEALTH

#### Autism: Health Services

**Andrew Mackinlay:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent research into cerebral inhibition soothing behaviours and the compromised capacity of persons who are autistic undertaken by autism spectrum experts his Department has (a) commissioned and (b) evaluated; and if he will make a statement. [305721]

**Gillian Merron:** Neither the Department nor the Medical Research Council (MRC) is currently supporting or evaluating research relating to cerebral inhibition soothing behaviours and the compromised capacity of persons who are autistic. Both fund a portfolio of other research relating to autism on which the MRC, for example, spent over £2.4 million in 2008-09.

#### Christmas

**Mr. Hunt:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much his Department budgeted for Christmas trees in 2009. [306147]

**Phil Hope:** The Department has budgeted for £3,250 for Christmas trees in 2009.

#### Departmental Finance

**Mr. Stephen O'Brien:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health with reference to paragraph 17 of the Explanatory Notes for the Personal Care at Home Bill, which budgets within his Department will fund the Department's £420 million contribution in (a) 2010-11, (b) 2011-12 and (c) 2012-13; and by how much in each case. [306014]

**Phil Hope:** I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave on 8 December 2009, *Official Report*, column 296W, to the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Mark Simmonds).

#### Departmental Public Expenditure

**Mrs. Maria Miller:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much his Department has allocated to the Aiming Higher for Disabled Children programme in (a) 2009-10 and (b) 2010-11. [305293]

**Phil Hope:** The 2009 Child Health Strategy, 'Healthy lives, brighter futures', confirmed that £340 million was included in primary care trust (PCT) baseline allocations by the Department of Health for disabled children for the period 2008-09 to 2010-11, to support the implementation of the Aiming High for Disabled Children programme and the children's palliative care strategy, 'Better Care: Better Lives'. This figure includes £30 million to deliver the priorities for children's palliative care. Neither the programme nor the strategy broke down the funding by year. It is for PCTs to determine how best to use this funding based on local needs.

Copies of both documents have already been placed in the Library.

#### Mental Capacity Act 2005

**Andrew Mackinlay:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health on how many occasions the Mental Capacity Act 2005 has been invoked in order to modify the situation pertaining to someone with disability in order to maximise their individual capacity; and if he will make a statement. [305722]

**Phil Hope:** This information is not collected.

#### Mental Health Services

**Norman Lamb:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the level of implementation of the National Service Framework for mental health; and if he will make a statement. [305913]

**Phil Hope:** No recent assessment has been made of the level of implementation of the National Service Framework (NSF). However, we know that the NSF has led to an impressive range of policy initiatives in a previously neglected area of service provision. We have seen many benefits for people who use mental health services in the form of more money, with real terms investment in adult mental health services increasing by 44 per cent. (or £1.7 billion), since 2001-02. We also know that more patients have been helped, with crisis resolution teams providing over 106,000 home treatments to patients in the year 2007-08.

Further, because of the NSF the national health service now has 64 per cent. more consultant psychiatrists, 71 per cent. more clinical psychologists and 21 per cent. more mental health nurses than it had in 1997, and over 740 new community mental health teams offering home treatment, early intervention, or intensive support for people who might otherwise have been admitted to hospital.

### Mental Health Services: Finance

**Paul Holmes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much funding has been allocated to the provision of cognitive behavioural therapy in each primary care trust in each of the last five years. [305483]

**Phil Hope:** The Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) programme's principal aim is to support primary care trusts (PCTs) in implementing National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence guidelines for people suffering from depression and anxiety disorders.

To date, IAPT has focused solely on the provision of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). IAPT has allocated funds centrally to the national health service in each of the last two years, rather than directly and individually to each PCT.

This centrally allocated money has seen £33 million allocated in 2008-09, with 35 IAPT services established. A further £70 million (to a total of £103 million) has been centrally allocated in 2009-10, with 115 IAPT services established. In 2010-11, a further £70 million (to a total of £173 million) will be allocated.

The expansion of sites are part of a phased roll-out and services will be beginning to be implemented in every PCT by 2011 and the NHS is committed to delivering universal coverage in the period after 2011. Prior to the start of the IAPT programme in 2008, CBT provision was not funded through centrally allocated money. Information about spending on CBT prior to 2008-09 is not collected by the Department but is held by PCTs.

### Neuroblastoma

**Mr. Bone:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make it his policy that monoclonal antibody therapy is available to NHS patients diagnosed with neuroblastoma. [305803]

**Ann Keen:** The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) has not issued any guidance on monoclonal antibody therapy for the treatment of neuroblastoma.

In the absence of NICE guidance, it is a matter for local national health service organisations to decide whether to fund a particular drug or treatment. The NHS Constitution gives patients the right to expect local funding decisions on the availability of drugs and treatments to be made rationally following consideration of the available evidence.

**Mr. Bone:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what his estimate is of the number of children who have neuroblastoma. [305804]

**Ann Keen:** Information on the number of patients with neuroblastoma (prevalence) is not held centrally, nor has any estimate been made.

However, the following table shows the number of children and young people aged 19 and under diagnosed with an unspecified adrenal gland cancer, which could include neuroblastoma, during 2007. This is the latest year for which incidence data are available.

*Registrations of newly diagnosed cases of adrenal gland, unspecified cancer<sup>1</sup>, in persons aged 19 years and under by age group in England<sup>2</sup> during 2007<sup>3</sup>*

<i>Age of person diagnosed (years)</i>	<i>Number of cancers diagnosed</i>
Less than 1	7
1-4	19
5-9	5
10-14	0
15-19	4 <sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Adrenal gland, unspecified cancer (including neuroblastoma) is coded as C74.9 in the International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision (ICD-10).

<sup>2</sup> Based on boundaries as of 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Newly diagnosed cases registered in 2007.

<sup>4</sup> For young people aged 15-19, the reported incidence levels indicate less than three individuals. Due to this small cell count, the data have been suppressed to avoid the risk of disclosure.

*Source:*

Office for National Statistics

**Mr. Bone:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much the Government have allocated to research to find a cure for neuroblastoma. [305805]

**Gillian Merron:** The Department's National Institute for Health Research is undertaking translational research specifically concerned with neuroblastoma at two of its Biomedical Research Centres; and via its national cancer research network is currently supporting some nine studies into the condition. The Department has additionally invested over £1 million in experimental cancer medicine centres specifically to support early-phase clinical trials for children with cancer, including trials for children with neuroblastoma. It is not possible to disaggregate the cost of these research activities.

### Social Services

**Mr. Stephen O'Brien:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will publish the economic modelling used for the Shaping the Future of Care Together consultation. [305697]

**Phil Hope:** The Department is working towards publishing a White Paper on care and support in early 2010. They have been working with the Personal Social Services Research Unit (PSSRU) to provide the modelling and analysis to underpin our policy development. We were provided with an interim report from PSSRU in November but that report was based on a view of the system when the Green Paper was published. Our core modelling assumptions have changed quite significantly since then as a result of our stakeholder engagement, responses to our consultation and developments such as the Prime Minister's announcement on free personal care. The report is therefore only part of the story and we have come to the conclusion that to publish it now could be unhelpful to the wider debate on the future of care and support.

PSSRU continue to model the costs and benefits of a new National Care Service based on revised assumptions.

The whole methodology of the interim report was published in July on the PSSRU's website at:

[www.pssru.ac.uk/pdf/dp2644.pdf](http://www.pssru.ac.uk/pdf/dp2644.pdf)

The top level costs and benefits are in the impact assessment published with the Green Paper and available on the Big Care Debate website at:

<http://careandsupport.direct.gov.uk/greenpaper/the-green-paper-and-supporting-documents/>

**Mr. Stephen O'Brien:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent consideration he has given to raising the charges for lower levels of need in order to subsidise free personal care at the critical level. [305740]

**Phil Hope:** Setting charges for social care is a matter for local authorities. Free personal care will be funded by an additional £420 million from central Government and £250 million from local government efficiency savings.

**Mr. Stephen O'Brien:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health with reference to paragraph 5.14 of the impact assessment for the Personal Care at Home Bill; what assessment he has made of the likely effect on small businesses in the care sector if individuals and local authorities do not use money that would have been spent on personal care for other purchases. [305742]

**Phil Hope:** The impact assessment published alongside the current consultation document, "Personal Care at Home: a consultation on proposals for regulations and guidance", sets out the current considerations on the impact on small firms. Both documents have already been placed in the Library.

The consultation will close on 23 February 2010 and a response to the document will be published subsequently. We will also be undertaking direct stakeholder engagement alongside the consultation process and this will be considered as part of this.

**Mr. Stephen O'Brien:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health for what reasons the purposes set out for the Personal Care at Home Bill vary between page two of the impact assessment, paragraph 7.2 of the impact assessment and the human rights section of the relevant explanatory note. [305751]

**Phil Hope:** The different sections of text referred to are intended to detail differing aspects of the Personal Care at Home Bill. Therefore, differing explanations are required to appropriately define each section of the text. There are no inconsistencies between them.

**Mr. Stephen O'Brien:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health with reference to the impact assessment for the Personal Care at Home Bill, what recent assessment he has made of the risk of catastrophic costs being incurred. [305976]

**Phil Hope:** Paragraph 5.6 of the impact assessment recognises that the costs of meeting personal care needs will be greater for individuals in higher need and that, if these costs are incurred over an extended period of time, they may sum to a significant and in some cases catastrophic, amount.

It is this risk, which cannot be well insured against in the current market, that the Personal Care at Home Bill is seeking to reduce for individuals in highest need.

**Mr. Stephen O'Brien:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what discussions he had with Ministerial colleagues in respect of the formulation of his policy on the provision of free personal care at home. [305977]

**Phil Hope:** In formulating policy proposals as part of the Personal Care at Home Bill, there were appropriate ministerial level discussions and clearances.

**Mr. Evans:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what assessment his Department has made of the likely effect of future demographic changes on the provision of free personal care; and if he will make a statement; [306151]

(2) what models his Department has commissioned to assess the future provision of free personal care for those people with the highest needs; and if he will make a statement. [306154]

**Phil Hope:** I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien) on 7 December 2009, *Official Report*, column 166W.

**Mr. Evans:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent assessment his Department has made of the geographical distribution of the provision of free personal care; and if he will make a statement. [306152]

**Phil Hope:** I refer the hon. Member to the replies I gave to the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien) on 8 December 2009, *Official Report*, column 294W.

**Mr. Evans:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health how his Department defines eligibility in relation to the provision of free personal care; and if he will make a statement. [306153]

**Phil Hope:** Eligibility in relation to the provision of free personal care is set out in the consultation document, "Personal Care at Home: a consultation on proposals for regulations and guidance" and comments are invited. The consultation will close on 23 February 2010 and will inform the drafting of regulations which will define the scheme.

The consultation document has already been placed in the Library.

## ENERGY AND CLIMATE CHANGE

### Christmas

**David T.C. Davies:** To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change how many Christmas trees were purchased by his Department in each year since its establishment; what the cost was of those trees in each year; from where the trees were sourced; what account was taken of the sustainability of the sources of the trees; and by what process the trees were disposed of. [305644]

**Joan Ruddock:** The Department has purchased no Christmas trees.

### Climate Change

**Mr. Dai Davies:** To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change how many (a) Ministers and (b) officials from his Department attended the Copenhagen Climate Change Summit; what methods of transport each used to travel (a) to and (b) from the

Summit; and whether he has applied carbon offsets to carbon footprint of the collective travel of the UK delegation to the Summit. [305847]

**Joan Ruddock:** Two Ministers and 38 officials from the Department of Energy and Climate Change are in Copenhagen, or will be shortly arriving in Copenhagen, to attend the UNFCCC summit on Climate Change. Seven delegates travelled by rail, 28 by plane, and five have yet to determine their method of travel. All of DECC's travel emissions are offset.

#### Departmental Electronic Equipment

**Mr. Hands:** To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change how many plasma screen televisions his Department has purchased since its inception; and what the cost has been of purchasing and installing such screens. [306086]

**Joan Ruddock:** The Department has purchased no plasma screen televisions.

#### Departmental Official Hospitality

**Charles Hendry:** To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change what the cost was of his Department's 1st Anniversary Stakeholder Reception held on 12 October 2009. [303405]

**Joan Ruddock:** The cost of the 12 October 2009 DECC 1st anniversary party was £21,937.71 +VAT.

#### Departmental Publications

**Paul Flynn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change what steps he has taken to (a) inform interested parties of and (b) distribute his Department's publication *The arrangements for the management and disposal of waste from new nuclear power stations: a summary of evidence*; and how many copies of the document have been printed. [304416]

**Mr. Kidney:** The Planning Act 2008 requires the Government to consult the public and stakeholders on

the National Policy Statements (NPSs) before they can be designated. The waste assessment summary evidence paper is part of a suite of documents supporting the draft Nuclear NPS, which is currently subject to a wide ranging national consultation lasting 15 weeks. As part of this programme the Government have corresponded with statutory consultees, have set up a dedicated NPS website and are conducting national and local engagement events targeting key stakeholders and members of the public. These have been widely advertised through print, broadcast and online media, as well as by generating PR coverage and targeted communications including leaflets and an email campaign.

The waste assessment summary evidence paper has not been printed in large quantities. The document is available on the NPS consultation website for viewing or download, and DECC has so far printed over 100 copies from this source and made them available at local exhibition events.

#### Departmental Taxis

**Ian Stewart:** To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change what contracts his Department has with private hire taxi companies; and what expenditure his Department has incurred against each such contract in each year since his Department was established. [300842]

**Joan Ruddock:** The Department has no contracts with private hire taxi companies.

#### Industrial Diseases: Compensation

**Mr. Touhig:** To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change what hospitality officials in his Department and its predecessors with responsibility for the two miners' compensation schemes have received from Capita Group plc since 1997; and if he will make a statement. [302087]

**Mr. Kidney:** Capita became the Department's claims handling contractor in 2004. Information held by the Department on hospitality received since 2004 related to officials in the Coal Liability Unit (CLU) is provided in the following table:

*Hospitality received by officials responsible for the Coal Health Schemes*

<i>Date received</i>	<i>Section</i>	<i>Staff by grade</i>	<i>Hospitality received</i>	<i>Total value (£)</i>
October 2005	CLU	SCS plus staff below SCS (x 3)	Dinner	120.00
23 June 2006	CLU	SCS	Lunch	10.00
26 July 2006	CLU	SCS plus staff below SCS (x 1)	Dinner	45.00
August 2006	CLU	SCS	Dinner	25.00
29 March 2007	CLU	SCS	Lunch	10.00
18 September 2007	CLU	SCS plus staff below SCS (x 1)	Lunch and dinner	50.00
13 December 2007	CLU	Staff below SCS (x 3)	Lunch	90.00
30 July 2008	CLU	Staff below SCS (x 3)	Lunch	90.00
22 September 2008	CLU	Staff below SCS	Meal	20.00
22 July 2009	CLU	Staff below SCS	Dinner	25.00

**Mr. Touhig:** To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change whether Capita Group plc receives a financial benefit from reducing (a) the total money paid out and (b) the amount of money paid to individual claimants under each of the two miners' compensation schemes. [302089]

**Mr. Kidney:** I can confirm that there is no financial benefit to Capita in respect to (a) or (b) under the Department's contractual arrangements for claims handling for the vibration white finger and respiratory disease schemes.



**Mr. Dai Davies:** To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change what evaluation his Department has made of the effectiveness for claimants of the Coal Health Compensation Scheme. [304683]

**Mr. Kidney:** The Coal Health Compensation Schemes have been closely scrutinised by a range of reviews including the Boys Smith Review conducted in 2005 for the then Minister for Energy, my right hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, North (Malcolm Wicks); the Trade and Industry Select Committee Review in 2005; and the National Audit Office report in 2007 on the schemes and the subsequent Public Accounts Committee hearing in 2007 and Committee's Report in 2008.

I am proud that we are now moving towards the conclusion of these schemes under my ministerial 'watch'. We believe these are the biggest personal injury schemes in British legal history. They are complex schemes that were set up in agreement between the Department and the miners' solicitors' representatives following the original judgments in the 1990's and then endorsed by the High Court. This ensured that miners and their families received the level of compensation to which they might reasonably have been entitled had they pursued their claim in common law.

I believe that objective has been achieved as we now draw near to the completion of the vibration white finger (VWF) and respiratory disease schemes. In all almost 760,000 miners' claims have been processed and compensation now totalling £4.1 billion has been paid out.

The VWF litigation was wound up in the High Court on 1 May 2009 following the completion of processing nearly all the 170,000 claims. There are now fewer than 10 VWF general damages and 20 special damages scheme claims left to settle. There are also a small number of claims involving individual mediations or court actions to be concluded. For the respiratory scheme where we had nearly 590,000 claims there are now less than 2,000 active claims left to be settled and we are on track to achieving settlement of the majority of these by mid 2010.

However, it has not all been plain sailing. Clearly we have all learnt lessons from the operation of these schemes.

One of the key issues remains the conduct of solicitors in making deductions from compensation. I continue to hold regular meetings with the Legal Complaints Service (LCS) and Solicitors Regulatory Authority (SRA) and I know that this work remains an important focus for both organisations. I welcome recent developments both in terms of action taken against individual firms of solicitors and actions being taken by solicitors to offer repayment of deductions. I would urge firms that have not taken such actions to co-operate with the LCS.

I also recognise that despite the scale of these schemes it has taken too long for some claimants to receive the compensation they were entitled too. I apologise to those people who have had to wait so long. The key lesson here is about making sure information required to process claims is obtained at an early stage and the use of tight and binding timescales for all parties to manage the claims to be settlement. The successful fast track risk offer scheme has also demonstrated how claims can be settled more rapidly for some claimants.

In overall terms, I believe settling the claims has been a major achievement for this Government delivering over £4.1 billion in compensation to miners and their families. I would also like to pay tribute to those that have contributed to delivery of the schemes on behalf of the Department.

### Nuclear Power

**Mr. Dai Davies:** To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change what assessment he has made of the merits of including in his Department's report, Appraisal of sustainability of the draft national nuclear policy statement: main report, published on 9 November 2009, an appraisal relating to the uranium mined for the nuclear fuel used in new reactors. [305241]

**Mr. Kidney:** The Appraisal of Sustainability is intended to assess the environmental and sustainability impacts of the draft Nuclear National Policy Statement and therefore focuses on those impacts which arise from the draft Nuclear National Policy Statement itself. The draft Nuclear National Policy Statement provides guidance to the Infrastructure Planning Commission on the construction and operation of new nuclear power stations. It does not cover mining or milling of uranium.

The Government have previously considered the environmental impacts of uranium mining and milling as part of the 2007 consultation on nuclear power. The Government published their response in the Nuclear White Paper in January 2008. In the Nuclear White Paper, the Government set out that conventional uranium mining do not differ significantly from mining of other metalliferous ores or coal for other types of power stations. Furthermore, an increasing proportion of the world's uranium now comes from in-situ leaching. This is a process that does not require the ore to be mined and generates much less waste, though it can have a negative impact on the water table and is not suitable for all types of uranium deposits. There are established environmental constraints, such as the regulations governing uranium mining in Australia which cover, among other things, environmental protection and the requirement to meet environmental approvals before mining proceeds. Additionally, most uranium mining companies in Australia and Canada, which supply much of the world's uranium, have achieved certification from the International Organisation for Standardisation. This body sets the standard for, and undertakes audits of, environmental management systems. These environmental constraints minimise the environmental impacts of mining operations.

The consultation on my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State's proposed decisions on the regulatory justification of new nuclear power station designs, copies of which have been placed in the Library of the House and are available at:

[www.decc.gov.uk/en/content/cms/consultations/reg\\_just\\_cons/reg\\_just\\_cons.aspx](http://www.decc.gov.uk/en/content/cms/consultations/reg_just_cons/reg_just_cons.aspx)

also covers this issue. In the consultation, my right hon. Friend explains that he considers that he is not bound to take practices outside the UK into account in making a regulatory justification decision but he has none the less considered the issue in view of fact that various respondents to the previous consultation on the regulatory justification process had raised concerns about the issue.

### Renewable Energy: Heating

**Annette Brooke:** To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change when he will be consulting on the Renewable Heat Incentive. [306003]

**Mr. Kidney:** We aim to publish the consultation on the renewable heat incentive (RHI) in January 2010. We had previously intended to publish the consultation by the end of 2009, however, we now plan to publish in January.

### HOME DEPARTMENT

#### Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs

**Mike Wood:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if he will publish a Government response to future recommendations from the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs; [306009]

(2) what factors he takes into consideration when assessing recommendations from the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs; [306010]

(3) on what basis he rejected the recommendation of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs that cannabis should remain a class C drug. [306011]

**Mr. Alan Campbell:** As my right hon. Friend the former Home Secretary (Jacqui Smith) advised in her statement to the House on 7 May 2008, *Official Report*, column 705, the reclassification of cannabis as a Class B drug against the advice of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD) was based on a number of factors, including but not limited to scientific evidence. Reclassification on 26 January 2009 is a preventative measure to protect the public, particularly the future health of young people.

The Government's Reply to the Fifth Report from the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee Session 2005-06 HC 1031 Drug classification: making a hash of it? can be found at:

<http://www.official-documents.gov.uk/document/cm69/6941/6941.pdf>

sets out the factors, including the ACMD's recommendations, that are considered in relation to drug classification decisions.

The Government have published and will continue to publish responses to the recommendations in the reports of Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs.

#### Alcoholic Drinks: Crime

**Andrew Stunell:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what his most recent estimate is of the cost to his Department of crime caused by alcohol misuse in each region in the last five years. [305399]

**Mr. Alan Campbell:** The Home Office has estimated the cost of alcohol-related crime and disorder in England and Wales in 2007-08 as between £8-£13 billion per year. We are unable to break down this estimate by region.

#### Anabolic Steroids

**Mr. Don Foster:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people were (a) cautioned, (b) arrested, (c) charged and (d) convicted

of offences related to the (i) possession and (ii) supply of anabolic steroids in each year since 2005. [304097]

**Mr. Alan Campbell:** Information from the court proceedings database held by the Ministry of Justice, showing the number of defendants cautioned, proceeded against at magistrates courts and found guilty at all courts for offences relating to the possession and supply of anabolic steroids in England and Wales, 2005-07 (latest available) can be viewed in the following table.

The Ministry of Justice do not collect charging data; proceeded against information has been provided in lieu.

Data for 2008 are planned for publication on 28 January 2010.

The arrests collection held by the Home Office covers arrests for recorded crime (notifiable offences) only, broken down at a main offence group level, covering categories such as violence against the person and robbery. It is not possible to separate data on arrests related to the possession and supply of anabolic steroids from within these offence groups.

*Number of defendants cautioned, proceeded against at magistrates courts and found guilty at all courts for offences relating to the possession and supply of anabolic steroids<sup>1</sup>, England and Wales, 2005-07<sup>2, 3, 4, 5</sup>*

	Cautioned	Proceeded against	Found guilty
2005	28	16	15
2006	15	14	12
2007	24	22	14

<sup>1</sup> *Offence descriptions:*

i. Supplying or offering to supply (or being concerned in supplying or offering to supply) a controlled drug: Anabolic Steroids Statute: Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, section 4(3)

ii. Having possession of a controlled drug: Anabolic Steroids Statute: Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, section 5(2)

iii. Having possession of a controlled drug with intent to supply: Anabolic Steroids Statute: Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, section 5(3).

<sup>2</sup> The cautions statistics relate to persons for whom these offences were the principal offences for which they were dealt with. When a defendant has been cautioned for two or more offences at the same time, the principal offence is the more serious offence.

<sup>3</sup> From 1 June 2000, the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 came into force nationally and removed the use of cautions for persons under 18 and replaced them with reprimands and final warnings. These figures have been included in the totals.

<sup>4</sup> The court statistics relate to persons for whom these offences were the principal offences for which they were dealt with. When a defendant has been found guilty of two or more offences, the principal offence is the offence for which the heaviest penalty is imposed. Where the same disposal is imposed for two or more offences, the offence selected is the offence for which the statutory maximum penalty is the most severe.

<sup>5</sup> Every effort is made to ensure that the figures presented are accurate and complete. However, it is important to note that these data have been extracted from large administrative data systems generated by the courts and police forces. As a consequence, care should be taken to ensure data collection processes and their inevitable limitations are taken into account when those data are used.

*Source:*

Justice Statistics Analytical Services: Ministry of Justice.

#### Children: Abuse

**Margaret Moran:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proportion of his Department's budget was allocated to tackling child abuse and the viewing of images of child abuse online in each of the last five years. [304639]

**Mr. Alan Campbell:** The Government set up the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP) in 2006 to help protect children online. They have tackled both those who abuse children and those who are trading in images of such abuse. Since 2006 the Government have provided funding for the Centre as follows.

	<i>£ million</i>
2006-07	5.360
2007-08	5.657
2008-09	6.270
2009-10	6.353

In addition, chief constables have their normal policing budget which they are able to use on the priorities for their forces. Any decision on funding or staffing for child protection activity is a matter for the chief constables for their area.

**Margaret Moran:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what further work he plans to undertake on the relationship between viewing images of child abuse online and child abuse. [304719]

**Mr. Alan Campbell:** The Government's efforts on the relationship between viewing images of child abuse online and child abuse focus on the training courses provided by the Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP) Centre for child protection professionals. These courses are designed to do two things. Firstly, to help delegates better understand the nature of sexual offending and secondly to impart the skills and knowledge that can better equip professionals to deal with the difficult and distressing nature of this crime. Many of CEOP's training courses are based on material gathered during investigations, and case studies of sex offenders interviewed by CEOP's dedicated Behavioural Analysis Unit (BAU). The relationship between the use of images and contact offending is a key thread that runs through all of their project areas and something that is considered in all of the interviews that the BAU conduct with offenders.

### Crime and Disorder Act 1988

**James Brokenshire:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people have been convicted of an offence under section 9(7) of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 in each of the last five years. [301797]

**Mr. Alan Campbell:** Information is provided by the Ministry of Justice on how many people have been convicted of an offence under section 9(7) of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 in each of the last five years.

Information showing the number of persons proven at court to have breached a parenting order from 2003 to 2007 (latest available) can be viewed in the following table.

Data for 2008 are planned for publication on 28 January 2010.

The statistics relate to persons for whom these offences were the principal offence for which they were dealt with. When a defendant has been found guilty of two or more offences the principal offence is the offence for which the heaviest penalty is imposed. Where the same

disposal is imposed for two or more offences, the offence selected is the offence for which the statutory maximum penalty is the most severe.

*Number of defendants proven at court to have breached a parenting order, under Section 9(7) of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, from 2003 to 2007<sup>1</sup>*

	<i>Number of defendants</i>
2003	11
2004	20
2005	22
2006	25
2007	31

<sup>1</sup> Every effort is made to ensure that the figures presented are accurate and complete. However, it is important to note that these data have been extracted from large administrative data systems generated by the courts and police forces. As a consequence, care should be taken to ensure data collection processes and their inevitable limitations are taken into account when those data are used.

*Source:*

Justice Statistics Analytical Services—Ministry of Justice.

### Crimes of Violence: Females

**Mrs. May:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department with reference to his Department's Together we can end violence against women and girls strategy, from what budget the £5 million to be allocated to (a) independent domestic violence advocacy services, (b) sexual assault referral centres, (c) multi-agency risk assessment conferences and (d) local non-statutory support services for rape victims in 2010-11 will be drawn; whether the level of funding to other services funded from that budget will be changed as a consequence; and what plans his Department has for the level of such funding after 2010-11. [305312]

**Mr. Alan Campbell:** The Government's strategy: Together We Can End Violence Against Women and Girls committed the Government to a continuing investment of over £5 million in 2010-11 in independent domestic violence advisers (IDVAs) and the further roll-out of multi-agency risk assessment conferences (MARACs). This will be sourced from both Home Office and Ministry of Justice budgets. The Home Office budget has funded IDVAs and MARACs since 2008-09 and these have always been key initiatives.

Funding for Sexual Assault Referral Centres (SARCs) comes from the Department of Health and Home Office. Funding for local non-statutory support services for rape victims (Rape Crisis and Survivors Trust) from the Ministry of Justice Victim's Fund and from the Government Equalities Office.

Levels of funding to other services for violence against women and girls have not been affected as a result of these allocations which continue and expand on resources committed to the same priorities in 2009-10.

The strategy commits the Government to prioritising investment in these specialist services after 2010-11.

**Mrs. May:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department with reference to his Department's Together we can end violence against women and girls strategy, how much his Department plans to spend on (a) Connexions and other services working with schools to ensure they assist victims, (b) establishing a stalking and harassment helpline, (c) developing a sexual violence helpline and (d) meeting the Government's compact

with the voluntary sector by moving to three-year funding arrangements in (i) 2009-10, (ii) 2010-11 and (iii) each of the subsequent three years; and from what budgets such funding will be drawn. [305314]

**Mr. Alan Campbell:** The cross-Government strategy Together We Can End Violence Against Women and Girls was launched on 25 November 2009.

(a) The role of Connexions and other services working with schools in tackling Violence Against Women and Girls will be informed by the Early Interventions Consultation which the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) will be launching in December 2009.

(b) The Stalking and Harassment helpline will be run in partnership by the three main charities who work in this area: the Suzy Lamplugh Trust, Network for Surviving Stalking and Protection Against Stalking. The Home Office has awarded the partnership £47,470 for the 2009-10 financial year. This will cover initial set up of the helpline, staff and recruitment costs and the development of a multi-media website with personal safety advice and information. Funding for 2010-11 has been guaranteed by additional partnership funding.

(c) Plans for a new sexual violence helpline, including levels of investment, will be agreed in 2010 by a cross-departmental delivery board which will have oversight on delivery of all actions in the strategy.

(d) Officials across Government are working together to consider what more we can do to address the sustainability of the violence against women third sector. This will include looking at how the commissioning of voluntary services can be made Compact compliant.

#### Crimes of Violence: Knives

**Mr. Gerrard:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many offences of (a) wounding or grievous bodily harm, (b) assault with injury and (c) robbery there were involving a knife in each month since May 1997. [304304]

**Mr. Alan Campbell:** The Home Office has collected data on knife and sharp instrument offences since April 2007 via a special additional data collection, so it is not possible to give data back to May 1997.

Data are published annually. 2007-08 and 2008-09 data can be found in tables 7.11 and 7.12 of the Home Office Statistical Bulletin "Crime in England and Wales 2008/09" at the following link.

<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/crimeew0809.html>

#### Crimes of Violence: Retail Trade

**Miss McIntosh:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many (a) cautions, (b) penalty notices for disorder and (c) convictions resulted from incidents of violence against retail staff in (i) North Yorkshire, (ii) Lancashire, (iii) London and (iv) England in each of the last three years. [305305]

**Claire Ward:** I have been asked to reply.

Information held centrally by the Ministry of Justice on cautions and court proceedings does not identify the employment status of a victim of an offence other than where specified in the statute. Therefore outcomes of violence against retail staff cannot be separately identified from other offences of assault and violence against the person.

Penalty notices for disorder are not available for violent offences or when injury has been caused. They are only intended to be used for certain low level antisocial behaviour and public order offences.

#### Crimes of Violence: Taxis

**David Simpson:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many violent crimes were committed against taxi drivers in each region in each of the last two years. [305006]

**Mr. Alan Campbell:** Information is not available centrally on the number violent crimes committed against taxi drivers.

#### DNA: Databases

**Daniel Kawczynski:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) with reference to the written ministerial statement of 11 November 2009, *Official Report*, columns 25-28WS, on DNA and fingerprint retention, whether those stopped and searched under section 44 of the Terrorism Act 2000 will have their DNA retained; [301933]

(2) how many people stopped and searched under Section 44 of the Terrorism Act 2000 have a record on the National DNA Database. [304024]

**Mr. Hanson:** The stop and search powers under section 44 of the Terrorism Act 2000 do not include a power to take a DNA sample (or fingerprints) from a person.

However, if a person is arrested following a search under section 44, samples and fingerprints may be taken and will be retained. The relevant retention arrangements will then apply.

No figure is available in relation to the number of people initially stopped and searched under section 44, whose DNA has been retained because of a subsequent arrest. Profiles held on the national DNA database do not include the relevant legislation a person was arrested under, it only has the relevant police national computer (PNC) reference where this information would be held.

**Sarah Teather:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will bring forward proposals to amend the National DNA Database to take account of the recent ruling of the European Court of Human Rights; and if he will make a statement. [305171]

**Mr. Alan Campbell:** My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary set out the Government's proposals for implementing the judgment of the European Court of Human Rights in the case of S and Marper in a written ministerial statement on 11 November 2009, *Official Report*, column 25WS. Legislation to give effect to these proposals is set out in the Crime and Security Bill, introduced on 19 November 2009.

#### Domestic Violence

**Mr. Hoyle:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment has been made of the merits of systems to enable anonymous reporting of domestic abuse. [304222]

**Mr. Alan Campbell:** There has not been a Government assessment of systems to enable anonymous reporting of domestic abuse.

The Government expect all incidents of domestic violence to be taken seriously, however, they are reported. The implementation of specialist domestic violence courts and independent domestic violence advisers demonstrates that the Government are committed to ensuring that victims are supported throughout their engagement with the criminal and civil justice system.

**Paul Holmes:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate his Department has made of the cost of full implementation of all of proposals of his Department's "Together we can end violence against women and girls strategy." [305410]

**Mr. Alan Campbell:** The cross-Government strategy "Together We Can End Violence Against Women and Girls" was launched on 25 November 2009.

A comprehensive new burdens assessment will be published shortly.

### EU Law

**Gregory Barker:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what (a) statutory instruments and (b) other regulations his Department has brought forward to meet obligations arising from EU law in this parliament. [304178]

**Mr. Hanson:** Central records of statutory instruments made under specific powers have only been maintained by the Statutory Instruments Registrar since 2001. There are no central records maintained of "other regulations". Since that time the Home Office has made 33 statutory instruments to meet obligations arising from EU law, under powers contained in the European Communities Act 1972.

### Homophobia: Crime

**Ben Chapman:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps his Department is taking to reduce numbers of crimes of violence with a homophobic motive in the North West. [304221]

**Mr. Alan Campbell:** In September 2009 we launched the Cross-Government Hate Crime Action Plan which contains a number of action points designed to reduce numbers of crimes of violence across all five hate crime strands, including sexual orientation. In particular, it commits the Home Office to produce guidance for Crime and Disorder Partnerships on preventing and responding to hate incidents and hate crimes.

There is also a range of activity taking place in the North West to combat hate crime targeted at lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals. For example, bar owners and door staff in and around the gay quarter of Liverpool have recently received hate crime awareness-raising training. Further, Liverpool's Hate Crime Reduction Forum which brings stakeholders together from across Liverpool to address all strands of hate crime, funded the As One programme which was an educational awareness programme focused on youth centres in the Kensington area encompassing antisocial behaviour and diversity awareness.

### Independent Police Complaints Commission

**Mr. Amess:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if he will bring forward proposals to require the Independent Police Complaints Commission to inform his Department of the number of recommendations made by the Commission which have been (a) rejected and (b) implemented by the police force to which they are addressed; and if he will make a statement; [306101]

(2) how long on average police authorities have taken to make a response to recommendations of the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) in each of the last three years; what recent discussions he has had with (a) the IPCC and (b) police authorities on this issue; and if he will make a statement; [306102]

(3) if he will bring forward proposals to require individual police forces to (a) accept, (b) respond to and (c) implement in full recommendations made by the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC); and what (i) representations he has received from and (ii) discussions he has had with (A) police forces, (B) the IPCC and (C) members of the public on this issue in the last 12 months; [306103]

(4) if he will bring forward proposals to monitor the responses of police forces to the findings of the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) which affect them; what recent discussions he has had with the IPCC on this issue; and if he will make a statement. [306104]

**Mr. Hanson:** One of the functions of the police complaints system is to ensure that lessons are learned so that the service the public receives can be improved. The recommendations made by the IPCC are an important element in that improvement process.

The Public Accounts Committee's Fifteenth Report on the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC), published in March 2009, recommended that the Home Office clarify who is responsible for monitoring the implementation of IPCC recommendations made to police forces following an IPCC investigation.

The Home Office is considering with the IPCC, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary, Association of Police Authorities and the Association of Chief Police Officers the implementation of a suitable system for monitoring the implementation of IPCC recommendations, both at national and local level. We aim to have arrangements in place by spring 2010.

The specific information sought by the hon. Member is not collected by the Home Office.

### Mephedrone

**James Brokenshire:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent assessment he has made of the likely effects on health of the use of mephedrone as a recreational drug; what advice he has received from the Advisory Council for the Misuse of Drugs on mephedrone; and if he will make a statement. [302577]

**Mr. Alan Campbell:** Mephedrone (4-Methylmethcathinone) is a stimulant drug which is structurally related to cathinone and methcathinone, both of which are controlled substances

under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. The Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD) is currently considering the harms of Mephedrone and related cathinones compounds as a priority of its current review of so called 'legal highs', commissioned by the then Home Secretary earlier this year. The ACMD will report back early next year and their advice will inform our response to these substances. The Government's FRANK campaign provides information on Mephedrone with clear advice about its known harms provided by the Department of Health and our current 'legal highs' information campaign has included warnings about Mephedrone.

**Mr. Watson:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if he will bring forward proposals to prohibit the possession and supply of the recreational drug mephedrone; [306021]

(2) what recent meetings he has had with the Advisory Council for the Misuse of Drugs to discuss the recreational drug mephedrone; and if he will make a statement. [306022]

**Mr. Alan Campbell:** Mephedrone (4-Methylmethcathinone) is a stimulant drug which is structurally related to cathinone and methcathinone, both of which are controlled substances under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. I had not met the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD) specifically on this issue as they are already considering the harms of Mephedrone and related cathinones compounds as a priority of its current review of so called 'legal highs', commissioned by the then Home Secretary earlier this year. It is a statutory requirement that the ACMD are consulted before bringing an Order under the 1971 Act before Parliament. The ACMD will report back early next year and their advice will inform our consideration of the control of mephedrone under the 1971 Act.

**Joan Ryan:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what plans his Department has to classify mephedrone as a controlled substance under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971; and if he will make a statement; [306049]

(2) what assessment his Department has made of the harm associated with the use of mephedrone; and if he will make a statement. [306050]

**Mr. Alan Campbell:** Mephedrone (4-methylmethcathinone) is a stimulant drug which is structurally related to cathinone and methcathinone, both of which are controlled substances under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. The Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD), who we are required by statute to consult before bringing an order under the 1971 Act before Parliament, is currently considering the harms of mephedrone and related cathinones compounds as a priority of its current review of so called 'legal highs', commissioned by the then Home Secretary earlier this year. The ACMD will report back early next year and their advice will inform our consideration of the control of mephedrone under the 1971 Act. The Government's Frank campaign provides information on mephedrone with clear advice about its known harms provided by the Department of Health and our current 'legal highs' information campaign has included warnings about mephedrone.

## Offences Against Children: Internet

**Margaret Moran:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what mechanisms are in place for the sharing of information on online images of child abuse with the US authorities; and if he will make a statement. [304641]

**Mr. Alan Campbell:** The Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) is the reporting point for illegal images of child sexual abuse for the UK. When an image is reported, the IWF will notify the relevant INHOPE (the International Association of Internet Hotlines) Hotline in the country concerned, including in the United States, and will also inform the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP). CEOP work closely with the Virtual Global Taskforce, and with the law enforcement agencies of other countries, to tackle such sites, and to arrest those responsible for them. CEOP works closely with the National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) in the US.

## Passports

**Miss McIntosh:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department whether a person with a complaint about a defective passport is entitled to speak to a manager at a local passport office. [305200]

**Meg Hillier:** We are always concerned to hear of any problem that our customers have and we look to provide a resolution as quickly as possible.

Customers who wish to lodge a complaint about any aspect of the services that the Identity and Passport Service (IPS) provides may do so via telephone, e-mail, letter, fax or in person at one of the seven regional passport offices. All IPS customer facing staff are fully trained in handling complaints, however, if unable to do so or if a customer specifically asks to see a manager, the public counter manager will make themselves available.

**Miss McIntosh:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what mechanisms are in place to compensate those whose passport applications have been subject to (a) delays and (b) errors in processing. [305236]

**Meg Hillier:** In accordance with current Treasury and Cabinet Office guidance, which indicates that they do not consider it is appropriate to recompense for anything other than quantifiable loss and that payments for distress and inconvenience should only be made in exceptional circumstances. It is the Identity and Passport Service's (IPS) policy to reimburse the reasonable and actual out of pocket expenses incurred by customers as a direct consequence of operational errors or omissions by its staff by means of an ex-gratia payment. It is not our normal policy to pay compensation for distress or inconvenience arising from these errors.

**Miss McIntosh:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many passports issued in each of the last three years were replaced after being reported as damaged. [305239]

**Meg Hillier:** The recording of statistical data relating to faulty chips in passports began in January 2007 and, as at 31 October 2009, the Identity and Passport Service (IPS) has recorded a total of 389 passports returned by customers with suspected faulty chips. Records show that 14 of these were found not to be faulty and five chips had been damaged after dispatch by persons unknown.

### Police

**Mr. Amess:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent representations he has received on the reform of police authorities; and if he will make a statement. [305835]

**Mr. Hanson:** In the development of the White Paper: Protecting the Public: Supporting the Police to Succeed I sought views from all key policing stakeholders on the planned Government reforms of police authorities in England and Wales. I was also strongly influenced by the review carried out by my right hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Brightside (Mr. Blunkett).

### Police: Essex

**Mr. Amess:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the crime detection rate for Essex police force was in each year since 1996-97. [305832]

**Mr. Alan Campbell:** The information requested is given in the table.

It should be noted that non-sanction detections which contribute to the overall detection rates have fallen in recent years reflecting a significant shift by many police forces away from recording detections where no further action is taken. For this reason overall detection rates over time are not fully comparable.

The detection rate is a ratio of crime detected in a period to crimes recorded in a period. It is not based on tracking whether individual crimes recorded in a period have eventually been detected.

*Overall detection rate for offences recorded by the police in Essex*

<i>Period</i>	<i>Detection rate (percentage)</i>
1996	29
1997	27
1997-98	28
1998-99 <sup>1</sup>	29
1999-2000 <sup>2</sup>	30
2000-01 <sup>3</sup>	26
2001-02	26
2002-03 <sup>4</sup>	27
2003-04	28
2004-05	27
2005-06	31
2006-07	33
2007-08	32
2008-09	35

<sup>1</sup> The percentage of crimes detected in that financial year using the expanded coverage and revised counting rules which came into effect on 1 April 1998.

<sup>2</sup> New instructions which clarified the rules for detecting crime were introduced on 1 April 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Essex police force was affected by boundary changes in April 2000.

<sup>4</sup> The National Crime Recording Standard was introduced in 2002-03. Figures before and after that date are not directly comparable.

**Mr. Amess:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what discussions representatives of his Department have had with representatives of Essex Police Authority since May 2008; what issues were discussed; and if he will make a statement. [305833]

**Mr. Hanson:** Although the Home Office engages actively with all forces and authorities, especially in the development of the recent Policing White Paper, no central record is kept of discussions that have taken place between the Home Office and individual police authorities.

**Mr. Amess:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when representatives of his Department last visited Essex Police Authority area; what issues were discussed; and if he will make a statement. [305834]

**Mr. Hanson:** The Home Office does not keep central records of visits made by officials.

**Mr. Amess:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will request the Chief Constable of Essex Police to compile a report on the (a) number and (b) location of reported anti-Semitic incidents in Essex since December 2008; and if he will make a statement. [306094]

**Mr. Hanson:** This information is not held centrally, and we do not require police forces or authorities to hold statistics on these specific incidents. The statistics may be available directly from Essex police.

### Stop and Search: Children

**Mr. Holloway:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many children have been stopped and searched in each year since 2001; and how many of these procedures have taken place under Section 44 of the Terrorism Act 2000. [305355]

**Mr. Hanson** [*holding answer 8 December 2009*]: The information requested is not collected centrally.

Data on stop and search procedures reported to the Home Office do not include the age of persons searched.

### Stop and Search: Young People

**Tim Loughton:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many young people under the age of 18 have been stopped and searched in each police force area under Section 44 of the Terrorism Act 2000 in each year since 2000; and how many have subsequently been (a) arrested (i) under that Act and (ii) for another reason and (b) prosecuted (i) under that Act and (ii) for another reason, in each such area. [305998]

**Mr. Hanson:** The information requested is not collected centrally.

Data on stop and search procedures reported to the Home Office do not include the age of persons searched. Additionally, the data collected do not include the number of persons who were subsequently proceeded against at court.

## FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

### Afghanistan: Politics and Government

**Mr. Dai Davies:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent reports the Prime Minister has received on levels of corruption in the Afghanistan government. [304147]

**Mr. Ivan Lewis:** Corruption is endemic throughout society and state. Pervasive corruption within government and the security forces undermines the legitimacy of the government and corrodes consent. Nearly one fifth of the Afghan population believe corruption is the country's biggest problem (after insecurity, unemployment and poor economy) and Afghanistan ranks second to last on Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (before Somalia). President Karzai made a commitment to tackling corruption in his inauguration speech. We expect him to demonstrate this commitment by creating independent institutions that can prevent, detect and take action against corrupt practices in government. We will continue to offer a Multi-Agency Task Force of experts from across the Government to support the Afghan Government to tackle corruption.

**Mr. Keith Simpson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs pursuant to the Prime Minister's Statement of 30 November 2009, *Official Report*, columns 831-6, on Afghanistan and Pakistan, what steps have been agreed with the government of Afghanistan to ensure that all provinces and districts in Afghanistan have a governor appointed on merit, free from corruption and with clearly defined roles, skills and resources. [304878]

**Mr. Douglas Alexander:** I have been asked to reply.

President Karzai set out his commitments in his inauguration speech of 19 November 2009. We welcome the emphasis placed on the need for governors to have integrity and professionalism, and look forward to the announcement of appointments over the next nine months.

We also welcome the Afghan Government's intention to reform sub-national governance. The reforms proposed will address various issues, including the definition of roles and responsibilities and the provision of training and resources. Once the reform proposals are agreed, the UK and its international partners will work with the Afghan Government to ensure that there are clear, time-bound targets for delivery.

**Mr. Keith Simpson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs pursuant to the Prime Minister's Statement of 30 November 2009, *Official Report*, columns 831-36W, on Afghanistan and Pakistan, what criteria will be used to determine whether an appointee for provincial or district governorship in Afghanistan is free from corruption; what body will be charged with making that assessment; and what agreement has been made with the government of Afghanistan in respect of consultation on such appointments. [304930]

**Mr. Ivan Lewis:** In his inauguration speech of 19 November 2009, President Karzai made clear his commitment to political reform and tackling corruption, including the appointment of clean and competent Ministers and Governors. The Afghan-led framework which ensures appointments are corruption-free centres

on an asset registration process. This process is currently managed by the High Office of Oversight. UK support to the High Office of Oversight has thus far enabled it to register the assets of 50 per cent. of Cabinet Ministers and over 1,200 public officials. We have pressed the Afghan Government to establish strong and independent anti-corruption institutions that can report to the Afghan Parliament and public. The new institutions will have the responsibility to crack down on corruption cases.

**Mr. Keith Simpson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs pursuant to the Prime Minister's Statement of 30 November 2009, *Official Report*, columns 831-6W, on Afghanistan and Pakistan, what benchmarks the Government has set for the government of Afghanistan; what plans he has to review those benchmarks; and by what mechanisms progress against these benchmarks will be measured. [304931]

**Mr. Ivan Lewis:** My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister clearly laid out the benchmarks in his statement to the House on 30 November 2009. We regularly discuss progress and challenges with the Afghan Government and international partners and we will continue to do so regarding the benchmarks the Prime Minister has described.

Other benchmarks had been previously agreed between the international community and the Afghan Government in the 2006 London Compact and are kept under review by the Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board (JCMB), comprising of senior Afghan and international officials.

The London Conference will be a further opportunity to review progress against the Prime Minister's benchmarks and the areas of work President Karzai highlighted in his inauguration speech, as well as an opportunity to set out international support to help the new Afghan Government deliver.

**Mr. Keith Simpson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs pursuant to the Prime Minister's Statement of 30 November 2009, *Official Report*, columns 831-6, on Afghanistan and Pakistan, what mechanisms will be used to monitor the record of the Afghan government on corruption; how often reports on such monitoring work will be made; and what plans he has to inform Parliament of the outcomes of such monitoring work. [304932]

**Mr. Ivan Lewis:** We have pressed the Afghan Government to establish strong and independent anti-corruption institutions that can report to the Afghan Parliament and public. President Karzai committed to tackle corruption in his inauguration speech. We will follow closely the delivery of this commitment. Priorities should be an anti-corruption commission that reports annually to the Afghan public and Parliament, and an independent accountability board to oversee the commission with both Afghan and international membership.

**Mr. Keith Simpson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs pursuant to the Prime Minister's Statement of 30 November 2009, *Official Report*, columns 831-6, on Afghanistan and Pakistan, whether he plans to assess the merits of reviewing the mandate of the United Nations in Afghanistan as part of the Government's policy on stronger civilian leadership in Afghanistan; and if he will make a statement. [304934]



**Mr. Ivan Lewis:** The UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) plays an essential and central role in coordinating civilian efforts in Afghanistan. We would like to see this role further reinforced and developed. Last week, the US and UK, together with many of our international security assistance force (ISAF) partners, announced a substantial uplift in the number of troops to be deployed in Afghanistan. It is important that the increasing growth, pace and effectiveness of ISAF's military efforts in Afghanistan are matched by similar improvements in the civil effort. We are working with the Government of Afghanistan, key international institutions such as the UN and NATO, and our international partners to ensure that this becomes a reality.

**Mr. Keith Simpson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs pursuant to the Prime Minister's Statement of 30 November 2009, *Official Report*, columns 831-6, on Afghanistan and Pakistan, whether the benchmarks for Afghanistan to meet have been agreed with the (a) US administration and (b) government of Afghanistan. [304935]

**Mr. Ivan Lewis:** We are in close and regular contact with the Government of Afghanistan, US and our other international security assistance force allies about progress in Afghanistan, including how we best measure that progress and prioritise our collective effort. The London Conference on Afghanistan, set for 28 January 2010, offers a further opportunity to discuss progress and will be part of a sequence of events to help to reinvigorate delivery in the priority areas of security, development and governance.

**Mr. Keith Simpson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what objectives he has set for the 2010 London Conference on Afghanistan; and if he will make a statement. [304936]

**Mr. Ivan Lewis:** On 28 November 2009, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced that we would host an international conference on Afghanistan in London. The one-day event, to be held on 28 January 2010, will be opened by the Prime Minister and President Karzai and chaired by the Foreign Secretary.

The main focus of the conference will be to deliver and coordinate support for the ambitious agenda set out in President Karzai's inauguration speech: increasing Afghan leadership on security issues; improving governance and reducing corruption; reintegration and reconciliation; improving economic and social development; and building closer regional relationships.

#### **Afghanistan: Reconstruction**

**Daniel Kawczynski:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs with reference to the answer of 14 July 2009, *Official Report*, columns 327-30W, on departmental contracts, what services were provided by Crown Agents under its contract for life support services in Afghanistan; and if he will make a statement. [305470]

**Mr. Ivan Lewis:** Crown Agents has been contracted by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to provide life support to our embassy in Kabul since April 2008. The service includes the provision of catering, laundry services, cleaning and waste removal.

#### **Bangladesh**

**Anne Main:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with his Bangladeshi counterpart on the potential effect of sea level rises in the country. [305921]

**Mr. Ivan Lewis:** Environmental specialists studying the effects of climate change in Bangladesh believe that as many as 30 million Bangladeshis could be affected by a one metre rise in sea level. When my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary met Bangladesh Foreign Minister Dipu Moni at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Port of Spain on 28 November 2009, they discussed the importance to Bangladesh of a robust deal on climate change. This included calling for a fair, equitable and global deal at Copenhagen, particularly on adaptation and mitigation, and sufficient, predictable and additional international finance. We will continue to work closely with the Bangladesh Government and civil society to secure an equitable deal at Copenhagen this week.

#### **Bangladesh: Internally Displaced Persons**

**Anne Main:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what estimate his Department has made of the number of people in coastal zones of Bangladesh who may be displaced as a result of changes to the sea level in the next 10 years; and if he will make a statement. [305289]

**Mr. Ivan Lewis:** Environmental specialists studying the effects of climate change in Bangladesh believe that as many as 30 million Bangladeshis could be affected by a one metre rise in sea level; a likely scenario within the next 100 years. The Government consider this estimation credible. While a sea level rise of 10 cm over the next 10 years is unlikely to provoke large-scale migration from coastal areas, increased levels of salinity in fresh water will cause considerable health and agricultural problems. Adaptation to this new environment will be crucial.

The Government remain the largest bilateral donor to Bangladesh. We led in the formation of the Multi-donor Trust Fund, a substantial fund for climate change adaptation projects, to which we have assigned £75 million over five years.

We continue to work closely with the Bangladesh Government and civil society to secure an equitable deal at Copenhagen for Bangladesh, and suitable amounts of climate finance for large-scale adaptation to the effects of climate change.

#### **British Council: Stratagem**

**Mr. Hurd:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what payments the British Council has made to Stratagem in the last 12 months; for what purpose; and if he will place in the Library a copy of the contract under which such payments were made. [305163]

**Chris Bryant:** The British Council has made the following payments to Stratagem in the last 12 months:

To support the delivery of a conference in Northern Ireland in September/October 2008, which brought together 100 young North Americans and Europeans—£1,470. (This covers the VAT, paid for separately to the £6,950 cost of the contract.)

Annual e-mail subscription service, which provides political updates and analysis on local political developments in Northern Ireland—£813.75.

Facilitation of Living Together International Congress in Poland in March 2009, the British Council's project on intercultural dialogue in South East Europe and the UK—£1,032.54.

I will send under separate cover copies of the contracts for your information. At this time there are no plans to place copies of these contracts in the Library of the House. The e-mail subscription service is one of Stratagem's standard off-the-shelf products to which the British Council takes out a subscription and there is no separate contract.

#### British Overseas Territories: Cenotaph

**Mr. Hoyle:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations the Government has received from representatives of Overseas Territories on the laying of wreaths at the Cenotaph on their behalf. [304408]

**Chris Bryant:** We have received representations from some representatives of the overseas territories to lay wreaths at the Cenotaph on Remembrance Sunday. We have no plans at present to change the existing arrangements.

#### Departmental Publicity

**Mr. Philip Hammond:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how much his Department has spent on (a) Ministerial photoshoots and (b) production of videos in which Ministers appear in the last three years for which figures are available. [305517]

**Chris Bryant:** A Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) press officer is trained to take photographs so we do not need to employ external contractors for this work. The exception is that a photographer was hired in 2007, at a cost of £150 +VAT, to take shots of the new ministerial team. We are currently seeking to meet more of our video requirements in-house in order to save costs. The FCO had a public diplomacy contract with British Satellite News for 15 years which included filming some ministerial statements and engagements. This contract was terminated in September 2009 and it is not possible to disaggregate the cost of production of videos in which Ministers appear.

#### Departmental Recruitment

**Daniel Kawczynski:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many applicants for jobs in his Department have had their applications rejected on national security grounds in each year since 2001. [305473]

**Chris Bryant:** Since autumn 2008, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office has rejected six applicants for employment on national security grounds, as the applicants failed to secure developed vetting (DV) clearance. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office does not hold statistics for the period prior to this date.

#### EU Institutions: Fines

**Mr. Evans:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how much was levied in fines against the UK by EU institutions in the first six months of 2009. [306060]

**Chris Bryant:** The United Kingdom has never incurred a financial penalty for failure to comply with a European Court of Justice judgment under Article 228 (ex Article 171) of the Treaty Establishing the European Community.

#### Iran: Nuclear Power

**Mr. Lidington:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs whether he has made recent representations to his Malaysian counterpart on Malaysia's policy on Iran's nuclear programme; and if he will make a statement. [306143]

**Mr. Ivan Lewis:** My officials lobbied the Malaysian Government in advance of the recent International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Board of Governors meeting to make clear the importance of sending a strong signal to Iran. In the event, Malaysia cast its vote against a resolution censuring Iran for its nuclear programme on 27 November 2009. Since the vote, the Malaysian Government have made a public statement saying that their vote against the resolution was not in line with government procedures and that their Permanent Representative to the IAEA has been recalled to Kuala Lumpur for consultations. My officials have spoken to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and have sent a Note Verbale recording our disappointment with the vote, but welcoming the subsequent public statement.

#### Middle East: Armed Conflict

**Derek Wyatt:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations he has made to the Israeli government on its compliance with United Nations Security Council resolution (a) 478 of 1980, on Jerusalem and (b) 1860 of 2009, on Gaza. [304880]

**Mr. Ivan Lewis:** We fully agree with the provisions of UN Security Council Resolution 478, and do not recognise as valid under international law the Israeli "basic law" proclaiming a change in the character and status of Jerusalem. We have consistently made clear that we do not accept actions by Israel that seek to alter the status of Jerusalem and the Government's view that Israel does not have sovereignty over East Jerusalem, which remains occupied territory.

We have made frequent representations to the Israeli Government on the key aspects of UN Security Council Resolution 1860 including the need for the sustained and regular flow of goods and people through the Gaza crossings and renewed efforts towards achieving a comprehensive peace.

#### Middle East: Overseas Aid

**Derek Wyatt:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of damage during Operation Cast Lead to properties constructed with public funding provided (a) directly by the UK and (b) by the EU. [304908]

**Mr. Ivan Lewis:** We have not made such an assessment and there would be significant obstacles to doing so accurately. Much UK and EU funding is donated in the form of contributions towards projects carried out by the UN Relief and Works Agency and the Palestinian Authority. However over 100 schools, three hospitals and five health clinics need full reconstruction or major repair. We continue to press the Israeli Government to allow the materials required for reconstruction into Gaza.

#### **Moldova: Politics and Government**

**Mr. Watson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what his latest assessment is of the political situation in Moldova; and if he will make a statement. [306054]

**Chris Bryant:** On Monday 7 December 2009 the Moldovan Parliament failed for the second time to elect the President, when Marian Lupu (Chairman of the Democratic Party) failed to reach the minimum qualifying threshold following the opposition Communist party's boycott of the vote. This means that the Parliamentary Speaker Mihai Ghimpu (Chairman of the Liberal party) will remain Acting President.

Parliament will need to be dissolved. However, this can only occur once within a 12 month period. It was last dissolved in June 2009. As a result, dissolution will only be possible after mid-June 2010 causing elections to be held around October 2010.

With elections now firmly on the horizon, the Alliance will need to remain united in order to advance much needed economic and institutional reforms. When I met the Moldovan Deputy Foreign Minister, Natalia Gherman, in November 2009, I underlined the UK's continued support for Moldova's democratic and economic development and its European integration.

#### **Sri Lanka: Politics and Government**

**Susan Kramer:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps he is taking to encourage the government of Sri Lanka to (a) release all those in internment camps and (b) establish a political settlement which takes into account the needs of the Tamil people. [305048]

**Mr. Ivan Lewis:** My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary discussed both these issues with Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Bogollogama on 27 November 2009.

We take every available opportunity to urge the Sri Lankan Government to ensure the early and safe return to their home areas of all internally displaced persons (IDPs). In recent weeks there has been some progress on returns; unconfirmed UN figures of 7 December 2009 estimate that over 150,000 IDPs had been returned to their home areas. The announcement that IDPs would be granted freedom of movement as of 1 December 2009 is a positive step. Some IDPs have already left, and we believe the opening of the camps and granting real freedom of movement will enable the thousands still living in the camps to start to rebuild their lives. It is now imperative that humanitarian agencies are given full access to the IDPs so that they can provide them with the help they need both in the camps and in their places of return.

We have also regularly made clear our view that Sri Lanka has a unique opportunity—and duty—to work for genuine political reconciliation. We have urged the Government to resolve the underlying causes of the conflict through an inclusive political process which addresses the legitimate grievances and aspirations of all communities—Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims.

### **WOMEN AND EQUALITY**

#### **Christmas**

**David T.C. Davies:** To ask the Minister for Women and Equality how many Christmas trees were purchased by the Government Equalities Office in each year since its establishment; what the cost was of those trees in each year; from where the trees were sourced; what account was taken of the sustainability of the sources of the trees; and by what process the trees were disposed of. [305641]

**Michael Jabez Foster:** Since its creation on 12 October 2007, the Government Equalities Office has not purchased any Christmas trees.

#### **Dalits: Discrimination**

**Jeremy Corbyn:** To ask the Minister for Women and Equality what research the Government Equalities Office is undertaking on the level of discrimination by caste and descent against Dalit peoples resident in the UK. [305189]

**Michael Jabez Foster:** The Department is aware of the scoping study published last month by the Anti-Caste Discrimination Alliance and asked the Equality and Human Rights Commission to consider one of the study's recommendations for the Equality and Human Rights Commission to conduct further research.

#### **Departmental Operating Costs**

**Sammy Wilson:** To ask the Minister for Women and Equality for what reasons year-on-year the running costs of the Government Equalities Office have increased since its inception. [305398]

**Michael Jabez Foster:** The Government Equalities Office was established as a Government Department in October 2007. Staff and administration resources transferred from the Department for Communities and Local Government and the Department for Work and Pensions to form the GEO. These transfers were based upon the resources transferring and not the resources required for the establishment of a new Department with extra responsibilities.

The build up of staff and resources reflects:

(a) the cost of establishment of the Department (for example press and private offices, a correspondence team, finance and human resources teams) and

(b) extra resources allocated to the delivery of an Equality Bill and work on the Equality agenda including the Minister for Women's Priorities.

#### **Departmental Security**

**Mr. Heald:** To ask the Minister for Women and Equality how many security passes her Department has issued to contractors providing consultancy services in the last 12 months. [303958]

**Michael Jabez Foster:** Over the past 12 months the Government Equalities Office has not issued any security passes to consultants.

## TREASURY

### Agricultural Products: Israel

**Dr. Starkey:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many consignments of agricultural produce imported from Israel and checked by HM Revenue and Customs were identified as originating in Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories in the last 12 months; and how many of those consignments were originally represented as originating in Israel. [305255]

**Mr. Timms:** A total of six consignments have been identified as originating in an Israeli settlement. All of them were claiming Israeli preferential origin.

**Dr. Starkey:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many consignments of agricultural produce imported from Israel and Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories were checked by HM Revenue and Customs to verify their place of origin in the last 12 months; and how many of such consignments were of (a) avocados, (b) herbs, (c) dates, (d) peppers and (e) tahini or halva. [305256]

**Mr. Timms:** Since July 2008 HM Revenue and Customs has undertaken 49 physical examinations of fresh produce, including avocado pears, dates and herbs, imported under the EU-Israel Agreement. 10 examinations were undertaken in respect of avocados. No investigations were undertaken in respect of consignments of pepper and tahini or halva. Separate figures are not available for the number of examinations in respect of dates and herbs. Two labelling irregularities were identified for herbs.

### Child Tax Credit: Grandparents

**Mrs. Maria Miller:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what recent estimate he has made of the number of grandparents eligible to claim child tax credits for grandchildren in their care; and what proportion of this group receive such credits. [305319]

**Mr. Timms:** The information requested is not available as the survey used to estimate eligibility does not provide large enough sample sizes to accurately estimate the number of grandparents eligible to claim child tax credits for grandchildren in their care, and HMRC data does not record the nature of the relationship between the child and the child tax credit recipient where the claimant is not their parent.

### Child Trust Fund

**Mrs. Maria Miller:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much has been allocated to child trust funds in each year since 2003; and how much such funding he plans to allocate in each of the next two years. [305332]

**Sarah McCarthy-Fry:** Information in relation to the allocated costs of Government contributions to child trust fund accounts, including forecasted costs to 2012-13, is contained in table 9 of the 2009 Statistical Report which can be viewed on HM Revenue and Customs' website:

<http://www.hmrc.gov.uk/ctf/statistical-report-2009.pdf>

For years prior to 2007-08 the allocated costs were set at £240 million per full year.

### Cosmetics: Israel

**Dr. Starkey:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many consignments of cosmetics were imported from (a) Israel and (b) Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories in each of the last three years. [305257]

**Mr. Timms:** The term cosmetics covers a diverse range of products. Therefore the figures provided cover the most likely imports of interest—beauty and skin preparations, including skincare products and aftershave and bath preparations, deodorants and similar products.

<i>Israel</i>	<i>Consignments</i>
<i>Beauty and skin care preparations</i>	
2007	246
2008	260
2009	370
<i>Aftershave and bath preparations, deodorants and similar products</i>	
2007	41
2008	32
2009	47

Checks have not revealed any imports of the above products from Palestine. The Occupied Palestinian Territories do not have their own country of origin code. Consequently, importers can only declare Israel or Palestine as the country of origin on the Customs import declaration.

### Council Tax: Bexley

**Mr. Evennett:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the number of properties which have been revalued for council tax purposes in the London borough of Bexley in each of the last three years for which figures are available; and how many such revaluations resulted in a change of council tax banding. [304996]

**Ian Pearson:** In the last three years, the changes to council tax bands for Bexley, including increases and reductions, as a result of day-to-day work undertaken by the VOA in maintaining valuation lists, are as follows:  
*Number of properties in list as at 1 April 2006—93,778*

*Number of changes (including percentage) between 1 April 2006 and 31 March 2007*

	<i>Number/percentage</i>
Number deleted	119
Deleted as a percentage of total bands	0.13
Number increased	103

*Number of changes (including percentage) between 1 April 2006 and 31 March 2007*

	<i>Number/percentage</i>
Increased as a percentage of total bands	0.11
New dwellings	291
New as a percentage of total bands	0.31
Number decreased	148
Decreased as a percentage of total bands	0.16

*Number of properties in list as at 1 April 2007—93,950*

*Number of changes (including percentage) between 1 April 2007 and 31 March 2008*

	<i>Number/percentage</i>
Number deleted	77
Deleted as a percentage of total bands	0.08
Number increased	176
Increased as a percentage of total bands	0.19
New dwellings	404
New as a percentage of total bands	0.43
Number decreased	220
Decreased as a percentage of total bands	0.23

*Number of properties in list as at 1 April 2008—94,277*

*Number of changes (including percentage) between 1 April 2008 and 31 March 2009*

	<i>Number/percentage</i>
Number deleted	390
Deleted as a percentage of total bands	0.41
Number increased	54
Increased as a percentage of total bands	0.06
New dwellings	735
New as a percentage of total bands	0.78
Number decreased	178
Decreased as a percentage of total bands	0.19

### Departmental Security

**Mr. Heald:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many security passes his Department has issued to contractors providing consultancy services in the last 12 months. [303956]

**Sarah McCarthy-Fry:** Departmental systems record all such passes issued, but do not separately identify information in the format requested, which could therefore be provided only at disproportionate cost. All persons working in HM Treasury buildings are required to have a minimum level of security clearance before they are issued with a building security pass. This includes permanent passes, day passes and visitors' passes.

### Equitable Life Ex-gratia Payment Scheme Review

**Daniel Kawczynski:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what level of remuneration is being provided to Sir John Chadwick for undertaking work in order to provide advice on an ex-gratia payment scheme; and how much (a) time Sir John spent on such work and (b) he was paid (i) between 17 July 2009 and 18 August 2009 and (ii) since 1 November 2009. [301508]

**Sarah McCarthy-Fry:** Sir John Chadwick is paid at the rate of £250 per hour for the performance of his services, excluding VAT. This is substantially less than judges of Sir John's standing would charge commercially.

Sir John has been contracted to oversee and lead the work of his Office, to time scales broadly equivalent to two days a week. This is being kept under review.

### EU External Trade: Israel

**Dr. Starkey:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer whether Mitzpe Shalem is considered to be in Israel for the purposes of the EU-Israel Trade Agreement. [305264]

**Mr. Timms:** Mitzpe Shalem where Mitzpe is spelt with a letter 't' does not appear on the current list of Settlements locations which was transmitted by the European Commission to member states' customs authorities in September 2009. However, the settlement at Mizpe Shalem where Mizpe is spelt without a 't' is on the list.

### Excise Duties: Alcoholic Drinks

**Paul Rowen:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to amend the rate of alcohol duty consequent on the return of the rate of value added tax to 17.5 per cent.; and if he will make a statement. [301663]

**Sarah McCarthy-Fry:** The 2008 pre-Budget report announced that the increases made to alcohol duties will be maintained when the standard rate of VAT is returned to 17.5 per cent. in January 2010 to help fiscal consolidation. The 2009 pre-Budget confirmed this announcement.

### Imports

**Dr. Starkey:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what guidance HM Revenue and Customs has issued to ensure that goods or produce imported to the UK is designated according to place of production rather than location of company headquarters. [305174]

**Mr. Timms:** HM Revenue and Customs publishes guidance across a wide range of customs matters. This includes advising UK importers of the need to check that goods imported under the EU-Israel agreement actually originate in the state of Israel. The guidance includes Customs information papers which are published on the HMRC website.

### Imports: Israel

**Dr. Starkey:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer by what means HM Revenue and Customs ensures that the labelling of produce in mixed consignments of imports containing produce from both Israel and from Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories for the purposes of customs duties is consistent with that used for supermarket tracking systems. [305194]

**Mr. Timms:** HM Revenue and Customs undertakes the physical examination of goods imported under the EU-Israel Agreement at the time of importation to establish whether the place of production shown on packaging is the same as that in the accompanying proof of preferential origin. Such checks would only involve reference to a supermarket tracking system, where the supermarket concerned is shown as the importer on the Customs import declaration.

**Dr. Starkey:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer by what mechanism HM Revenue and Customs ensures that produce identified by supermarket tracking systems as originating in Israeli settlements on the occupied Palestinian territories does not benefit from the trade preference under the EU-Israel Trade Agreement. [305254]

**Mr. Timms:** When carrying out verification checks, HM Revenue and Customs only has access to the supporting documents, systems and records which relate directly to the import declaration. This may not include access to the supermarket tracking system as checks reveal that, in most cases, a supermarket is not the actual importer of the goods.

### Non-Domestic Rates: Valuation

**Mr. Hoyle:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what factors the Valuation Office Agency takes into account when making rating assessments for petrol filling stations; and if he will make a statement. [305980]

**Ian Pearson:** The Valuation Office Agency adopts the rental comparative method of valuation when valuing petrol filling stations for rating purposes. Valuations reflect the four main elements of a petrol filling station; the petrol sales forecourt, the forecourt shop, the car wash facilities and other sources of income from non-forecourt buildings such as workshops and showrooms and the like. The factors considered when making such a valuation include the fair maintainable throughputs and turnovers, which are derived from factors such as the location, layout of the site, and number of pumps.

### Royal Bank of Scotland

**Lorely Burt:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what steps he intends to take following the National Audit Office's conclusion that net lending to business by the Royal Bank of Scotland (RBS) will not meet the legally binding targets agreed between RBS and the Government in negotiating the Asset Protection Scheme. [306057]

**Sarah McCarthy-Fry:** The lending commitments are legally binding on the banks and include sanctions such as restricting access to the Credit Guarantee Scheme. If the banks fail to meet their commitments and cannot satisfactorily demonstrate that this is due to insufficient demand for lending, the Government will impose these sanctions.

### Welfare Tax Credits

**Miss McIntosh:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) how many cases were handled by the Tax Credit Office in each year since 1997; [305315]

(2) what percentage of cases handled by the HM Revenue and Customs were handled by the Tax Credit Office in each year since 1997. [305316]

**Mr. Timms:** The Tax Credit Office (TCO) was set up by the former Inland Revenue in October 1999.

Detailed information about the administration of tax credits for all years can be found in the Department's reports, trust statements and the Comptroller and Auditor General's standard reports which are all available on the HMRC website at:

[www.hmrc.gov.uk/about/reports.htm](http://www.hmrc.gov.uk/about/reports.htm)

Statistical information on tax credits can be found at:  
[www.hmrc.gov.uk/stats/personal-tax-credits/menu.htm](http://www.hmrc.gov.uk/stats/personal-tax-credits/menu.htm)

### Welfare Tax Credits: Complaints

**Miss McIntosh:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) how many complaints from members of the public the Tax Credit Office received in each year since 1997; [305317]

(2) what percentage of complaints received by HM Revenue and Customs concerned the Tax Credit Office in each year since 1997. [305318]

**Mr. Timms:** Information about the number of complaints handled by the different HMRC business areas, including tax credits, is broken down in the annexes of the departmental reports available at:

[www.hmrc.gov.uk/about/reports.htm](http://www.hmrc.gov.uk/about/reports.htm)

Complaints to the Tax Credit Office are about 40 per cent. lower in the current year than for the same period last year.

## COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

### Fire Prevention

**Mr. Sanders:** To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what representations on measures to improve fire safety his Department has received from coroners in each of the last three years. [304157]

**Mr. Malik:** The Department has received three representations on measures to improve fire safety from coroners in the last three years. These representations were made under Rule 43 of the Coroners Rules 1984 and as amended by the Coroners (Amendment) Rules 2008.

The representations received were from:

8 March 2007 Mr. E Thomas, Coroner for Hertfordshire, after the inquests into the death of Michael Miller; Jeffrey Wornham and Natalie Close

1 July 2009 Dr. E Carlyon, Coroner for Cornwall, after the inquests into the death of Joan Harper, Peter Harper and Monica Hughes

14 July 2009 Mr. C Dorries, Coroner for South Yorkshire, after the inquest into the death of Margaret Wilson

### Fire Services

**John McDonnell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what plans he has to transfer Fire and Rescue Service operational command and control arrangements to regional level in England. [305419]

**Mr. Malik:** The responsibility for operational command and control will remain, as is now, with local Fire and Rescue Services.

**John McDonnell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what duties are performed by fire brigade control rooms; and if he will make a statement. [305420]

**Mr. Malik:** The primary duties of the fire brigade control rooms are operations such as call handling and mobilising resources. They may also provide other duties but this is for individual Fire and Rescue Services to determine.

### Fire Services: Emergency Calls

**Greg Mulholland:** To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government how many (a) genuine and (b) bogus fire emergency calls have been received in Leeds North West in each year since 2006. [305770]

**Mr. Malik:** This information is held centrally only to Fire Authority level. The numbers of malicious false alarm calls and other emergency calls to West Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service are shown in the following table.

*Total emergency calls and malicious false alarms calls to West Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service 2006-07 to 2008-09*

	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09
Malicious false alarms calls	3,903	2,395	2,149
Other emergency calls	88,458	82,000	76,163
Total emergency calls	92,361	84,395	78,312

Source:

Data returns to Communities and Local Government

### Fire Services: Finance

**John McDonnell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what estimate he has made of the cost to date of the FiReControl project in the (a) South West, (b) South East, (c) East of England, (d) West Midlands, (e) East Midlands, (f) Yorkshire and the Humber, (g) North West and (h) North East regions. [303722]

**Mr. Malik:** Estimated costs to date of the FiReControl Project in each of the regions are set out in the following table:

Region	Total by region (£)
(a) South West	13,300,000
(b) South East	9,300,000
(c) East of England	6,400,000
(d) West Midlands	9,700,000
(e) East Midlands	11,600,000
(f) Yorkshire and the Humber	5,200,000
(g) North West	7,400,000
(h) North East	10,300,000
Total	73,200,000

This includes costs associated with the Regional Control Centre buildings up to end of November 2009. It also includes funding provided to Fire and Rescue Authorities and local authority controlled companies for local and regional implementation activity up to the end of financial year 2009-10.

**John McDonnell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what funding his Department has allocated for the purposes of meeting new burden costs associated with the implementation of regional fire control centres since 2002; and for what activities such funding has been allocated. [305401]

**Mr. Malik [holding answer 9 December 2009]:** We are committed to meeting all the upfront costs of implementing the regional control centre network. A total of £68,753,000 has been provided to fire and rescue authorities for implementation of regional control centres. This funding has been allocated in recognition of the costs of all local and regional implementation activities including project management and coordination, transition activities such as data capture and migration and preparation for new ways of working. This includes funding to cover regional control centre staffing and accommodation.

**John McDonnell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what the cost to the public purse was of the report by Mott McDonald on the (a) Future of Fire Service Control Rooms and Communications in England and Wales, April 2000 and (b) Future of Fire and Rescue Service Control Rooms in England and Wales 2003; what the cost, including value added tax has been of all consultants' fees in respect of the FiReControl project; what his most recent estimate is of his Department's total expenditure on such fees in respect of that project; and when he expects all contracts for consultancy services in respect of that project to have ended. [305402]

**Mr. Malik [holding answer 9 December 2009]:** The Department does not hold individual figures for the reports referred to at (a) and (b).

Estimated fees reflecting support provided in a range of specialist areas such as procurement, contract management, building services and system development, up to end of October 2009 is £43 million. Current estimates of remaining fees up to the end of 2012 are around £6.2 million. Specialist support is expected to be needed up to various different points in the project and some until the end of the project.

**John McDonnell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government how much has

been spent on bonuses paid to officials of his Department who have worked on the FireControl Project team in each of the last three years for which figures are available. [305403]

**Mr. Malik** [*holding answer 9 December 2009*]: Bonuses paid to officials who have worked on the FiReControl Project team in the last three years are

2006-07: £733.00

2007-08: £8,600.00

2008-09: £9,505.00.

These payments have been made in line with the department's pay and reward policy.

**John McDonnell**: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government how much funding his Department allocated to each fire authority in each region for the purposes of meeting (a) new burdens and (b) other costs in respect of the FiReControl Project in each year since 2002. [305404]

**Mr. Malik** [*holding answer 9 December 2009*]: All local and regional costs associated with the implementation of FiReControl are met under the New Burdens principle. No funding was provided prior to financial year 2005-06. The following table indicates funding provided to meet local costs:

	<i>Transition funding</i>				
	<i>FY05-06</i>	<i>FY06-07</i>	<i>FY07-08</i>	<i>FY08-09</i>	<i>FY09-10</i>
Avon Fire Authority	31,620	52,986	56,041	57,554	59,108
Bedfordshire and Luton Combined Fire Authority	11,616	76,984	111,904	137,973	115,000
Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Fire Authority	12,002	95,539	135,766	130,338	115,000
Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Fire Authority	11,170	80,367	118,157	183,330	115,000
Cheshire Fire Authority	15,230	93,692	177,393	179,326	117,599
Cleveland Fire Authority	32,153	189,710	272,038	205,473	115,000
Cornwall County Council	28,048	52,986	56,041	57,554	59,108
County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Authority	30,153	142,711	293,546	193,464	115,000
Cumbria County Council	12,998	85,964	128,299	208,472	131,599
Derbyshire Fire Authority	27,997	158,097	613,165	196,803	158,429
Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Authority	58,998	777,606	56,041	1,224,317	715,687
Dorset Fire Authority	29,611	52,986	56,041	57,554	59,108
East Sussex Fire Authority	11,555	92,743	143,631	145,257	120,836
Essex Fire Authority	15,411	92,743	116,762	298,542	232,824
Gloucestershire County Council	29,834	52,986	56,041	57,554	59,108
Greater London Authority (GLA)	64,654	234,150	659,062	876,173	1,551,497
Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Authority	25,498	118,093	283,346	299,339	204,279
Hampshire Fire and Rescue Authority	14,457	112,472	320,891	221,444	243,771
Hereford and Worcester Fire Authority	11,892	148,228	319,276	122,805	115,000
Hertfordshire County Council	11,839	82,413	117,039	183,228	137,428
Humberside Fire Authority	13,904	83,956	123,023	115,000	115,000
Isle of Wight County Council	8,653	87,620	123,409	115,000	115,000
Kent and Medway Towns Fire Authority	15,573	115,410	296,981	355,901	190,302
Lancashire Combined Fire Authority	19,025	99,611	224,957	254,841	153,871
Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland Combined Fire Authority	28,220	200,111	430,189	124,926	115,000
Lincolnshire County Council	26,657	148,069	525,606	204,480	129,681
Merseyside Fire and Rescue Authority	21,257	103,780	203,857	213,005	139,998
Norfolk County Council	12,063	80,402	114,579	132,616	129,578
North Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Authority	12,341	84,736	124,080	131,379	115,000
Northamptonshire County Council	26,211	144,838	269,850	151,421	119,225
Northumberland County Council	28,814	131,634	248,152	190,027	115,000
Nottinghamshire and City of Nottingham Fire Authority	27,550	159,421	525,224	182,492	121,750
Oxfordshire County Council	9,993	94,284	143,809	144,164	115,000
Royal Berkshire Fire Authority	12,448	97,139	157,405	117,262	115,000
Shropshire and Wrekin Fire Authority	11,000	137,554	269,128	143,216	115,000
South Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Authority	16,136	88,618	170,161	183,101	119,050
Stoke on Trent and Staffordshire Fire Authority	13,678	161,277	331,031	158,803	115,000
Suffolk County Council	11,616	79,425	115,043	213,955	134,503
Surrey County Council	11,555	104,085	143,551	133,302	116,407
Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Authority	33,948	160,944	388,365	240,983	133,871
Warwickshire County Council	10,553	138,902	256,054	142,717	115,000
West Midlands Fire and Rescue Authority	9,965	221,473	484,746	370,543	229,542
West Sussex County Council	12,002	98,583	165,744	153,802	128,443
West Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Authority	18,815	104,122	315,406	164,911	115,000
Wiltshire and Swindon Fire Authority	28,718	52,986	56,041	57,554	59,108



The following table indicates funding provided to meet regional costs:

<i>Regional funding (paid to a nominated lead authority)</i>					
	<i>FY05-06</i>	<i>FY06-07</i>	<i>FY07-08</i>	<i>FY08-09</i>	<i>FY09-10</i>
East Midlands	155,106	135,832	1,694,415	2,698,027	2,557,832
East of England	144,327	135,832	216,551	591,501	1,252,466
North East	152,271	135,832	921,379	2,739,983	2,474,220
North West	150,143	135,832	261,301	1,650,216	2,298,807
South East	154,394	135,832	216,551	1,308,297	1,278,760
South West	166,737	135,832	256,551	1,891,806	1,749,498
West Midlands	142,199	135,832	301,051	2,160,885	2,030,057
Yorkshire and Humberside	140,215	135,832	216,551	367,693	1,187,080

**John McDonnell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what (a) staffing, including civil servants, temporary and agency staff, (b) secondment and (c) travel costs his Department had incurred in respect of the national FiReControl project team on the latest date for which figures are available; and what his most recent estimate is of such costs on completion of the project. [305405]

**Mr. Malik** [holding answer 9 December 2009]: The FiReControl project latest figures and recent estimate of the cost of the completion of the project is:

	<i>£ million</i>		
	<i>Costs to November 2009</i>	<i>December 2009 to FY 2013</i>	<i>Total</i>
(a) Civil servant/agency/temporary	24.2	14.3	38.5
(b) Secondment	7	3.3	10.3
(c) Travel and subsistence	1.5	4.8	6.3
Total	32.7	22.4	55.1

#### Fire Services: Manpower

**Mr. Dismore:** To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government how many staff have been recruited to the regional fire control centre in (a) the South West, (b) the South East, (c) the East of England, (d) the East Midlands, (e) the West Midlands, (f) Yorkshire and the Humber, (g) the North West and (h) the North East. [303909]

**Mr. Malik:** The Department provides funding for each Local Authority Control Company (LACC) for three defined staff roles: Regional Control Centre Director (RCCD), Senior Operations Manager (SOM) and Service Support Manager (SSM). There are eight RCCDs in post, seven SOMs and seven SSMs (or their equivalents). The Department also provides funding for LACCs to procure professional advice and it is at the discretion of the LACCs how this is spent.

<i>Regional FiReControl Centre</i>	<i>RCCD</i>	<i>SOM</i>	<i>SSM</i>
East Midlands	Yes	Yes	Yes

<i>Regional FiReControl Centre</i>	<i>RCCD</i>	<i>SOM</i>	<i>SSM</i>
South West	Yes	Yes	Yes
North East	Yes	Yes	Yes
West Midlands	Yes	Yes	Yes
South East	Yes	Yes	Yes
Yorkshire and Humberside	Yes	Yes	Yes
North West	Yes	Yes	No
East of England	Yes	No	Yes

#### Fire Services: Operating Costs

**Mr. Drew:** To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what the cost has been of establishing and operating each regional fire control room to date; and what the estimated monthly cost of operating each regional fire control room is expected to be over the next 12 months. [305843]

**Mr. Malik:** I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave him on 31 March 2009, *Official Report*, columns 1040-41W, and the answer given to my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) today (PQ 305843).

#### Housing: Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty

**Mr. Steen:** To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government how many housing project developments have been approved in areas of outstanding natural beauty (a) in the first instance by local council planning authorities and (b) on appeal in each of the last three years; how many houses were involved in each project; and if he will make a statement. [306155]

**Mr. Ian Austin:** Information is not held centrally on local authority planning permissions for housing in areas of outstanding beauty. The Planning Inspectorate does hold information on appeals but details of whether or not they were in areas of outstanding natural beauty could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

#### Housing: Fire Prevention

**Jim Cousins:** To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government if he will review the fire safety provisions and regulations relating to (a) multi-storey hostel, (b) student and (c) key worker housing for the purpose of making further fire safety provisions; and if he will require the owners of such accommodation to conduct their own fire safety checks. [305565]

**Mr. Malik** [holding answer 9 December 2009]: The Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 came into effect in October 2006. In March 2009, my Department published an initial evaluation of the effectiveness of the order which indicated the legislation was bedding in well. We therefore have no plans, at present, to review it.

The Fire Safety Order places the responsibility for fire safety in all non-domestic premises, including hostels and halls of residence, in England and Wales, with a 'responsible person' for the premises—usually the employer, owner or occupier. It requires the responsible person for

the premises to carry out a fire safety risk assessment and to put in place appropriate fire safety measures to adequately protect lives in the event of a fire.

In other types of multi-occupied residential premises, including blocks of flats and houses in multiple occupation, the order applies to the common parts of the premises, rather than the individual domestic units themselves. In these premises, the 'responsible person' is likely to be the landlord.

#### Housing: Rural Areas

**Grant Shapps:** To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government how many homes in rural areas have been demolished in each year since 1997. [306013]

**Mr. Ian Austin:** The information requested is not held centrally.

#### Non-domestic Rates: Sports

**Hugh Robertson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government how many local authorities are planning to (a) remove and (b) reduce from 2009-10 levels the discretionary rate relief available to sports clubs in 2010-11. [305792]

**Barbara Follett:** Discretionary rate relief is solely a matter for the local authority. Communities and Local Government does not collect data on local authorities' plans with regard to rate relief.

#### Ordnance Survey

**Mr. Arbuthnot:** To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what discussions his Department has had with the independent mapping sector on the effect on that sector of its proposals for Ordnance Survey in drafting its consultation on Re-mapping the future for Ordnance Survey. [305126]

**Mr. Ian Austin:** In developing policy proposals for Ordnance Survey, officials in Shareholder Executive have had a number of meetings and conversations with individuals, companies and organisations from the private sector geographic information market. The purpose of these was to understand better the external environment in which Ordnance Survey operates. Independent consultants working for Shareholder Executive have also had similar meetings. The purpose of the forthcoming consultation is to hear further feedback on the policy proposals from all interested parties.

**Mr. Arbuthnot:** To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what account he takes in his formulation of policy on the mapping sector of the effect on the independent mapping sector of his Department's support for the activities of Ordnance Survey. [305127]

**Mr. Ian Austin:** The Government recognise that Ordnance Survey operates in a commercial marketplace and any change must be implemented carefully to reflect this. The purpose of the forthcoming consultation is to hear further feedback on the policy proposals from all interested parties, including the independent mapping sector.

#### Ordnance Survey: Public Relations

**Mr. Hurd:** To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what payments Ordnance Survey has made to Mandate Communications/AS Biss in the last 12 months; for what purposes; and if he will place in the Library a copy of each of the contracts under which such payments have been made. [302216]

**Mr. Ian Austin:** Mandate Communications provides Ordnance Survey with consultancy and advice on Corporate Communications and Public Affairs.

Payments made by Ordnance Survey to Mandate Communications for these services for the 12 months up to the 31 October 2009 total £ 53,900 inclusive of VAT.

I am unable to place a copy of Ordnance Survey's contract with Mandate Communications in the Library of the House due to its content being commercially confidential.

#### Right to Buy Scheme: Rural Areas

**Grant Shapps:** To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government how many right to buy sales there were in rural areas in each year since 1997; what the average discount available to buyers was; and what the average discount was as a percentage of the value of such property. [306012]

**John Healey:** The following table shows the number of local authority right to buy homes sold in rural areas, the average discount and market value of these sales, and the discount as a proportion of the average market value, in each year since 1997-98:

<i>Local authority right to buy sales in rural areas</i>				
	<i>Number</i>	<i>Average discount (£)</i>	<i>Average market value (£)</i>	<i>Discount as a percentage of value</i>
1997-98	12,820			
1998-99	11,420	21,000	43,000	49
1999-2000	15,250	22,000	47,000	47
2000-01	12,840	22,000	49,000	45
2001-02	12,450	22,000	50,000	43
2002-03	14,590	23,000	57,000	41
2003-04	13,950	23,000	60,000	37
2004-05	8,990	22,000	63,000	35
2005-06	5,190	24,000	77,000	32
2006-07	3,280	25,000	88,000	29
2007-08	2,000	26,000	98,000	27
2008-09	420	27,000	101,000	26

These figures reflect the sales of local authority properties through the right to buy scheme in the 178 local authorities defined as rural by the Defra rural definition (2004).

The figures are from quarterly P1B returns from local authorities to CLG. Number of sales and financial data from 2005-06 onwards include imputation for a small number of missing returns. Prior to this, the figures on average discounts, average market values, and discount as a percentage of market value in rural areas are based on the reported figures, and do not include imputation for missing returns. Financial details on right to buy sales are not available prior to 1998-99.

Right to buy and preserved right to buy sales can also be made by registered social landlords (RSLs). Data on RSL RTB sales are collected by the Tenant Services Authority (TSA), but these figures are not available by the spatial level required to provide estimates of RTB sales in rural areas. Typically LA sales make up around 80 per cent. of total RTB sales in England.

## CABINET OFFICE

### Cinemas: Closures

**Mr. Moss:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many cinemas have closed in (a) England and (b) North East Cambridgeshire since 1 January 2008. [303714]

**Angela E. Smith:** The information requested falls within the responsibility of the UK Statistics Authority. I have asked the authority to reply.

*Letter from Jil Matheson, dated December 2009:*

As National Statistician, I have been asked to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question concerning what estimate has been made of the number of cinemas which have closed in (a) England and (b) North East Cambridgeshire since 1 January 2008 (303714).

ONS does not have any statistics on the number of cinemas. Annual statistics on business births, deaths and survival are available from the ONS release on Business Demography at [www.statistics.gov.uk](http://www.statistics.gov.uk). The table below contains the latest statistics available on business deaths of cinema businesses for England and the constituency of North East Cambridgeshire. All counts are based on enterprises and not local units (i.e. sites). Where a local unit closes but the enterprise continues to trade at other sites, a death will not be recorded in this data.

#### Counts of deaths of enterprises for 2008

		England	North East Cambridgeshire
5914	Motion picture projection activities	25	0

### Death

**Mr. Crausby:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what the average age of mortality was (a) in 1996 and (b) on the latest date for which figures are available. [304530]

**Ms Butler:** The information requested falls within the responsibility of the UK Statistics Authority. I have asked the Authority to reply.

*Letter from Jil Matheson, dated December 2009:*

As National Statistician, I have been asked to reply to your recent question asking what the average age of mortality was (a) in 1996 and (b) at the latest date for which figures are available. (304530)

The average (mean) age at death in England and Wales was (a) 75 years in 1996 and (b) 77 years in 2008 (the latest year available).<sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Figures for England and Wales include deaths of non-residents.

<sup>2</sup> Figures are based on deaths registered in each calendar year.

### Departmental Energy

**Grant Shapps:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office (1) what the energy (a) rating and (b) band of each building occupied by her Department and its agency was in each of the last three years; [302939]

(2) what the (a) energy rating and (b) energy band of each building occupied by her Department and its agencies was in each year for which figures are available. [305969]

**Angela E. Smith:** OGC publish central Government Departments' Display Energy Certificate (DEC) operational ratings on a building by building level twice a year. The most recent data, published on 31 July 2009, contains DEC data up to and including 28 February. Data relating to the month ending 30 September will be published on 18 December. More information on this can be found on the appropriate website

[www.ogc.gov.uk/sustainability\\_programme\\_progress](http://www.ogc.gov.uk/sustainability_programme_progress)

The table OGC is publishing will also include DEC reference numbers for each building, which can be used to view each building's advisory report on the following website:

<https://www.ndepregister.com/home.html>

The answer is also included in the tables:

2007-08		
Building	Rating	Score
9 Whitehall	E	118
22 Whitehall	D	87
26 Whitehall	E	112
36 Whitehall	D	88
70 Whitehall	E	122
35 Great Smith Street	F	137
67 Tufton Street	E	120
Admiralty Arch	E	110
Admiralty House	E	110
Downing Street	D	76
Central Office of Information	G	206
Emergency Planning College (Main)	C	74
Emergency Planning College (Accommodation Block)	C	67

2008-09		
Building	Rating	Score
9 Whitehall	E	125
22 Whitehall	E	118
26 Whitehall	E	121
36 Whitehall	D	84
70 Whitehall	E	111
35 Great Smith Street	F	133
67 Tufton Street	G	190
Admiralty Arch	E	119
Admiralty House	F	135
Downing Street	E	101
Central Office of Information	G	223
Emergency Planning College (Main)	D	83
Emergency Planning College (Accommodation Block)	C	65

There are a number of factors that account for the increase in DEC ratings to the Cabinet Office buildings. The most significant factor being that currently many staff are working longer hours and at weekends. The increased intensity of use is not considered when evaluating DEC's.

The Cabinet Office central London estate has applied and been accepted for a grant of £681,000.00 from the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC) Low Carbon Technology Scheme to undertake a number of carbon saving initiatives.

### Drinking Water

**Miss McIntosh:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what the policy is of (a) her Department, (b) its agency and (c) its non-departmental public bodies on the provision of bottled water for official meetings. [305235]

**Angela E. Smith:** The policy for the Cabinet Office is to use tap water for official meetings.

### Employment Schemes

**Mrs. May:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office (1) how many people are participating in each Government-supported training scheme and employment programme classified as employment for the purpose of the monthly labour market statistics; [304383]

(2) what schemes are classified as Government-supported training and employment programmes for the purpose of the monthly labour market statistics. [304384]

**Angela E. Smith:** The information requested falls within the responsibility of the UK Statistics Authority. I have asked the authority to reply.

*Letter from Jil Matheson, dated December 2009:*

As National Statistician, I have been asked to reply to your Parliamentary Questions asking how many people are participating in each Government-supported training scheme and employment programme classified as employment for the purpose of the monthly labour market statistics and what schemes are classified as Government-supported training scheme and employment programmes for the purpose of the monthly labour market statistics. (304383, 304384)

The estimate of the total number of people in employment who are participating in Government-supported training schemes and employment programmes are derived from the Labour Force Survey (LFS).

The current Government Supported training schemes and employment programmes specifically identified by the LFS comprise: Work-based Learning for Young People (those aged 16-25 in Great Britain); Work-based Learning for Adults/Training for Work (Great Britain only); Job Skills and Worktrack (Northern Ireland only); and Entry to Employment.

Some variants of the New Deal: working for the Voluntary Sector or an Environmental Task Force; Basic Employment Training (BET) and Education and Training Opportunities (ETO) are also included.

Estimates of the numbers participating in each scheme and programme are considered too unreliable for practical purposes due to the small sample sizes involved and therefore cannot be provided. However, the latest total figure published in the monthly Labour Market Statistical Bulletin for the period July to September 2009 is 107,000.

### Food Strategy Task Force

**Lynne Featherstone:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what the names are of each member of her Department's Food Strategy Task Force group on (a) vision and strategy, (b) joint research strategy, (c) healthier food mark, (d) integrated consumer advice,

(e) global foods market and (f) food communications and campaigns; in which Government department or agency each group member works; and if she will make a statement. [304267]

**Angela E. Smith:** The Food Strategy Task Force was established by the Cabinet Office in July 2008, to oversee the delivery of activities identified in the Food Matters cross-Governmental strategy on food. It was comprised of civil servants from Cabinet Office, the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, the Department for Health, the Chief Scientific Advisor, the Department for International Development, the Treasury, the Food Standards Agency, the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform, the Department for Energy and Climate Change, and the Devolved Administrations. Progress of this work was set out in the "Food Matters One Year On" report which was published in August 2009. Copies have been placed in the Libraries of the House. Following completion of most of the agreed actions, the Food Strategy Task Force was wound up and responsibility for ongoing cross-Governmental co-ordination of food policy was transferred to the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

Some of the sub-committees established to support the Food Strategy Task Force continue to meet, where their work is not yet concluded. They have a wide-ranging membership from across Whitehall and outside. The exact officials who attend each meeting are not necessarily constant; rather Departments and organisations are represented by the official they feel most appropriate. Departments and organisations represented across these groups include those listed, representatives from local administrations and services and representatives from various research councils, among others.

### Lone Parents: Employment

**Andrew Stunell:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many lone parents were in work in (a) 1998 and (b) 2005; and how many lone parents were in work in each local authority area in the North West on the most recent date for which figures are available. [304677]

**Ms Butler:** The information requested falls within the responsibility of the UK Statistics Authority. I have asked the authority to reply.

*Letter from Jil Matheson, dated December 2009:*

As National Statistician, I have been asked to reply to your Parliamentary Question on how many lone parents were in work in (a) 1998 and (b) 2005; and how many lone parents were in work in each local authority area in the North West on the most recent date for which figures are available. (304677)

The information requested is given in the tables attached. The figures in table 1 are the number of lone parents in employment in the UK. These estimates come from the Labour Force Survey (LFS) household datasets and are available for the three month period ending in June of each year requested.

Information at local authority level comes from the Annual Population Survey (APS) household datasets. Table 2 shows the number of lone parents and confidence intervals for each local authority within the North West for January to December 2008.

As with any sample survey, estimates from the LFS and APS are subject to a margin of uncertainty as different samples give different results. The confidence intervals provided in table 2 give

an indication as to the accuracy of the estimates, and how much they could vary if taken from a different sample. These estimates are such that there is 95 per cent certainty that from all samples possible they will lie within the lower and upper bounds.

Table 1: Number of working-age<sup>1</sup> lone parents with dependent children<sup>2</sup> in employment, April to June 1998 and 2005, United Kingdom

April to June each year	Level (thousand)
1998	778
2005	1,023

<sup>1</sup> Men aged 16-64 and women aged 16-59.

<sup>2</sup> Children under 16 and those aged 16-18 who have never married and are in full-time education.

Source:

LFS household datasets

Table 2: Number of working-age<sup>1</sup> lone parents with dependent children<sup>2</sup> in employment with 95% confidence intervals<sup>3</sup> by each local authority in the North West region, January to December 2008

	Level	Lower CI	Thousand Upper CI
United Kingdom	1,070	1,030	1,111
North West	129	119	139
Bolton	5	3	6
Bury	4	3	5
Manchester	9	7	12
Oldham	5	3	6
Rochdale	4	2	5
Salford	5	4	6
Stockport	6	4	8
Tameside	5	4	6
Trafford	5	3	6
Wigan	5	3	7
Knowsley	5	4	6
Liverpool	9	6	12
St. Helens	3	2	4
Sefton	6	4	8
Wirral	6	4	8
Halton	3	2	3
Warrington	4	3	5
Blackburn with Darwen	3	2	3
Blackpool	4	3	4
Chester	3	1	4
Congleton	4	4	4
Crewe and Nantwich	1	0	2
Ellesmere Port and Neston	2	0	3
Macclesfield	3	1	5
Vale Royal	2	0	3
Allerdale	2	1	3
Barrow-in-Furness	4	4	4

Table 2: Number of working-age<sup>1</sup> lone parents with dependent children<sup>2</sup> in employment with 95% confidence intervals<sup>3</sup> by each local authority in the North West region, January to December 2008

	Level	Lower CI	Thousand Upper CI
Carlisle	3	1	4
Copeland	4	4	4
Eden	4	4	4
South Lakeland	1	0	2
Burnley	1	0	3
Chorley	1	0	2
Fylde	1	0	3
Hyndburn	4	4	4
Lancaster	2	0	3
Pendle	1	0	2
Preston	2	1	4
Ribble Valley	2	0	3
Rossendale	4	4	4
South Ribble	3	1	5
West Lancashire	1	0	3
Wyre	2	1	4

<sup>1</sup> Men aged 16-64 and women aged 16-59.

<sup>2</sup> Children under 16 and those aged 16-18 who have never married and are in full-time education.

<sup>3</sup> 95 per cent. certainty that the true estimate would lie within the lower and upper bounds.

<sup>4</sup> Sample size too small to provide an estimate.

Source:

APS household datasets

### Retail Trade: Closures

**Mr. Moss:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many high street shops have closed in (a) England and (b) North East Cambridgeshire since 1 January 2008. [303715]

**Angela E. Smith:** The information requested falls within the responsibility of the UK Statistics Authority. I have asked the authority to reply.

*Letter from Jil Matheson, dated December 2009:*

As National Statistician, I have been asked to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question concerning what estimate has been made of the number of high street shops which have closed in (a) England and (b) North East Cambridgeshire since 1 January 2008 (303715).

ONS does not have statistics on the number of high street shops. Annual statistics on business births, deaths and survival are available from the ONS release on Business Demography at [www.statistics.gov.uk](http://www.statistics.gov.uk). The table below contains the latest statistics available on business deaths of retail businesses for England and the constituency of North East Cambridgeshire. All counts are based on enterprises and not local units (i.e. sites). Where a local unit closes but the enterprise continues to trade at other sites, a death will not be recorded in this data.

Count of deaths of enterprises for 2008—Retail by England and North East Cambridgeshire constituency

	England	North East Cambridgeshire
Retail	20,765	40
471 Retail sale in non-specialised stores	4,050	10
472 Retail sale of food; beverages and tobacco in specialised stores	3,190	5
473 Retail sale of automotive fuel in specialised stores	425	0
474 Retail sale of information and communication equipment in specialised stores	570	0
475 Retail sale of other household equipment in specialised stores	2,430	5

*Count of deaths of enterprises for 2008—Retail by England and North East Cambridgeshire constituency*

		England	North East Cambridgeshire
476	Retail sale of cultural and recreation goods in specialised stores	990	0
477	Retail sale of other goods in specialised stores	6,680	15
478	Retail sale via stalls and markets	250	0
479	Retail trade not in stores; stalls or markets	2,180	5

### Third Sector: Finance

**Tom Levitt:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how much the Office of the Third Sector originally allocated in its budget to provide grants and funding for the voluntary and community sector for the 2009-10 financial year; how much of this has so far been allocated; and how much remains for the rest of the financial year. [301962]

**Angela E. Smith:** The Office of the Third Sector (OTS) grant allocations for 2009-10 are set out in the Cabinet Office Main Estimates and updated in the Winter Supplementary and Spring Supplementary Estimates. Expenditure on grants for the third sector will be set out in the Cabinet Office Annual Report and Accounts, expected to be published before the summer recess.

All OTS funds are allocated to programmes set out in 'The future role of the third sector in social and economic regeneration: final report' and for 2009-10 only in, 'Real Help for Communities: Volunteers, Charities and Social Enterprises'.

### Unemployment: Graduates

**Mr. Willetts:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many and what proportion of graduates were unemployed six months after obtaining their degree in each year since 1997. [304164]

**Angela E. Smith:** The information requested falls within the responsibility of the UK Statistics Authority. I have asked the authority to reply.

*Letter from Jil Matheson, dated December 2009:*

As National Statistician, I have been asked to reply to your Parliamentary Question asking how many and what proportion of graduates were unemployed six months after obtaining their degree in each year since 1997. (304164)

Estimates for unemployment are derived from the Labour Force Survey (LFS). The economic status of graduates six months after obtaining their degree is not recorded in the LFS. However, estimates for unemployed graduates who have gained a degree in the last twelve months are available on an annual basis from quarter 2 2005.

The information provided in the attached table shows the unemployment level of those who gained a degree in the last twelve months, the proportion who are unemployed and their unemployment rate. The unemployment rate is the number of graduates who are unemployed divided by the number of graduates who are economically active (in employment or unemployed), in accordance with the International Labour Organization (ILO) convention.

As with any sample survey, estimates from the LFS are subject to a margin of uncertainty.

The figures in the table are derived from the LFS microdata which are weighted using the official population estimates published in autumn 2007. Consequently the estimates from Q3 2006 are

not entirely consistent with the figures published in the monthly Labour Market Statistics First Release, which are weighted using more up-to-date population estimates.

*Unemployment level, rate and proportion of people who had gained a degree or equivalent in the previous 12 months, Quarter 2 each year, 2005-09, United Kingdom, not seasonally adjusted*

	Level <sup>1</sup>	Thousand and per cent.	
		Rate	Proportion <sup>2</sup>
2005	23,752	5.8	4.8
2006	42,207	8.6	7.4
2007	33,097	6.3	5.5
2008	38,615	7.1	6.1
2009	***65,360	11.4	9.4

<sup>1</sup> Coefficients of Variation have been calculated for the latest period as an indication of the quality of the estimates, as described below:

*Guide to Quality:*

The Coefficient of Variation (CV) indicates the quality of an estimate, the smaller the CV value the higher the quality. The true value is likely to lie within +/- twice the CV—for example, for an estimate of 200 with a CV of 5 per cent. we would expect the population total to be within the range 180-220

*Key Coefficient of Variation (CV) (%) Statistical Robustness*

\* 0 ≤ CV < 5 Estimates are considered precise

\*\* 5 ≤ CV < 10 Estimates are considered reasonably precise

\*\*\* 10 ≤ CV < 20 Estimates are considered acceptable

\*\*\*\* CV ≥ 20 Estimates are considered too unreliable for practical purposes

<sup>2</sup> The number of people who are unemployed divided by the total population.

*Notes:*

1. The number of people who are unemployed divided by the number of people who are economically active.

2. It should be noted that the above estimates exclude people in most types of communal establishment (e.g. hotels, boarding houses, hostels mobile home sites, etc.).

*Source:*

Labour Force Survey

### Unemployment: Young People

**Damian Green:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what the (a) numerical and (b) percentage change in youth unemployment in Ashford constituency was in the most recent 12 months for which figures are available. [304922]

**Ms Butler:** The information requested falls within the responsibility of the UK Statistics Authority. I have asked the authority to reply.

*Letter from Jil Matheson, dated December 2009:*

As National Statistician, I have been asked to reply to your Parliamentary Question asking what the (a) numerical and (b) percentage change in youth unemployment in Ashford Constituency was in the most recent 12 months for which figures are available (304922).

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) compiles unemployment statistics for local areas from the Annual Population Survey following International Labour Organisation (ILO) definitions. However, estimates of unemployment for the requested age range and area are not available.

As an alternative, in Table 1 we have provided the numerical change and the percentage change in the number of persons aged

18 to 24 claiming Jobseeker's Allowance in the Ashford constituency, for the most recent 12 month period for which figures are available.

National and local area estimates for many labour market statistics, including employment, unemployment and claimant count are available on the NOMIS website at:

<http://www.nomisweb.co.uk>

*Table 1. Change and percentage change in the number of persons aged 18-24 claiming jobseeker's allowance resident in Ashford parliamentary constituency between October 2008 and October 2009*

<i>October each year</i>	<i>Number/percentage</i>
2008	300
2009	625
Change	325
Percentage change	108

*Note:*

Count data rounded to the nearest 5.

*Source:*

Jobcentre Plus Administrative System.

## BUSINESS, INNOVATION AND SKILLS

### Apprentices: Finance

**Mr. Benyon:** To ask the Minister of State, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills if he will issue a letter of intent to repay capped funds withheld by the Learning and Skills Council to the training providers of apprenticeships for those aged 19 years or more. [304263]

**Kevin Brennan:** We have no plans to issue any such letters. Funding of Apprenticeships is the responsibility of the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). The LSC contracts with FE colleges and training organisations to deliver training places funded up to a maximum contract value. In March 2009, providers were advised in writing by the LSC not to exceed or to further exceed Apprenticeship contract values for adults. Recruitment of new apprentices could continue up to maximum contract values and the LSC has committed to funding the training of apprentices who had already started on their programme.

The LSC has a clear responsibility to manage its finances within agreed budgets and made it clear to providers that any further commitments above their agreed maximum contract values would not be funded. However the LSC has sought to ensure, through performance management actions, that funding is moved to the highest performing providers. Where possible, for 19-24 provision this has resulted in increases to agreed contract levels, but as demand has been so high for those aged over 25 the LSC has had to continue to take actions to manage demand to remain within the overall funding limits it has available.

### Business: Closures

**Mr. Moss:** To ask the Minister of State, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills how many small and medium-sized businesses have closed in (a) England and (b) North East Cambridgeshire since 1 January 2008. [304578]

**Angela E. Smith:** I have been asked to reply.

The information requested falls within the responsibility of the UK Statistics Authority. I have asked the authority to reply.

*Letter from Jil Matheson, dated December 2009:*

As National Statistician, I have been asked to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question concerning how many small and medium-sized businesses have closed in (a) England and (b) North East Cambridgeshire since 1 January 2008. (304578)

Annual statistics on business births, deaths and survival are available from the ONS release on Business Demography at [www.statistics.gov.uk](http://www.statistics.gov.uk). The table below contains the latest statistics available on business deaths for England and the constituency of North East Cambridgeshire.

	<i>Counts of deaths of enterprises in 2008 by employment size band</i>	
	<i>0-49</i>	<i>50-249</i>
England	192,465	445
North East Cambridgeshire (parliamentary constituency)	375	0

**Mr. Moss:** To ask the Minister of State, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills how many restaurants and cafés have closed in (a) England and (b) North East Cambridgeshire since 1 January 2008. [304579]

**Angela E. Smith:** I have been asked to reply.

The information requested falls within the responsibility of the UK Statistics Authority. I have asked the authority to reply.

*Letter from Jil Matheson, dated December 2009:*

As National Statistician, I have been asked to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question concerning how many restaurants and cafes have closed in (a) England and (b) North East Cambridgeshire since 1 January 2008. (304579)

Annual statistics on business births, deaths and survival are available from the ONS release on Business Demography at [www.statistics.gov.uk](http://www.statistics.gov.uk). The table below contains the latest statistics available on business deaths for England and the constituency of North East Cambridgeshire. All counts are based on enterprises and not local units (i.e. sites). Where a local unit closes but the enterprise continues to trade at other sites, a death will not be recorded in this data.

<i>England</i>	<i>Counts of deaths of enterprises for 2008</i>	
	<i>Restaurants and cafes by England and North East Cambridgeshire constituency</i>	
	<i>North East Cambridgeshire</i>	
4,985	5	

*Note:*

To avoid disclosure figures are rounded to the nearest 5.

### Christmas

**Mr. Vaizey:** To ask the Minister of State, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills how much his Department has budgeted for Christmas trees in 2009. [305720]

**Mr. McFadden:** This Department has spent £1,144 in 2009 on the purchase and installation of decorated Christmas trees for the reception areas in three of its buildings in central London and Sheffield.

### Cybercrime

**Mark Pritchard:** To ask the Minister of State, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills if he will take steps to require utility companies which

operate within his Department's remit to put in place resilience measures sufficient to prevent cyber-attacks rendering their services temporarily ineffective. [303801]

**Ian Lucas:** BIS leads on policy for critical infrastructure in the communications sector, which encompasses the postal and telecommunications sectors.

BIS maintains close working links with the telecoms sector on resilience, primarily through the EC-RRG (Electronic Communications Resilience and Response Group) which is industry-led but with Government and regulator representation. The aim of this group is to enhance the resilience of UK telecommunications systems to all types of hazard or threat, including cyber attacks. Part of the work of this group is to carry out exercises responding to emergencies, in order to ensure any recovery can take place as soon as possible. Additionally, CPNI (the Centre for the Protection of National Infrastructure) facilitates the Network Security Information Exchange, a forum for telecoms industry providers to share information and good practice specific to digital security.

The Digital Economy Bill also proposes measures to enhance investment in telecoms infrastructure and overall resilience (as part of a report on the overall health of the telecoms system in the UK). These measures will involve sharing information on resilience matters with Ofcom, who will then provide a report to the Secretary of State on the ability of the UK telecoms system to withstand shocks.

BIS also works closely with Royal Mail on resilience issues and ensures that the company liaises with the appropriate Government agencies (including CPNI) for advice on proportionate measures to protect postal operations from threats and hazards, including risks associated with cyber attacks, and to maintain business continuity.

### Departmental Assets

**Dr. Cable:** To ask the Minister of State, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills what assets of his Department are planned to be sold in each year from 2009-10 to 2013-14; what the (a) description and (b) book value of each such asset is; what the expected revenue from each such sale is; and if he will make a statement. [300194]

**Mr. McFadden:** The Government have stated their intention to realise £16 billion in asset disposals over the period 2011-14 and will publish further details of opportunities to commercialise business assets and property in the coming weeks.

The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) currently has planned asset disposals of £9 million in 2009-10 and £21 million 2010-11.

### Departmental Cost Effectiveness

**Dr. Cable:** To ask the Minister of State, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills what efficiency savings projects (a) his Department and (b) its agencies put in place under the Operational Efficiency Programme; on what date each such project was initiated; how much each such project was expected to contribute to departmental savings; how much had been saved through each such project on the latest date for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [300934]

**Mr. McFadden:** BIS has a significant Value for Money Programme (VfM) for CSR07, with a challenging three year set of targets of £732 million (2008-09), £1,113 million (2009-10) and £2,090 million (2010-11).

Most of the savings are due to be delivered by BIS partner organisations and examples include:

the further education sector savings of £29 million for 2008-09 through the modernisation of the further education estate and more efficient procurement.

Research Council savings of £168 million for 2008-09 include a reduction in the proportion of expenditure on administration, increasing the efficiency of Research Council institutes, growing co-funding of research and post graduate training and re-prioritising expenditure.

The target for 2008-09 has been exceeded, and we are forecasting the same for 2009-10. Further details of the VfM programme are contained in the BIS autumn performance report, published on 8 December:

<http://www.berr.gov.uk/aboutus/corporate/performance/service-standards/page24986.html>.

BIS has a change management programme to drive out the further efficiency savings and improvements in service levels required over the coming years. This programme covers all the strands in the Operational Efficiency, Public Value and Service Transformation Programmes. The focus is on improving workforce planning, sharing common delivery platforms and channels, and making better use of existing infrastructure. This will contribute to the government-wide £9 billion which will be delivered in the next spending period.

I have approached the chief executives of the Department's agencies and they will respond to the hon. Member directly.

*Letter from Stephen Speed, dated 9 December 2009:*

The Minister of State, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills has asked me to reply to your question, what efficiency savings projects (a) his Department and (b) its agencies put in place, under the Operational Efficiency Programme; on what date each such project was initiated; how much each such project was expected to contribute to departmental savings; how much had been saved through each such project on the latest date for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement.

The answer is nil return from The Insolvency Service.

*Letter from Sean Dennehey, dated 27 November 2009:*

I am responding in respect of the Intellectual Property Office to your Parliamentary Question tabled 18 November 2009, to the Minister of State, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

The Intellectual Property Office is a Trading Fund and as such any savings it makes do not contribute to the Department's budgets. Accordingly, no formal projects under the Operational Efficiency Programme have been launched. The Office is, however, continually looking to improve its efficiency and has just launched two Value for Money Reviews which will identify further savings.

*Letter from Sarah Glasspool, dated 30 November 2009:*

I am responding in respect of the National Measurement Office to your Parliamentary Question tabled 18 November 2009, to the Minister of State, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

The National Measurement Office has not been asked to put in place any project under the Operational Efficiency Programme due to the small size of the Agency.

The Agency has however made a number of efficiency savings for the Department in recent years, not least as a result of the transfer of the National Measurement Unit to the Agency on the 1 April 2009. The transfer increased the staff of the Agency, but resulted in the reduction in back office posts overall. It also enabled other Agency back office resources and accommodation to be used for a larger range of services.



*Letter from Gareth Jones, dated 9 December 2009:*

I am replying on behalf of Companies House to your Parliamentary Question tabled 18 November 2009, UIN 300934, to the Minister of State for Business, Innovation and Skills.

As a trading fund Companies House activities are funded from the fees parliament sets for its services and is not directly part of the CSR funding process. Companies House is committed to improving efficiency and has had a public target for efficiency improvement for many years. Our current target is to achieve a 15% reduction in operating costs per company from 2008/9 to 2010/11. In 2008/9 we achieved an 8.4% reduction through a range of activities including increasing the channel shift from paper transactions to electronic, increasing process efficiency, better procurement and cost control.

### Departmental Legal Costs

**Pete Wishart:** To ask the Minister of State, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills what expenditure his Department and its agencies have incurred on external legal advice and representation in each year since his Department was established; and for what purposes such services have been commissioned. [300581]

**Mr. McFadden:** The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) was created by Machinery of Government changes in June. From 1 June to 23 November, BIS spent £2.6 million on external legal advice and representation. The information about the purposes for which the legal services have been commissioned is not held centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Chief executives of BIS agencies and NDPBs will respond directly to the hon. Member.

I have approached the chief executives of the Department's agencies and they will response to you directly.

*Letter from Gareth Jones, dated 9 December 2009:*

I am replying on behalf of Companies House to your Parliamentary Question tabled 18 November 2009, UIN 300581, to the Minister of State for Business, Innovation and Skills.

Since the Department of Business Innovation and Skills was established in June 2009, Companies House has paid £3,302 on external legal advice and representation on employment issues.

*Letter from Peter Mason, dated 3 December 2009:*

I am responding in respect of the National Measurement Office to your Parliamentary Question tabled on 18 November 2009, to the Minister of State, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

Since the formation of the Department in June 2009, the National Measurement Office has incurred £7,000 on external legal advice up to and including 1 December 2009: £6,000 on providing legal advice on land registration and construction disputes and £1,000 on providing legal advice on policy issues relating to hallmarking legislation on behalf of the Department's ministers.

*Letter from Sean Dennehey, dated 24 November 2009:*

I am responding in respect of the Intellectual Property Office to your Parliamentary Question tabled 18 November 2009, to the Minister of State, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

The Intellectual Property Office, an Executive Agency, of the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, spent £23,000 on external legal advice. This covered employment advice and developing proforma IP agreements.

We have also incurred £38,000 in costs for external legal advice, engaged and paid via Treasury Solicitors, on IP cases going through the legal system.

*Letter from Stephen Speed, dated 9 December 2009:*

The Minister of State, for the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) has asked me to reply to you directly in respect of your question what expenditure his Department and its agencies have incurred on external legal advice and representation in each year since his Department was established; and for what purposes such professional services have been commissioned.

The Insolvency Service Executive Agency of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills has incurred the following expenses between June 2009 and October 2009:

£49,000 on external legal advice concerning contractual matters and

£3,054,000 on external legal services for investigation and enforcement purposes.

### Departmental Training

**Mr. Hayes:** To ask the Minister of State, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills which five training courses funded by his Department had the highest per diem rates in the last five years. [304560]

**Mr. McFadden:** Training budgets are not held centrally but delegated to line managers and business units. Decisions are made locally on how the money is spent and this information is not held centrally.

We are able to provide information for the centrally funded training and the per diem rates are as follows:

New Leaders Programme: £17,000 for an eight day programme for 14 delegates

Leadership Management: £1,595 for a 3.5 day programme

First Time Management: £880 for a three day programme

Induction: £415 for two to three hours

Staff Appraisal: £485 for a two day programme.

### Estate Agents: Registration

**Grant Shapps:** To ask the Minister of State, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (1) what estimate he has made of the number of estate agent practices which will be required to register with the Office of Fair Trading under the provisions of the Money Laundering Regulations 2007; [302792]

(2) how many of the estate agents which have registered with the Office of Fair Trading under the provisions of the Money Laundering Regulations 2007 have registered (a) one premises, (b) between two and five premises, (c) between six and 10 premises and (d) 11 or more premises; [302793]

(3) how many estate agents have registered with the Office of Fair Trading under the provisions of the Money Laundering Regulations 2007; and what steps are available to the Office for use against estate agents who fail to register. [302794]

**Kevin Brennan** [*holding answer 30 November 2009*]: The Office of Fair Trading has estimated that 9,600 estate agency firms (with 14,400 branches) will be active in the estate agency market at the close of the six month registration period (January 2010) and be required to register with the OFT.

Estate agents who have registered with the OFT for money laundering purposes fall into the following categories:

- (a) one premise: 1,180
- (b) between two and five premises: 334
- (c) between six and 10 premises: 30
- (d) 11 or more premises: 26

1,570 estate agents have registered with the OFT. Those who are not registered by 31 January 2010 will be breaking the law. Failure to register can result in a fine and/or imprisonment.

#### Further Education: Admissions

**Mr. Hayes:** To ask the Minister of State, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills how many places at further education colleges were unfilled due to last minute cancellations in the last year for which figures are available; and what the cost to his Department or its predecessor was. [304546]

**Kevin Brennan:** Information is collected on the number of enrolments at each FE college which influences the amount of funding paid out by the Learning and Skills Council. FE colleges are not required to provide information on the number of unfilled places.

#### Grocery Trade: Complaints

**Mr. Drew:** To ask the Minister of State, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills when his Department will decide on the Competition Commission's recommendation on the establishment of a Groceries Supply Code of Practice Ombudsman. [305713]

**Kevin Brennan:** The Government intend to respond to this recommendation shortly.

#### Internet: Security

**Mr. Watson:** To ask the Minister of State, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills whether his Department plans to hold (a) residential customers and (b) businesses legally responsible for the security of their wireless internet router under the provisions outlined in the Digital Economy Bill. [306056]

**Mr. Timms:** No one will be held legally responsible for the security of their wireless router under the provisions in the Digital Economy Bill.

#### Learning and Skills Council for England: Pay

**Mr. Willetts:** To ask the Minister of State, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills how much has been spent on (a) performance-related pay and (b) bonuses for Learning and Skills Council staff in each year since 1998-99. [302466]

**Kevin Brennan:** The Learning and Skills Council makes decisions about the payment of performance pay and bonuses. Geoff Russell, the council's acting chief executive, will write to the hon. Member for Havant with further information.

#### Letter from Geoff Russell, dated 8 December 2009:

In response to your parliamentary question regarding, how much has been spent on (a) performance-related pay and (b) bonuses for Learning and Skills Council staff in each year since 1998-99.

Please see below:

##### a) Performance Related Pay:

The LSC does not link base salary to performance, other than to withhold elements of the pay review from individuals who fail to meet the required standards. Salary increases are dependant on individual position within the relevant pay band and subject to Treasury guidance on pay remit.

##### b) Bonuses:

The LSC has made bonus payments since 2003. The figures below consist of the staff bonus scheme and the executive scheme for the most senior roles.

Any bonus payments for the staff scheme are made subject to organisational performance that is measured at the Corporate level. Any bonus payments for the executive scheme are directly linked to a range of measures that span Corporate, Group/Regional and Individual performance. For example, in the year ended 31 March 2009, the main bonus driver was that corporate and regional goals to deliver PSA targets were met or exceeded, despite the uncertainties created from the machinery of government changes. More on these achievements can be found in our annual report. This can be obtained at

<http://www.lsc.gov.uk/aboutus/annualreport/annualreport0809/>

All bonuses are subject to affordability.

Bonus payment year	Number of employees who received a bonus	Total payments (£)
2003	4,536	3,586,434
2004	3,795	3,340,823
2005	3,964	3,623,257
2006	3,836	4,520,612
2007	2,947	4,214,036
2008	3,160	4,652,723
2009	3,106	4,868,463

#### London Metropolitan University

**Jeremy Corbyn:** To ask the Minister of State, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills how much funding the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) allocated to London Metropolitan University in each of the last five years; what amount was returned to HEFCE in each of those years due to course non-completion; and if he will make a statement. [304551]

**Mr. Lammy** [holding answer 8 December 2009]: I will place a copy of this information in the Libraries of the House.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** To ask the Minister of State, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills what information his Department holds on (a) full-time, (b) part-time, (c) drop-out and (d) course completion rates at London Metropolitan University in each of the last five years; and if he will make a statement. [304552]

**Mr. Lammy** [holding answer 8 December 2009]: I will place a copy of this information in the Libraries of the House.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** To ask the Minister of State, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills what steps his Department is taking following the consultants' report on the finances of London Metropolitan University in respect of future funding; and if he will make a statement.

[304555]

**Mr. Lammy** [*holding answer 8 December 2009*]: I welcome the work Sir David Melville and the Deloitte team have undertaken to review the situation at London Metropolitan University, and the lessons we need to learn about how that situation arose. I shall be studying the reports carefully. I look to the University and HEFCE similarly to consider Sir David's findings and the implications for the actions they now need to take. It is imperative that the University and HEFCE act with all due urgency to resolve the problems that have been identified, putting the interests of the students and the proper stewardship of public funds at the forefront of their concerns.

#### Shops: Closures

**Mr. Lancaster:** To ask the Minister of State, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills what

estimate he has made of the number of high street shops which have closed in (a) England and (b) Milton Keynes since 1 January 2008. [304485]

**Angela E. Smith:** I have been asked to reply.

The information requested falls within the responsibility of the UK Statistics Authority. I have asked the Authority to reply.

*Letter from Jil Matheson, dated December 2009:*

As National Statistician, I have been asked to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question concerning what estimate has been made of the number of high street shops which have closed in (a) England and (b) Milton Keynes since 1 January 2008 (304485).

ONS does not have statistics on the number of high street shops. Annual statistics on business births, deaths and survival are available from the ONS release on Business Demography at [www.statistics.gov.uk](http://www.statistics.gov.uk). The table below contains the latest statistics available on business deaths for England and Milton Keynes. All counts are based on enterprises and not local units. Where a local unit closes but the enterprise continues to trade at other sites, a death will not be recorded in this data.

*Count of deaths of enterprises for 2008: Retail by England and Milton Keynes unitary authority*

		England	Milton Keynes UA
	Retail	20,765	95
471	Retail sale in non-specialised stores	4,050	10
472	Retail sale of food; beverages and tobacco in specialised stores	3,190	10
473	Retail sale of automotive fuel in specialised stores	425	5
474	Retail sale of information and communication equipment in specialised stores	570	5
475	Retail sale of other household equipment in specialised stores	2,430	10
476	Retail sale of cultural and recreation goods in specialised stores	990	10
477	Retail sale of other goods in specialised stores	6,680	25
478	Retail sale via stalls and markets	250	0
479	Retail trade not in stores; stalls or markets	2,180	20

#### Students: Loans

**Mr. Willis:** To ask the Minister of State, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills how many applications for student loans were outstanding from the Student Loans Company on 1 December 2009.

[305794]

**Mr. Lammy:** The Student Loans Company has released figures to show the levels of processing and payment of Student Support in England for the 2009/10 academic year. The information is available on the Student Loans Company website and includes information, under "application status", on "applications currently being processed" and "further information required from student/sponsors".

I am advised that SLC is still receiving around 1,500 new applications each week.

#### Unemployed: Qualifications

**Stephen Williams:** To ask the Minister of State, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills what estimate he has made of the proportion of unemployed people between 18 and 24 years old in England whose

highest qualification is (a) Level 4, (b) Level 3, (c) Level 2 and (d) below Level 2. [303305]

**Kevin Brennan:** The following table gives estimates of the highest qualification breakdown of ILO unemployed people aged 18 to 24 in England. These data are from the quarter 3 (July to September) 2009 Labour Force Survey.

*Qualification levels of ILO unemployed people aged 18 to 24, England*

	Percentage
Level 4 and above	20.7
Level 3	22.8
Level 2	23.9
Below level 2	23.8
No Qualifications	8.7

*Base:*

People aged 18 to 24, England

*Source:*

Quarter 3 2009 Labour Force Survey

#### Universities

**Stephen Williams:** To ask the Minister of State, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills what discussions his Department has had with (a) the Privy Council and (b) Universities UK on the use of the title

university in relation to university technical colleges, as referred to in paragraph 27 of his Department's paper Skills for Growth. [304838]

**Mr. Lammy:** The Department has not had any discussions with the Privy Council or Universities UK on the use of the term 'university' in relation to university technical colleges. I have, however, been engaged in discussions with GuildHE over the use of term 'university' in a number of different ventures and been in correspondence with them over the new university technical college proposal.

## JUSTICE

### Antisocial Behaviour: Fixed Penalties

**Miss McIntosh:** To ask the Secretary of State for Justice (1) with reference to the answer of 9 November 2009, *Official Report*, columns 137-8W, on penalty notices for disorder, on what date the consultation on publishing information on reoffending will (a) open and (b) close; [305198]

(2) what estimate he has made of the number of penalty notices for disorder given to those with previous (a) convictions and (b) penalty notices for disorder. [305199]

**Claire Ward:** The Ministry of Justice is currently finalising its consultation on plans to publish a range of reoffending related analyses that are not currently published. The consultation will be issued as soon as possible.

Due to concerns over the alleged inconsistent use of PNDs by the police the Justice Secretary has recently announced a review of the use of out-of-court disposals. The review will examine evidence on the use and enforcement of out-of-court disposals including PNDs and will report back to Parliament in due course.

### Christmas

**Mr. Vaizey:** To ask the Secretary of State for Justice how much his Department has budgeted for Christmas trees in 2009. [305717]

**Mr. Wills:** The budgeted cost of Christmas trees and decorations for the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) headquarters locations for 2009 is £1,466 inclusive of VAT. This includes £200 on lights to decorate the trees which will be re-used in future years.

The information for agencies can be gathered only at a disproportionate cost. All four MoJ agencies (National Offender Management Service; HM Courts Service; Tribunals Service and Office of the Public Guardian) have regionalised structures. Each individual building orders its own trees and decorations.

### Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority

**Norman Baker:** To ask the Secretary of State for Justice whether the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority takes account of budgetary constraints in determining the level of awards it wishes to make. [304273]

**Mr. Straw:** The levels of the awards the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority (CICA) makes are set out in the Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme 2008. Accordingly, CICA must make awards based on these tariff levels, where the relevant criteria are met.

### Crown Dependencies

**Andrew Mackinlay:** To ask the Secretary of State for Justice on what date the Ministry of Justice issued advice to Government departments to (a) always consult his Department's Crown Dependencies Branch before making any statements on answers to parliamentary questions about Crown Dependencies and (b) where a UK policy initiative requires consultation with Crown Dependencies, to allow sufficient time for their governments to make consultation effective; on what date and in what manner he received notification from the Department of Health prior to its decisions to abrogate the reciprocal NHS arrangements with (i) Guernsey and Jersey with effect from 1 April 2009 and (ii) the Isle of Man from 1 April 2010; and if he will make a statement. [305811]

**Mr. Wills:** Advice on consultation with the Ministry of Justice regarding the Crown Dependencies was circulated to all Departments in June 2006 and has been available on departmental websites since that time. It is currently being updated and will be re-circulated to all Departments in the new year. Officials in the Department of Health and the Ministry of Justice liaised on the UK Government's decision to withdraw from bilateral health agreements with the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man from February 2008.

### Domestic Violence: Greater Manchester

**Mr. Crausby:** To ask the Secretary of State for Justice how many people have been convicted of offences related to domestic violence in (a) Bolton and (b) Greater Manchester in each of the last five years. [305101]

**The Solicitor-General:** I have been asked to reply.

The following number of people have been convicted of offences relating to domestic violence in Bolton in each of the last four years:

	<i>Convictions</i>
2006	222
2007	225
2008	221
2009	281

The following number of people have been convicted of offences relating to domestic violence in Greater Manchester in each of the last four years:

	<i>Convictions</i>
2006	2,188
2007	2,873
2008	2,992
2009	3,111

Due to improvements made in respect of domestic violence identification from 2006, no complete or comparable data are available for earlier periods.

**Driving Offences**

**Norman Baker:** To ask the Secretary of State for Justice how many drivers convicted of driving without insurance in each police authority area in each year since 1997 had previous convictions for the same offence. [304286]

**Mr. Straw:** The information requested is in the table. Figures before 2000 are not available.

These figures have been drawn from the police's administrative IT system, the police national computer, which, as with any large scale recording system, is subject to possible errors with data entry and processing. The figures are provisional and subject to change as more information is recorded by the police.

*Number of offenders convicted of driving without insurance in each year and in each police force<sup>1</sup> who at the time of their conviction had at least one previous conviction for the same offence*

Police Force	Number of offenders								
	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Avon and Somerset <sup>2</sup>	10	7	17	235	734	779	784	712	620
Bedfordshire	322	391	430	524	473	458	436	338	259
Cambridgeshire	259	270	305	404	398	350	347	288	230
Cheshire	558	562	629	680	682	507	522	468	339
City of London	47	64	92	117	100	112	107	81	50
Cleveland	420	432	491	541	579	529	434	376	346
Cumbria	259	317	318	361	343	256	216	208	167
Derbyshire	503	561	655	719	721	572	484	459	359
Devon and Cornwall	565	590	708	791	649	614	525	460	406
Dorset	343	342	380	450	442	433	348	285	247
Durham	463	485	581	646	592	491	388	391	332
Dyfed-Powys	249	260	285	281	256	229	213	193	180
Essex	653	715	798	878	792	777	764	799	658
Gloucestershire	291	307	326	338	357	290	309	228	203
Greater Manchester	2,524	2,691	2,534	2,707	2,718	2,289	1,895	1,644	1,293
Gwent	563	538	522	580	535	527	476	381	307
Hampshire	817	834	931	999	854	766	639	638	513
Hertfordshire	350	326	394	443	476	504	522	376	335
Humberside	625	628	621	789	775	744	666	535	430
Kent	658	736	817	872	799	715	709	682	595
Lancashire	1,077	1,103	1,367	1,537	1,263	1,208	1,084	901	693
Leicestershire	754	771	883	961	925	683	520	429	320
Lincolnshire	269	257	280	353	393	310	330	254	227
Merseyside	1,112	1,172	1,295	1,506	1,478	1,357	1,140	894	738
Metropolitan police	2,251	2,446	3,088	3,674	4,193	4,248	4,429	4,267	4,062
Norfolk	335	388	428	459	401	335	278	303	272
North Wales	329	354	398	545	497	442	342	295	206
North Yorkshire	321	323	344	418	402	413	334	271	230
Northamptonshire	444	438	439	435	453	345	271	290	228
Northumbria	1,257	1,326	1,319	1,483	1,348	1,301	1,216	1,044	857
Nottinghamshire	938	958	957	1,278	1,227	1,019	846	681	587
South Wales	1,253	1,475	1,653	1,774	1,723	1,426	1,283	1,032	825
South Yorkshire	1,075	1,116	1,202	1,271	1,187	1,014	938	827	645
Staffordshire	603	661	741	859	813	750	656	552	511
Suffolk	244	264	329	400	383	317	286	220	164
Surrey	267	293	322	353	328	336	321	294	252
Sussex	492	547	590	622	613	579	560	609	444
Thames Valley	724	828	1,038	1,032	981	852	777	795	722
Warwickshire	215	257	287	289	327	279	242	245	191
West Mercia	495	537	569	633	625	620	537	440	368
West Midlands	2,378	2,652	3,045	3,312	3,500	3,118	2,737	2,269	1,706
West Yorkshire	1,945	1,894	2,011	2,262	2,167	1,745	1,391	1,214	1,049
Wiltshire	247	282	313	313	287	251	241	157	151
England and Wales	29,504	31,398	34,732	39,124	38,789	34,890	31,543	27,825	23,317

<sup>1</sup> Each offender is counted only once in each police force in each year.

<sup>2</sup> The numbers of convictions for driving without insurance recorded by Avon and Somerset in the data held by the Ministry of Justice are very low for the years 2000-03 and should be treated with caution.

**Andrew Stunell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Justice how many people in each police authority area

were disqualified from driving as a result of drink-driving offences in each of the last 10 years. [304690]

**Claire Ward:** The number of disqualifications imposed at all courts for offences of driving after consuming alcohol or taking drugs in England and Wales, by police force area, from 1998 to 2007 (latest available), is given in the following table.

Data for 2008 are planned for publication on 28 January 2010.

*The number of disqualifications imposed at all courts for offences of driving etc. after consuming alcohol or taking drugs, England and Wales, from 1998 to 2007<sup>1,2</sup>*

	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	Number of offences	
									2006	2007
Avon and Somerset	2,430	2,596	2,360	2,099	2,298	2,577	2,599	2,328	2,286	2,397
Bedfordshire	993	820	756	857	899	1,013	1,016	987	1,073	994
Cambridgeshire	972	869	721	742	782	879	1,042	1,164	1,221	1,201
Cheshire	1,790	1,698	1,555	1,429	1,853	1,784	1,906	1,432	1,732	1,708
Cleveland	825	758	729	824	831	897	956	884	954	879
Cumbria	762	809	739	703	718	781	845	804	816	801
Derbyshire	1,421	1,367	1,309	1,264	1,365	1,508	1,748	1,540	1,424	1,358
Devon and Cornwall	2,136	2,160	2,118	2,281	2,347	2,570	2,440	2,210	2,248	2,154
Dorset	1,097	1,059	1,045	1,063	1,121	1,201	1,198	1,089	1,111	1,134
Durham	956	1,098	1,061	1,029	1,075	1,101	1,179	1,096	951	988
Essex	2,241	2,331	2,265	2,273	2,346	2,400	2,657	2,429	2,569	2,433
Gloucestershire	911	818	728	813	852	834	870	790	777	683
Greater Manchester	4,323	4,416	4,431	4,329	4,387	4,444	4,471	4,410	4,369	4,282
Hampshire	3,358	3,487	3,294	3,297	3,654	3,513	3,584	2,892	2,767	2,855
Hertfordshire	1,570	1,584	1,491	1,600	1,810	1,799	1,776	1,756	1,791	1,710
Humberside	1,249	1,239	1,277	1,184	1,314	1,356	1,512	1,505	1,450	1,004
Kent	2,361	2,436	2,395	2,424	2,582	1,456	2,825	2,552	2,646	2,650
Lancashire	2,774	2,798	2,441	2,174	2,465	2,516	2,570	2,571	2,646	2,632
Leicestershire	1,384	1,506	1,435	1,437	1,556	1,618	1,602	1,496	1,385	1,373
Lincolnshire	919	885	775	836	810	1,064	1,160	1,096	1,180	1,186
London, City of	285	228	150	156	209	223	164	177	152	178
Merseyside	2,225	1,981	1,945	2,001	2,105	2,475	2,529	2,612	2,444	2,190
Metropolitan police district	12,958	11,633	11,048	10,607	12,140	11,910	12,351	12,134	12,307	11,510
Norfolk	1,001	947	872	1,065	1,179	1,216	1,178	1,217	1,261	1,186
Northamptonshire	725	836	730	375	212	757	878	720	948	834
Northumbria	2,241	2,243	2,408	2,297	2,373	2,527	2,491	2,267	2,361	2,275
North Yorkshire	1,120	1,050	1,021	1,015	1,071	1,139	1,054	1,184	1,176	1,126
Nottinghamshire	1,677	1,697	1,620	1,504	1,324	1,562	1,568	1,518	1,612	1,448
South Yorkshire	1,878	1,803	1,974	1,905	1,819	1,950	2,100	2,103	1,917	1,916
Staffordshire	1,844	1,592	1,777	1,431	1,592	1,633	1,629	1,618	1,567	1,605
Suffolk	955	1,002	828	854	1,022	1,099	1,191	991	1,053	958
Surrey	1,279	1,362	1,487	1,549	1,564	1,403	1,435	1,446	1,366	1,488
Sussex <sup>3</sup>	1,998	2,119	2,014	2,250	2,224	2,343	<sup>3</sup> 2,412	2,298	2,381	2,389
Thames Valley	3,707	3,527	3,348	3,137	4,147	3,752	3,405	3,356	3,292	3,216
Warwickshire	739	816	747	846	799	890	826	793	858	929
West Mercia	1,681	1,632	1,530	1,610	1,623	1,686	1,697	1,810	1,876	1,781
West Midlands	5,155	4,388	4,257	4,475	4,628	4,864	5,230	5,359	5,252	5,204
West Yorkshire	3,370	3,307	3,143	2,987	3,276	3,449	3,626	3,574	3,284	3,102
Wiltshire	1,022	930	873	966	938	950	949	899	958	746
Dyfed Powys	931	874	777	811	856	920	919	866	867	850
Gwent	1,088	983	1,084	1,051	983	1,055	1,108	993	1,081	990
North Wales	1,211	1,147	1,242	1,153	1,165	1,253	1,265	1,262	1,247	1,233
South Wales	2,629	2,286	2,485	2,574	2,573	2,646	2,666	2,639	2,534	2,431
England and Wales	86,191	83,117	80,285	79,277	84,887	87,013	90,627	86,867	87,190	84,007

<sup>1</sup>It is known that for some police force areas, the reporting of court proceedings, in particular those relating to summary motoring offences, may be less than complete.

<sup>2</sup>Every effort is made to ensure that the figures presented are accurate and complete. However, it is important to note that these data have been extracted from large administrative data systems generated by the courts and police forces. As a consequence, care should be taken to ensure data collection processes and their inevitable limitations are taken into account when those data are used.

<sup>3</sup>Figures given are not as originally published within the Home Office Statistical Bulletin "Motoring Offences and Breath Test Statistics, England & Wales, 2004", which was released on 30 March 2006. The figures originally released in the above named publication were, due to a processing error, incorrect.

Source:

Justice Statistics Analytical Services—Ministry of Justice.

**David Simpson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Justice how many people in each region of England have been convicted of (a) a motoring offence that

resulted in a fatality and (b) careless driving in each of the last two years.

[305008]

**Claire Ward:** Data on the number of persons found guilty at all courts for offences of causing death by driving and for careless driving, by English Government office region, for 2006 and 2007 (latest available) are given in Tables 1 and 2.

Data for 2008 are planned for publication on 28 January 2010.

*Table 1: The number of persons found guilty at all courts for offences of causing death by driving<sup>1</sup>, by Government office region in England, 2006 and 2007<sup>2,3</sup>*

	2006	2007
North East	10	9
North West	31	39
Yorkshire and the Humber	41	36
East Midlands	27	31
West Midlands	32	32
East of England	28	32
London	29	24
South East	53	58
South West	20	22

*Table 2: The number of persons found guilty at all courts for offences of careless driving<sup>1</sup>, by Government Office Region in England, 2006 and 2007<sup>2,3</sup>*

	2006	2007
North East	932	1,253
North West	2,616	3,855
Yorkshire and the Humber	1,467	2,600
East Midlands	1,234	2,126
West Midlands	2,304	3,689
East of England	2,937	4,123
London	2,415	3,942
South East	2,379	3,334
South West	1,920	2,184
England	18,204	27,106

<sup>1</sup> Includes offences of use of hand held mobile phone while driving. Tough new penalties for using a hand-held mobile phone while driving and for failing to have proper control of a vehicle came into effect on 27 February 2007.

<sup>2</sup> The statistics relate to persons for whom these offences were the principal offences for which they were dealt with. When a defendant has been found guilty of two or more offences the principal offence is the offence for which the heaviest penalty is imposed. Where the same disposal is imposed for two or more offences, the offence selected is the offence for which the statutory maximum penalty is the most severe.

<sup>3</sup> Every effort is made to ensure that the figures presented are accurate and complete. However, it is important to note that these data have been extracted from large administrative data systems generated by the courts and police forces. As a consequence, care should be taken to ensure data collection processes and their inevitable limitations are taken into account when those data are used.

*Source:*

Justice Statistics Analytical Services—Ministry of Justice

### Drugs: Sussex

**Norman Baker:** To ask the Secretary of State for Justice how many people have been found guilty of offences of drug (a) possession and (b) dealing in (i) Sussex and (ii) Lewes constituency in each year since 1997. [304276]

**Mr. Straw:** The number of persons found guilty at all courts in the Sussex police force area for offences of

*Table 1: The number of persons found guilty at all courts for offences of causing death by driving<sup>1</sup>, by Government office region in England, 2006 and 2007<sup>2,3</sup>*

	2006	2007
England	271	283

<sup>1</sup> Includes offences of causing death by dangerous driving and causing death by careless driving when under the influence of drink or drugs. A separate offence of causing death by careless or inconsiderate driving came into effect in 2008.

<sup>2</sup> The statistics relate to persons for whom these offences were the principal offences for which they were dealt with. When a defendant has been found guilty of two or more offences the principal offence is the offence for which the heaviest penalty is imposed. Where the same disposal is imposed for two or more offences, the offence selected is the offence for which the statutory maximum penalty is the most severe.

<sup>3</sup> Every effort is made to ensure that the figures presented are accurate and complete. However, it is important to note that these data have been extracted from large administrative data systems generated by the courts and police forces. As a consequence, care should be taken to ensure data collection processes and their inevitable limitations are taken into account when those data are used

*Source:*

Justice Statistics Analytical Services—Ministry of Justice

possession, and supplying or offering to supply, a controlled drug, from 1997 to 2007 (latest available) can be viewed in the following table.

Data are not available at parliamentary constituency level.

Data for 2008 are planned for publication on 28 January 2010.

*Number of persons found guilty at all courts in the Sussex police force area for offences of possession, and supplying or offering to supply, a controlled drug, from 1997 to 2007<sup>1, 2</sup>*

Offence description	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Having possession of a controlled drug	525	533	475	433	581	621	593	476	510	524	638
Having possession of a controlled drug with intent to supply	104	102	84	54	72	96	103	71	61	72	113

*Number of persons found guilty at all courts in the Sussex police force area for offences of possession, and supplying or offering to supply, a controlled drug, from 1997 to 2007<sup>1, 2</sup>*

Offence description	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Supplying or offering to supply a controlled drug	45	66	46	31	25	55	57	70	164	152	103

<sup>1</sup> The statistics relate to persons for whom these offences were the principal offences for which they were dealt with. When a defendant has been found guilty of two or more offences, the principal offence is the offence for which the heaviest penalty is imposed. Where the same disposal is imposed for two or more offences, the offence selected is the offence for which the statutory maximum penalty is the most severe.

<sup>2</sup> Every effort is made to ensure that the figures presented are accurate and complete. However, it is important to note that these data have been extracted from large administrative data systems generated by the courts and police forces. As a consequence, care should be taken to ensure data collection processes and their inevitable limitations are taken into account when those data are used.

Source:

Justice Statistics Analytical Services: Ministry of Justice.

### Elections: Armed Forces

**Bob Russell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Justice what arrangements have been made to enable members of the armed forces to participate in the 2010 general election through (a) campaign contact by candidates (i) in person and (ii) through literature and (b) voting in (A) the UK, (B) other European Union member states and (C) overseas beyond the EU; and if he will make a statement. [306053]

**Mr. Wills:** With respect to campaign contact by candidates, the Queen's Regulations prohibit all forms of political activity, including political meetings and speeches, in service establishments. Canvassers may visit at the discretion of the commanding officer, but no material issued by or on behalf of a political party may be distributed in service institutions. There is good internet access in service establishments, including those overseas, and personnel may access campaign information in this way. They may also access television election broadcasts. Campaign literature may be sent to those electors who have a UK address on the electoral register.

The Government are committed to supporting electoral participation by service personnel and their families. Service personnel may vote in person, by post or by proxy. The declaration period for service voters is to be extended from three years to five as soon as parliamentary time allows, which will increase convenience for these voters. However, service voters face unique challenges in exercising their vote. I recently met armed forces families' representatives and MPs to discuss service voting and a range of suggestions were made to further assist service personnel and their families. I have also set up a working group to consider possible improvements to the current system for this election and to identify a more comprehensive solution to be taken forward in the next Parliament.

### Fines

**Miss McIntosh:** To ask the Secretary of State for Justice with reference to the answer of 8 June 2009, *Official Report*, columns 768-70W, on fines, for what reason the publication of data for 2008 on penalty notices for disorder will not take place before the end of January 2010; and if he will make a statement. [305066]

**Claire Ward:** 'Criminal Statistics, England and Wales' is an annual national statistic publication covering a range of pre-court disposals (including penalty notices for disorder), court proceedings and outcomes. The

publication is normally scheduled for late autumn of the following year to which it refers. The length of time from end of the year to publication is due to the extensive validation checks that are carried out to ensure where possible individual data are consistent with both legislation and the actual outcome at court. This requires direct liaison with court staff to confirm the accuracy of these data.

The Ministry of Justice had pre-announced, in line with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics, that the publication covering data for the calendar year of 2008 would be released in November 2009. Since announcing this date, data quality issues were encountered. To allow sufficient time to resolve these issues the publication was delayed. An update on the delay of this publication was released on the Ministry of Justice website on 9 October 2009.

The publication of Criminal Statistics is planned for publication on 28 January 2010.

### Freedom of Information: Network Rail

**Norman Baker:** To ask the Secretary of State for Justice for what reason Network Rail was not made subject to the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 as a result of his recent review of the scope of the Act. [305620]

**Mr. Straw:** On 16 July 2009, the Government published their response to the consultation on extending the scope of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA) to cover additional bodies by way of a section 5 order. The Government response proposed an initial, focused section 5 order and noted their intention to consult Academies, ACPO, Financial Ombudsman Service and UCAS on their possible inclusion in such an order.

The Government made clear that this was an initial step and further consideration would be given to how other bodies, for example, Network Rail might also be brought within the scope of the freedom of information regime. In certain cases, it may be more appropriate to use primary legislation rather than a section 5 order.

### Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority

**Mr. Dai Davies:** To ask the Secretary of State for Justice how many applications were received for the position of (a) chairperson and (b) board member of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority; how many applicants were shortlisted; and when he expects further appointments of board members to be made. [301058]



**Mr. Straw:** As set out in the Parliamentary Standards Act 2009, the appointment of members to the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA) is a matter for Mr. Speaker, the Speaker's Committee for the IPSA and the House itself.

#### Information Commissioner's Office: Secondment

**Mr. Gordon Prentice:** To ask the Secretary of State for Justice how many and what proportion of people working in the Information Commissioner's Office are secondees from (a) his Department, (b) the Cabinet Office and (c) other Government Departments. [305725]

**Mr. Wills:** The Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) is the independent authority responsible for enforcing the Freedom of Information Act.

There are currently no secondees working for the ICO from the Cabinet Office, one from the Ministry of Justice, two from HM Revenue and Customs, and one from the Department of Health. These secondees represent 1.2 per cent. of the total equivalent full-time staff working for the ICO.

**Mr. Gordon Prentice:** To ask the Secretary of State for Justice how many people in work group six in the Information Commissioner's Office are secondees from the (a) Cabinet Office and (b) Ministry of Justice. [305728]

**Mr. Wills:** The Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) is the independent authority responsible for enforcing the Freedom of Information Act.

The ICO is supported by four secondees from Government Departments. Within work group six in the ICO, there is currently one secondee from the Ministry of Justice and no secondees from the Cabinet Office.

#### Judiciary: Criminal Records

**Paul Holmes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Justice how many and what proportion of members of the judiciary have a criminal record; and how many members of the judiciary have been dismissed for committing a criminal offence in each of the last 10 years. [305785]

**Mr. Straw:** No record is kept of the number or proportion of the judiciary who have a criminal record.

The judicial appointment process requires candidates to be of good character. Applicants are required to declare their criminal records, which are checked with the Criminal Records Bureau and Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, and for serving judges being recommended to a different post, with the Office for Judicial Complaints. All but the most minor convictions will normally disqualify someone from being appointed.

Post appointment, judicial office holders are required to report any criminal caution or charge to their senior judge and keep him or her informed of the progress and outcome of the case.

Information regarding the number of judiciary who have been dismissed for committing a criminal offence has only been collated centrally from 2004. The information is as follows:

2004: Two magistrates

2005: Six magistrates

2006-07: Three magistrates

2007-08: Two magistrates

2008-09: Two magistrates and one district judge.

#### Legal Aid

**Mr. Bellingham:** To ask the Secretary of State for Justice where each (a) community legal aid centre and (b) community legal advice network is located. [304833]

**Bridget Prentice:** There are currently five community legal advice centres located in:

Gateshead

Leicester

Derby

Portsmouth

Hull

The Legal Services Commission (LSC) and the relevant local authorities plan to establish the following centres during the course of 2010, subject to successful tenders:

Manchester

Barking and Dagenham

Wakefield

The LSC and the relevant local authorities also plan to establish the following community legal advice networks during the course of 2010, subject to successful tenders:

East Riding of Yorkshire

West Sussex.

#### Members Expenses

**Mr. Dai Davies:** To ask the Secretary of State for Justice what the cost has been of establishing the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA) including preparation of the report by the Committee on Standards in Public Life on hon. Members' expenses and allowances and the appointments to the IPSA board made to date. [301057]

**Mr. Straw:** The new estimate [HC18] laid before Parliament on the 24 November 2009 states that Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority's (IPSA) budget for financial year 2009-10 is £6.571 million. This includes various set-up costs such as procuring and fitting a new building but also includes salaries both for staff members of IPSA as well as the IPSA programme team.

The report of the Committee for Standards in Public Life records that the cost of its inquiry was £393,000. This is entirely separate to costs involved in the establishment of IPSA.

#### Prisons: Strikes

**Paul Holmes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Justice what contingency plans his Department has for the eventuality of a strike by prison officers in England and Wales. [305783]

**Maria Eagle:** All prisons are required to have contingency plans in place to deal with refusal to work by prison officers. The National Offender Management Service has a command structure in place to deal with a range of scenarios including strike action.

### Prosecutions: Animal welfare

**Hugh Bayley:** To ask the Secretary of State for Justice how many animal cruelty convictions there were in courts in North Yorkshire in each year since 1996.

[304587]

**Claire Ward:** Information showing the number of defendants found guilty at all courts for offences involving animal cruelty, in the North Yorkshire police force area from 1996 to 2007 (latest available) is shown in the following table.

Data for 2008 are planned for publication on 28 January 2010.

*Number of offenders found guilty at all courts for animal cruelty offences<sup>1</sup>, North Yorkshire police force area, 1996 to 2007<sup>2, 3</sup>*

	<i>Number of offenders</i>
1996	20
1997	22
1998	33
1999	43
2000	25
2001	19
2002	18
2003	25
2004	17
2005	15
2006	11
2007	15

<sup>1</sup> The offences of animal cruelty are covered by the following acts; The Protection of Animals Act 1911, Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986, Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, Performing Animals (Regulations) Act 1926, Protection of Animals Act 1934, Docking and Nicking of Horses Act 1949, Pet Animals Act 1951, Cockfighting Act 1952, Protection of Animals (Amendment) Act 1954, Animal Health Act 1981, Slaughterhouses Act 1974, Abandonment of Animals Act 1960, Animal & Animal Products (Import & Export) Regulations 1998, Animals (Cruel Poisons) Act 1962, Animal Boarding Establishments Act 1963, Riding Establishments Acts 1964 and 1970, Slaughter of Poultry Act 1967, Agriculture (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1968, Badgers Act 1973, Wild Mammals (Protection) Act 1996, Protection of Animals (Amendment) Act 2000, the Fur Farming (Prohibition) Act 2000 and the Animal Welfare Act 2006.

<sup>2</sup> The statistics relate to persons for whom these offences were the principal offences for which they were dealt with. When a defendant has been found guilty of two or more offences the principal offence is the offence for which the heaviest penalty is imposed. Where the same disposal is imposed for two or more offences, the offence selected is the offence for which the statutory maximum penalty is the most severe.

<sup>3</sup> Every effort is made to ensure that the figures presented are accurate and complete. However, it is important to note that these data have been extracted from large administrative data systems generated by the courts and police forces. As a consequence, care should be taken to ensure data collection processes and their inevitable limitations are taken into account when those data are used.

*Source:*

Justice Statistics Analytical Services—Ministry of Justice.

### Sexual Offences

**David Simpson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Justice how many people were (a) prosecuted for and (b) convicted of serious sexual assault in each region in each of the last two years.

[305244]

**Claire Ward:** Information showing the number of persons proceeded against at magistrates courts and found guilty at all courts for serious sexual offences by

Government office region, 2006 and 2007 (latest available) can be viewed in the following table.

Data for 2008 are planned for publication on 28 January 2010.

*Number of defendants proceeded against at magistrates; courts and found guilty at all courts by Government office region for serious sexual crimes<sup>1</sup>, England and Wales 2006 and 2007<sup>2,3</sup>*

<i>Region</i>	<i>2006</i>		<i>2007</i>	
	<i>Proceeded against</i>	<i>Found guilty</i>	<i>Proceeded against</i>	<i>Found guilty</i>
North East	459	254	432	232
North West	1,156	610	1,201	625
Yorkshire and the Humber	645	420	638	440
East Midlands	605	336	547	370
West Midlands	901	455	776	439
East of England	599	341	466	339
London	1,387	508	1,314	547
South East	900	469	915	497
South West	509	299	520	302
Wales	420	194	407	188
England and Wales	7,581	3,886	7,216	3,979

<sup>1</sup> Offences include:

Sexual assault on a male  
Rape or attempted rape of a male and female  
Sexual assault on a female  
Sexual activity with child under 13  
Sexual activity with child under 16  
Sexual activity with a person with a mental disorder  
Abuse of children through prostitution and pornography  
Trafficking for sexual exploitation  
Gross indecency with children

<sup>2</sup> The statistics relate to persons for whom these offences were the principal offences for which they were dealt with. When a defendant has been found guilty of two or more offences the principal offence is the offence for which the heaviest penalty is imposed. Where the same disposal is imposed for two or more offences, the offence selected is the offence for which the statutory maximum penalty is the most severe.

<sup>3</sup> Every effort is made to ensure that the figures presented are accurate and complete. However, it is important to note that these data have been extracted from large administrative data systems generated by the courts and police forces. As a consequence, care should be taken to ensure data collection processes and their inevitable limitations are taken into account when those data are used.

*Source:*

Justice Statistics Analytical Services—Ministry of Justice

**David Simpson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Justice how many people were (a) prosecuted for and (b) convicted of (i) assault and (ii) sexual assault on teachers in each region in each of the last two years.

[305246]

**Claire Ward:** The Court Proceedings Database held by the Ministry of Justice contains information on defendants proceeded against, found guilty and sentenced for criminal offences in England and Wales on a persons basis. These data include information on the age of the defendant, their gender, the police force area and court where proceedings took place as well as the specific offence and statute for the offence. Other than where specified in a statute statistical information held does not identify the employment status of a victim of an offence.

### Solicitors Regulation Authority: Public Relations

**Mr. Hurd:** To ask the Secretary of State for Justice what payments the Solicitors Regulation Authority has made to Lexington in the last 12 months; for what purposes; and if he will place in the Library a copy of the contract under which such payments were made.

[305424]

**Bridget Prentice:** The Solicitors Regulation Authority is the independent regulatory arm of the Law Society of England and Wales. It receives no public funding, and is paid for by the solicitors' profession, including through practising fees. I have asked the SRA if this information is available, and they have agreed to respond in writing directly to the hon. Member.

### Victims Advisory Panel

**Mr. Grieve:** To ask the Secretary of State for Justice (1) what remuneration the chair of the Victims Advisory Panel receives; [304308]

(2) how many people worked for the Victims Advisory Panel in each of the last three years; [304309]

(3) how much was spent on the Victims Advisory Panel in each of the last three years. [304310]

**Mr. Straw:** This Victims Advisory Panel is currently chaired by senior officials in the Office of Criminal Justice Reform. There is no additional remuneration for this role.

The Victims Advisory Panel recruited in July 2006 originally consisted of nine volunteers. Two more volunteer panel members were recruited in 2007 to replace one member who resigned, bringing the total panel members to 10.

The current Victims Advisory Panel's tenure concluded in July 2009. Four panel members have agreed to extend their membership and continue their work until February 2010 when we expect to appoint the Victims' Commissioner.

The Government spent the following amounts supporting the Victims Advisory Panel:

£19,116 in 2007-08

£46,940 in 2008-09

£6,692 in 2009-10 (up to the end of October 2009).

### Young Offenders: Training

**Miss McIntosh:** To ask the Secretary of State for Justice whether offenders under the age of 24 years who are directed to participate in a training course may do so (a) in addition to a community sentence or rehabilitation and (b) instead of a community sentence or rehabilitation. [305323]

**Claire Ward:** Young adult offenders aged 18 to 24 may, depending on the circumstances of the offence and offender, be sentenced to a community order. The community order is available to courts on conviction under the Criminal Justice Act 2003 and may include a programme requirement, an activity requirement or an attendance centre requirement, among others. The purposes of sentencing set out in the Act include the reform and rehabilitation of offenders.

A programme requirement requires the offender to participate in a particular accredited programme at times and places specified in the order. Under an activity requirement offenders may be required to take part in activities at places and times specified in the order. An attendance centre requirement means that the offender must attend an attendance centre at the times specified and engage in occupation or receive instruction as required. Some of these programmes, activities, etc. could be described as training courses.

A court may impose an ancillary order in addition to or instead of a community order. Some such orders for example, a parenting order, may include elements of training. Programme, activity and attendance centre requirements may also be imposed on 18 to 24-year-olds as part of a suspended sentence order.



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