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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Monday 6 December 2010

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OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-FIFTH PARLIAMENT OF THE
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 18 MAY 2010]

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

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 520

ELEVENTH VOLUME OF SESSION 2010-2011

House of Commons

Monday 6 December 2010

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Speaker's Statement

2.35 pm

Mr Speaker: I have a short statement to make further to my statement of 8 November on the application of the sub judice rule to the matter of the judgment of the election court in the petition relating to the Oldham East and Saddleworth constituency.

The House will know that the administrative court has upheld the certificate and report of the election court. I understand that Mr Woolas is not intending to appeal, although the period for applying for leave to appeal has not yet expired. However, I can inform the House that the sub judice resolution no longer applies to this matter.

So far as the seat is concerned, it has been vacated since 5 November, the date on which I received the election court's certificate and report, as I informed the House in my previous statement.

Oral Answers to Questions

HOME DEPARTMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Security Threats

2. **John Howell** (Henley) (Con): What methodology her Department follows to determine the nature of security threats to the UK. [28266]

12. **Jonathan Lord** (Woking) (Con): What methodology her Department follows to determine the nature of security threats to the UK. [28276]

13. **Stephen Mosley** (City of Chester) (Con): What methodology her Department follows to determine the nature of security threats to the UK. [28277]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May): As part of the Government's national security strategy, we conducted a national security risk assessment—the first time that a Government have undertaken a comprehensive assessment of all national security risks to the UK. The most important risks were then placed into three tiers to inform the strategic defence and security review.

John Howell: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. Does she agree that the issue is even more important today, because the recent activities of WikiLeaks have shown the need to strengthen cybersecurity measures in the UK?

Mrs May: My hon. Friend makes a very pertinent point. On WikiLeaks, the Prime Minister's national security adviser has written to all Departments to ask them to look again at their information security and to provide him with assurance about the level of that information security.

My hon. Friend makes a wider point about cybersecurity. This Government recognise the importance of dealing with cybersecurity and cybercrime, which is why we focused on both in the strategic defence and security review and in the national security strategy, and over the next four years £650 million is being made available to develop a national cybersecurity programme.

Jonathan Lord: What are the Government doing to prevent threats from within and to tackle radicalisation?

Mrs May: My hon. Friend also makes an extremely important point about security. We must remember the importance of prevention as well as dealing with security

threats as they arise. We are reviewing the Prevent programme, which was initiated by the previous Government, with a view to separating more clearly its counter-terrorism work from the integration or participation-in-society work of the Department for Communities and Local Government. In that work, we are also looking at radicalisation issues so that we can ensure that our programmes are effective.

Stephen Mosley: What action is my right hon. Friend taking to ensure the security of the Olympic and Paralympic games in 2012?

Mrs May: The Home Office's Olympic and Paralympic safety and security strategy, run by the police, the London Organising Committee of the Olympic Games and Paralympic Games, the Olympic Delivery Authority and other partners, provides a framework for projects to safeguard and secure London 2012. The Minister for Security and Counter-Terrorism has conducted an audit and review of Olympic security planning, and that concluded that that work is well placed. There is of course more work to be done, but an effective foundation has already been established, and we are absolutely sure that there is sufficient funding to deliver a safe and secure Olympic games in 2012. We have protected the Olympic security budget, and counter-terrorism policing budgets will stay flat in cash terms.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): May I first concur with the Home Secretary about the threat posed by those involved in WikiLeaks, which is to be condemned by all in this House? In looking at the methodology for assessing a security threat, however, will she listen in particular to those voices internally who advise her on control orders, so that she does not move away from control orders in a way that potentially damages the United Kingdom but recognises that orders signed by former Ministers such as myself were placed for absolutely correct and proper reasons?

Mrs May: I accept that any Minister who has taken such a decision in has done so for proper reasons. In relation to the right hon. Gentleman's question on control orders, I can assure him that the Government and I have national security at the forefront of our minds. In considering the counter-terrorism legislation review, we need to rebalance national security and civil liberties, but we are absolutely clear that we can enjoy our civil liberties only if we have national security.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): Does the right hon. Lady accept that the current system for intelligence gathering in Northern Ireland used to counteract the threat from dissident republican and other paramilitary groups has failed? The system is flawed and needs to be reviewed. The Police Service of Northern Ireland needs to take the lead in intelligence gathering to counteract the security threat.

Mrs May: I do not accept what the hon. Lady says about the flawed system that has existed so far. Sadly, the PSNI has had to deal with an increasing number of incidents over recent months in relation to bombs and other attempts on the lives of people in Northern Ireland. As I say, that threat has been increasing. It is important that we ensure that the tools are available to

enable the PSNI to do the job that it has been doing. The whole House should congratulate the PSNI on its work.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): On control orders, will the Home Secretary give the House a categorical assurance that she will always put the safety of the British people first and that she will resist pressure to appease either her maverick Back Benchers or her Liberal Democrat coalition partners?

Mrs May: I think that I answered that when I responded to the right hon. Member for Delyn (Mr Hanson). As I said, the Government are absolutely clear that there is a need to rebalance national security and civil liberties. We can enjoy our civil liberties only if we have our national security, and we are absolutely clear about the Government's responsibility for ensuring our national security.

e-Borders

3. **Claire Perry (Devizes) (Con):** How much she plans to allocate to development of the e-borders system in the next three years. [28267]

The Minister for Immigration (Damian Green): The priority for the coalition remains to secure the border and to control migration. The coalition Government remain committed to the delivery of e-borders, which will help to reduce terrorism, crime and immigration abuse and to improve the productivity of border processes. At this stage, final budgets have not been agreed for e-borders.

Claire Perry: I am grateful to the Minister for that reply. I am particularly pleased to hear that we have an ongoing commitment to the e-borders project, which is a necessary step in tackling the problem of illegal immigration that many people in my constituency feel was all but ignored by the previous Government. Will the Minister update us on another vital part of our strategy to combat illegal terrorism, namely the formation of the dedicated UK police and border force?

Damian Green: My hon. Friend is right to point out the importance of e-borders as part of an integrated strategy to improve our border control. We have made significant progress on creating a single harmonised work force in the UK Border Agency. Some 3,000 staff have already been trained across the old disciplines of customs and immigration, and we have gone a long way towards creating a single primary line—the first line that people meet when they come into the country. On top of that, of course, we have published our consultation document, "Policing in the 21st century", in which we announced a border police command as part of the new national crime agency. That will co-ordinate the tasking of the border enforcement operational staff who will form the new border police capability. We will make our borders much more secure with all those measures.

Mr Gerry Sutcliffe (Bradford South) (Lab): Is the Minister not being complacent when he talks about the border and immigration service, which will face 5,260 job losses over the next five years? How can he talk tough

on immigration when the reality is that he will not be able to deliver because there will be a reduced number of staff?

Damian Green: The hon. Gentleman illustrates the problem of writing his question before hearing the previous answer, in which I made the point that we are deploying UK Border Agency staff more efficiently by integrating them, as his Government started off doing. On top of that, the border police command will be within the national crime agency. That will mean not only that we better use the resources that we have, but that we will have more resources with the new border police command. Our borders will be much safer than they were under what I am afraid was the lamentable performance by the previous Government.

Young People (Sexualisation)

4. **Helen Goodman** (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): What progress she has made on implementing the recommendations of the review of sexualisation of young people undertaken by Linda Papadopoulos. [28268]

The Minister for Equalities (Lynne Featherstone): The coalition Government have already made a clear commitment to tackle the sexualisation of young people. That is why the Minister of State, Department for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Brent Central (Sarah Teather), has announced today an independent review of the excessive commercialisation and premature sexualisation of childhood.

Helen Goodman: As a long-standing member of the Mother's Union, I am pleased that the Government have listened to its "Bye Buy Childhood" report, but what has the Minister done about two particular recommendations in the Papadopoulos report, one of which recommends the closing down of pro-anorexic websites, while the other recommends labelling of airbrushing in teenage magazines?

Lynne Featherstone: On closing down anorexic websites, I will have to confer with my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Department for Education, who has taken on this work from Dr Papadopoulos and other recommendations that will be considered by the new review. On the labelling of airbrushing, I have met people from the industry and we are looking at what may be done to ensure that we no longer have a single image which so affects young people who are oppressed by having to conform with being over-skinny.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): Will my hon. Friend join me in praising Mumsnet's Let Girls be Girls campaign, which has already seen dozens of companies sign up to support moves against the premature sexualisation of young people? Does she agree that companies should be encouraged to commit to responsible marketing and product selection for children, but that the Government need to recognise that, in some cases, regulation might be necessary on top of good practice by industry?

Lynne Featherstone: I thank my hon. Friend. I congratulate Mumsnet on its very admirable campaign on the sexualisation of children. Perhaps one of the

best ways forward is to get corporations to sign up and develop their own responsibility. However, I understand from my colleague at the Department for Education that it will look at whatever is necessary, be it regulation or simple persuasion.

Police Officer Numbers

5. **John Woodcock** (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment her Department has made of potential links between police officer numbers and levels of crime. [28269]

The Minister for Policing and Criminal Justice (Nick Herbert): There is no simple link between police numbers and crime—[*Interruption.*] What matters is how officers are deployed. Our aim is to reduce costs and bureaucracy to ensure that resources can be directed to the front line.

John Woodcock: Does the Minister understand how quickly he has seemed so completely out of touch with the reality on the ground? Every community up and down the nation will understand that more police on the street make people feel safer and that it has contributed to a lowering of crime over the past decade. Will he take this opportunity to retract his statement?

Nick Herbert: Surely the test of an effective police force is what we are doing with those officers. The report by Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary, which I am sure the hon. Gentleman has read, pointed out that only 11% of a police force's strength is visible and available at any one time. That number is too low. There is a problem with the bureaucracy that the previous Government created and that we have to deal with.

Mr David Ruffley (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): The Met Police Commissioner says that a simple way of increasing police visibility in lower-risk areas is to end double crewing, where officers patrol in pairs, and to put individual officers on patrol. Can my right hon. Friend tell the House how many forces have adopted that very sensible policy?

Nick Herbert: I should say to my hon. Friend that these are operational matters for police forces, but we strongly support those who have taken what we regard as a sensible decision. The Met Police Commissioner and the Mayor have been clear that the move towards single patrolling has been hugely helpful in increasing police visibility, and that can be extended to other police forces.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): The Sunday before last, on "The World This Weekend", the Minister for Policing and Criminal Justice told the nation that there was no link between police numbers and the level of crime—a quite astonishing claim. He also argued in recent weeks that it is not officer numbers that are key to cutting crime but individual directly elected police commissioners who will make the difference. As *The Daily Telegraph* reported, the Minister told a private meeting of police authority chairs on 9 November that, to make that happen, "the first thing a directly elected individual will do is to appoint a political adviser."

Will he confirm that he made those remarks, and does he stand by what he told *The Guardian* last week—that the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Bill will enshrine in legislation that these advisers “may not...be a member of a political party”?

Nick Herbert: First, I did not say that there was no link; I said that there was no simple link. Let me tell the hon. Gentleman something:

“I don’t think it’s possible to make a direct correlation between police numbers and crime reduction.”

Those are not my words; they were the words of the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) when he appeared on “Any Questions” in September.

In response to the hon. Gentleman’s specific question, he and his right hon. Friend should have taken care to read the Bill and the consultation document before making the allegation that police and crime commissioners will be able to appoint political advisers. We are determined that they should not be able to do so and have legislated for that. It is in the Bill that they may not appoint political advisers.

Non-EU Immigration

6. **Mr Robert Buckland** (South Swindon) (Con): What steps she plans to take to reduce annual immigration from states outside the EU to the tens of thousands. [28270]

11. **Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): What steps she plans to take to reduce annual immigration from states outside the EU to the tens of thousands. [28275]

15. **Karen Bradley** (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): What steps she plans to take to reduce annual immigration from states outside the EU to the tens of thousands. [28281]

The Minister for Immigration (Damian Green): As my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary announced to the House a fortnight ago, we are introducing a new permanent limit on non-EU economic migrants, with a reduction in the number of visas next year from 28,000 to 21,700. We are also taking action to tighten our immigration system across all the key routes—work, students and family—and will make settlement in this country a privilege to be earned.

Mr Buckland: I thank the Minister for that reply. What evidence has he found of abuse in the points-based immigration system that was introduced by the previous Government?

Damian Green: Regrettably, there is large-scale abuse. For instance, we looked at a sample of the migrants who came here last year in tier 1, which is meant to cover the brightest and the best of highly skilled migrants, and nearly a third of them were doing completely unskilled jobs. We have also found widespread abuse in the student system. That tells us that we must refine and smarten the points-based system that was left to us by the previous Government so that it does the job of ensuring that we get immigration numbers down to sustainable levels.

Sheryll Murray: How many migrant workers are from within the EU and how many are from elsewhere?

Damian Green: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for asking that question, because it enables me to puncture one of the great urban myths in the immigration debate, which is that most immigration comes from within the European Union. The net migration figures—which we will get down to the tens of thousands by the end of this Parliament—show that the vast bulk of immigrants come from outside the European Union. She asked about the numbers. In 2009, 292,000 non-European economic area migrants entered the UK and only 109,000 left. The House will see that the vast majority of net immigration comes from outside the European Union. Such immigration is precisely what we will take action on.

Karen Bradley: Will the Minister assure the House that the new proposals to control immigration will protect the interests of legitimate businesses?

Damian Green: I give that assurance to the House and, beyond that, to business. We held something that has been unusual in recent years: a consultation that genuinely consulted. We listened to business and changed the rules on inter-company transfers. That is also why we got rid of most of tier 1 and left a small remainder for the very exceptional. We now have a system that will not only enable us to get immigration to sustainable levels, but protect businesses and educational institutions that are vital to our future prosperity.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): In light of the concerns about immigration that the Minister has articulated, will he share his justification for this week’s news that front-line UK Border Agency staff at Liverpool port and John Lennon airport will be slashed by almost half?

Damian Green: The hon. Lady has heard me say in response to a previous question that there will be a reduction of more than 5,000 in the UKBA work force. We are ensuring that we use new technology and new working practices to make our border more secure than it was under the Government whom she used to support. I commend to her the very good Institute for Public Policy Research publication, “Immigration under Labour”, in which an adviser to one of Labour’s more successful Home Secretaries—

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister of State will resume his seat. His purpose here is to answer questions about the policy of the Government, not that of the Opposition. I hope that that is now clear to him.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I know that some members of the coalition have trouble understanding what a pledge means, but after a bit of probing, the Home Secretary gave the House a commitment the other week to reduce immigration to tens of thousands by the end of this Parliament. Does that commitment still hold this week?

Damian Green: I think that the hon. Gentleman was in the House when my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary made that commitment. [*Interruption.*] No, she said by the end of this Parliament; I was here. All I

can say to the hon. Gentleman is that I do not propose to go into the French accent that my right hon. Friend used, but I am more than happy to repeat the commitment that she gave the House on that occasion.

Shabana Mahmood (Birmingham, Ladywood) (Lab): On that exact point, the Prime Minister has repeatedly promised that he will bring net migration down to the tens of thousands by the end of this Parliament. The promise was even included in the Conservative party's pre-election contract with voters. However, in recent weeks it has been downgraded to an aspiration or an aim, most notably by the Home Secretary. Has the Minister been told whether his policy is a firm pledge or just an aim or aspiration? Which is it?

Damian Green: Our policy has been the same since before the election and is the same as it was when the Home Secretary stated it to the House in her announcement about the immigration limit.

Dr Julian Huppert (Cambridge) (LD): Both the Home Secretary and the Minister have stated a commitment to ensuring that excellent scientists, engineers and academics will be able to come into this country. Will they revise the number of points available for PhDs compared with MBAs, and can the Minister explain how the tier 1 scheme will work for both established people and up-and-coming young people?

Damian Green: The tier 1 system is designed precisely so that we can ensure that we get the next generation of excellent scientists. As the Member of Parliament for Cambridge, my hon. Friend clearly has both interest and knowledge in the matter, and he will know that existing Nobel prize winners will get enough points to come in under the points-based system. Our new tier 1 is designed to ensure that the Nobel prize winners of tomorrow will be able to come to this country. We plan to ensure that objective, outside bodies decide who those people are, so that we get the best expertise in specialist fields not just among those coming into this country but among those who decide who comes to this country.

Policing Numbers

7. **Paul Blomfield** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): What estimate she has made of the likely number of police community support officers at the end of the spending review period. [28271]

Hon. Members: Come on! Get up!

The Minister for Policing and Criminal Justice (Nick Herbert): The number of police officers is not set by central Government, but we believe that forces can make savings to ensure that visible and available policing is secured for the public.

Mr Speaker: Order. I realise that the right hon. Gentleman was slightly out of breath or a bit uncertain in coming to the Dispatch Box, but I believe that he is seeking to group the question with Question 8.

Nick Herbert: With permission, Mr Speaker, I will take Questions 7 and 8 together.

8. **Mrs Sharon Hodgson** (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with police forces on the likely number of (a) police officers and (b) police community support officers at the end of the 2014-15 financial year. [28272]

Mr Speaker: I assume that the Minister had finished his reply, so I call Paul Blomfield.

Paul Blomfield: Will the Minister note that there are 337 police community support officers in South Yorkshire whose jobs are at risk because of cuts in both police and local government budgets? Those officers have made an enormous contribution to the reduction in crime and the fear of crime. Does he accept that people across the country would believe that money was better spent on those posts than on the £100 million that the Government propose to waste on police commissioners?

Nick Herbert: First, I should say to the hon. Gentleman that our intention is that directly elected police and crime commissioners should cost no more than existing police authorities. Of course there will be a cost for elections once every four years—an average of £12 million a year, which is less than 0.1% of the national policing budget. We are determined to do everything we can to protect front-line policing and the number of police community support officers. We think they do a very valuable job in our communities.

Mrs Hodgson: As the Minister is no doubt aware, Northumbria police force, which covers my constituency, has recently confirmed that it is to make 450 civilian staff redundant immediately and it is imposing a recruitment freeze on all front-line posts, all because of the cuts made by the Home Secretary. Does the Minister think that those cuts to front-line policing will make my constituents safer?

Nick Herbert: I do not accept that those are cuts—

Hon. Members: What was that?

Mr Speaker: Order. Opposition Members' hearing is playing tricks with them. They did not hear what they thought they heard.

Nick Herbert: Mr Speaker, I am in very good company today.

The hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) said that these were cuts to police staff. In all, there are more than 6,000 members of staff in Northumbria police force, including police officers, and I repeat that our determination is to do everything we can to support forces in making savings to the back office, in order to protect the front line and the visible and available policing that the public value.

Mr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): Will the Minister advise the House on what is to happen to the neighbourhood policing fund?

Nick Herbert: I am afraid I cannot give an answer to my hon. Friend right now. We will shortly be announcing the provisional police grant. At that point, we will tell the House what we plan to do with the neighbourhood policing fund.

Patrick Mercer (Newark) (Con): I am sure that my right hon. Friend would like to congratulate the large number of regular police officers and police community support officers who have responded, often unpaid, to the crises of the past few weeks, including the bomb at east midlands airport, the violence here in Westminster and so on. In view of the spending review, how will we cope in future with the need for surging officers when those occasions occur?

Nick Herbert: As my hon. Friend knows, we prioritise counter-terrorism funding to policing, and it has received a measure of protection in the funding settlement. We will, of course, continue to prioritise it.

Ed Balls (Morley and Outwood) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister for Policing and Criminal Justice is having a busy and rather stressful afternoon. I was hoping to ask the Home Secretary about police funding and numbers—and it looked like he thought that she would answer this question too. In any case, may I ask him about the Home Secretary's Cabinet-level spending negotiations? I hope that she has filled him in on what went on. This week, the cross-party association of police officers wrote to the Home Office to ask for the spending review settlement for the police—20% front-end loaded cuts, followed by 6% next year and 8% the year after—to be reopened in order to

“avoid long term damage to policing capability”

and to protect the front line. Back in May, the Prime Minister told the BBC:

“Any Cabinet minister...who comes to me and says ‘here are my plans and they involve front line reductions’ will be sent back to their department to go away and think again.”

If the Prime Minister has not told the Home Secretary to go away and think again, will she listen to police chiefs up and down the country urging her to do just that?

Nick Herbert: I think that the right hon. Gentleman was referring to the Association of Police Authorities. The House might not have heard that he told the Home Affairs Committee seminar in Cannock on 22 November that this is a tighter environment for police spending and would be under any Government. He admitted that there would be cuts in police spending. We inherited £44 billion of unspecified spending cuts from his Government, and we are having to deal with the deficit, taking the decisions that he has forced upon us.

Ed Balls: The deputy to the Home Secretary will have to do a lot better than that. These cuts are front-end loaded and go well beyond the 12% over four years that Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary said was do-able. I am pleased that he has not repeated the 11% smear against our police, which he knows is a completely corrupt and erroneous statistic. Hon. Members should look at the numbers. In north Wales, 230 officers are to go; in the west midlands, 1,100; and in Greater Manchester, 1,387. The chief constable of Greater Manchester police said that

“there will be a reduction in frontline police officer numbers”.

The Home Secretary was not willing to stand up for the police in the spending review, and she is not willing either to stand up in the House and answer my questions on the police. She can refuse to answer my questions,

but she cannot refuse to answer the questions from police officers and the public all around the country. Today—

Mr Speaker: Order. We must have a one-sentence question.

Ed Balls: I call on the Home Secretary to listen to police chiefs and the public, and I demand that her spending settlement be reopened, that there is an end to front-end loading and that there is a better deal for the police.

Nick Herbert: First, may I say that I am absolutely astonished by the right hon. Gentleman's attack on the figure of only 11% of total police strength being visible and available to the public at any one time? That was the finding of a report by Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary, and if he takes issue with it, perhaps he will speak to the inspectorate. I think it is disgraceful that he should attack the figure in that way. The report stated:

“The fact is that general availability, in which we include neighbourhood policing and response, is relatively low.”

The right hon. Gentleman also quoted the chief constable of Greater Manchester police. In announcing the changes that he was making to the force, the chief constable said that

“the end result will be more resources put into frontline policing and a more efficient and effective service for the people of Greater Manchester.”

Instead of scaremongering in this way, and instead of attacking the correction that we are having to make, perhaps the right hon. Gentleman will accept responsibility for bequeathing the deficit to this country that has meant that we have had to deal with public expenditure.

Youth Services

9. **Julie Hilling** (Bolton West) (Lab): What funding her Department plans to allocate to the provision of youth services provided by her Department in the spending review period. [28273]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May): I know that the hon. Lady, in the various posts that she has held over the years, has a wealth of experience in dealing with this area of youth services. Youth services are crucial in ensuring that our young people have the best possible chance in life and fulfil their potential. As I am sure she will be aware, the Home Office itself does not provide youth services directly, but we do contribute towards local youth crime prevention work, including youth offending teams, and we will set out our plans for future funding in due course.

Julie Hilling: The Secretary of State will be aware of the numerous studies that show that, where there is a well-funded youth service, there is a decrease in criminality. Now that youth services are being destroyed due to cuts to local government, education, health and Home Office budgets, leaving young people with nowhere to go and nothing to do, has she done a cost analysis of the effects of closures of youth centres on her departmental budget and on levels of antisocial behaviour?

Mrs May: I simply do not recognise the picture that the hon. Lady has set out in relation to youth services across the country. I would also remind her of the extremely effective point that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Policing and Criminal Justice made just now in response to the shadow Home Secretary—namely, that the Government have had to take the recent decisions on funding because of the mess that the last Labour Government left the finances in. We will be looking very closely at the support that we can provide in relation to specific issues about youth crime, to ensure that we are able to help young people not to go down the route of crime and to ensure that they are able to fulfil their full potential and develop the life that they deserve.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): In my constituency, there are many voluntary organisations providing key services such as children's centres and youth services. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is essential to maintain the funding for those voluntary organisations that are doing such a key work?

Mrs May: I pay tribute to the voluntary organisations that are doing key work in my hon. Friend's constituency, and indeed in other constituencies up and down the country. This is a very good example of the big society in action. As he will be aware, the Government are putting support into voluntary organisations; £100 million is being made available to help voluntary organisations in the difficult times ahead.

Criminal Records Bureau

10. **Mr Marcus Jones** (Nuneaton) (Con): What her most recent assessment is of the performance of the Criminal Records Bureau in undertaking checks. [28274]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Lynne Featherstone): The Criminal Records Bureau has been consistently exceeding its performance targets for standard checks, completing over 95% in 10 days, but it has not been meeting its target for enhanced checks, which is to complete 90% of applications within 28 days. There has been an improvement over recent months, and the Criminal Records Bureau expects to meet its operational targets by April.

Mr Jones: I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Minister for that response. I would like to make her aware of a constituent of mine who, as a young girl aged just 12, received a police caution for a minor public disorder incident. Three years later, as a mere 15-year-old, the same young girl applied for a college course and was advised that, because she had been listed on a CRB check, she would struggle to access either a work placement or a university place. Does my hon. Friend agree that it cannot be in the public interest that a CRB check can so damage a young person's life chances at such an early age?

Lynne Featherstone: I agree with my hon. Friend. Under part V of the Police Act 1997, all convictions, cautions, reprimands or warnings, both spent and unspent, held on the police national computer must be disclosed. Obviously, I cannot comment on this particular case,

but young people's life chances can be ruined by one incident when they were young. That is why these issues are being looked at as part of a review of the criminal records regime and the vetting and barring scheme.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Can the Minister confirm that anyone receiving an official caution is accepting their guilt and that, in reviewing Criminal Records Bureau checks, she should bear in mind the balance of risk and make sure that that is at the forefront of her thoughts on this issue at all times?

Lynne Featherstone: I have complete faith in the fact that the review will adopt a balanced viewpoint and understand all that it needs to look at.

Licensing

14. **Annette Brooke** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): What plans she has to allow local authorities to levy charges on pubs and clubs wishing to stay open late. [28279]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (James Brokenshire): The Police Reform and Social Responsibility Bill, which was introduced last week, includes measures that will allow local authorities to charge a late-night levy. This levy will help to pay for police services and licensing authority services aimed at mitigating the impact the late-night economy has on the local community.

Annette Brooke: I thank the Minister for his answer. How will he ensure that the extra funding will be made available to police the night-time economy, particularly in places such as Bournemouth, which is within Dorset's large rural police authority and where resources have to be concentrated in a relatively few hot spots—often, my constituents feel, to the detriment of the policing of other areas within Dorset?

James Brokenshire: I certainly recognise the pressures put on the police, often in the small hours of the morning, when it comes to dealing with issues surrounding the late-night economy. That is precisely why we have introduced the late-night levy in the Bill. When it comes to ensuring that moneys are protected for policing, we have said that 70% of the revenue, after administration costs have been covered, must go to the police for that purpose.

Police Authority Funding

16. **Greg Mulholland** (Leeds North West) (LD): What assessment she has made of the likely effects of the planned reduction in Government funding for police authorities in (a) England and (b) West Yorkshire. [28283]

The Minister for Policing and Criminal Justice (Nick Herbert): The Government will propose individual force allocations to Parliament later this month. By cutting costs and scrapping bureaucracy, we will save both money and man hours, so I am confident that the spending review should not lead to any reduction in police officers visible and available on the streets.

Greg Mulholland: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer and accept the logic of what he says. May I bring it to his attention, however, that the proposed cuts in grant reductions will lead to 7.07% cut to West Yorkshire police, whereas it will lead to a 0.17% increase for Surrey police? By looking at damping the formula grant, could we not find a fairer way and ensure that all forces have approximately the same reductions in their funding?

Nick Herbert: My hon. Friend raises an important point about both the issue of damping and the contribution to police funding made by the precept. I am afraid that I cannot tell him any more about our plans right now, but we will make an announcement to the House very shortly.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Perhaps I can help the House by quoting what the Minister said on “The World This Weekend” on Sunday 21 November. He said:

“There is no such link”

between police numbers and levels of crime. Let me ask the Minister, however, about a recent quote by the Home Secretary on special constables, as I do not have the opportunity to ask the right hon. Lady. We know that special constables are a valued extra resource for our police service. It has been reported that the Home Secretary said that she is looking to recruit an additional 50,000 specials, but does the Minister seriously believe that part-time volunteers can properly substitute for the core policing work of trained, full-time police officers and police community support officers whose numbers are being so savagely cut?

Nick Herbert: I repeat to the hon. Lady that I said that there was no simple link. She may have noticed that the former police chief of Los Angeles and New York was in this country last week. He wrote a number of pieces, which I think the hon. Lady should read. One thing he said was:

“It’s not so much the number of police you have... but what you do with them... You cannot spend your way to a safer community... Successful policing is not only about making the right investments: it’s about leadership and focus.”

I would suggest that Bill Bratton knows rather more about policing than the hon. Lady does. As to special constables, of course they are valuable and of course we would like to recruit more of them. They are not a substitute for what police officers do, but an important supplement.

Student Visas

17. **Mark Lancaster** (Milton Keynes North) (Con): What plans she has for the future of the student visa system. [28284]

The Minister for Immigration (Damian Green): As my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary announced in her statement to Parliament on 23 November, the Government will shortly launch a public consultation on proposed changes to the student visa arrangements. The proposals will result in a more selective system, and will reduce the numbers to support our aim of reducing net migration to sustainable levels.

Mark Lancaster: I commend my hon. Friend on the public consultation and subsequent review, but may I press him to ensure that the terms of reference will be broad enough to enable us to address the underlying causes of abuse, particularly bogus colleges?

Damian Green: I am more than happy to give my hon. Friend that assurance, because it is an extremely important point. I hope he will be encouraged to learn that since the Government came to office in May, we have revoked 24 tier 4 sponsor licences for bogus colleges, 40% more than the number revoked by the last Government. We have also discovered by researching the figures that in some sectors of the education world—especially private sector further education colleges—26% of students are not complying with the visas with which they entered the country. That means that tens of thousands of students are breaking the rules in some way each year. That is simply unacceptable, and we will deal with it.

Topical Questions

T1. [28290] **Annette Brooke** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May): Last Tuesday, we introduced the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Bill. It makes provision for the new police and crime commissioners, who will ensure that for the first time the public have a greater say over how their community is policed. That will make forces truly accountable to the communities whom they serve, and will ensure that resources are targeted properly where they are needed.

Annette Brooke: Will the Home Secretary update the House on progress towards the ending of child detention in relation to immigration? What improvements can she make to ensure that family applications are processed at an earlier stage?

Mrs May: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving me the opportunity to confirm, first, that the coalition Government retain their commitment to ending the detention of children for immigration purposes and, secondly, that we will make an announcement before the House rises for its Christmas recess. One of the issues that we will be considering is how we can work with families at a much earlier stage of the application process to help them to negotiate the system.

T6. [28296] **Toby Perkins** (Chesterfield) (Lab): In 1997, a 17-year-old girl in Chesterfield was raped. The offence remained undetected by the police for 12 years. Finally, a gentleman who was arrested and not charged was matched to it by the DNA database, and he is now serving time. Why is the Home Secretary more in favour of supporting someone like that than supporting use of the DNA database by our police to ensure that dangerous rapists are locked up?

Mrs May: I do not accept what the hon. Gentleman has said about what the Government are doing. The Government take a very simple view. The last Government wanted to hold the DNA records of innocent people, but did not even possess the DNA records of all those

who were in prison. We will change that. We will establish the protections of the Scottish model in relation to the DNA database. DNA will continue to be a tool available to the police to secure convictions, but it is crucial for us to stop holding the DNA records of innocent victims without holding those of all the people who are in prison.

T3. [28292] **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): What steps are being taken with the help of the French authorities to stop the steady flow of illegal immigration from the northern French coast into our channel ports?

The Minister for Immigration (Damian Green): Very effective steps. I am grateful to the French Government for the changes that they have made, not just the closure of Sangatte some years ago but, more recently, the clearing of “the jungle”, the unofficial camp that was set up. We also have our own juxtaposed controls. British customs and immigration officers are standing on the French side of the border, not just in Calais but at the Gare du Nord and other rail points at which people can gain direct entry to Britain. That has had measurable results. The number of illegal immigrants caught in Kent in the area of the channel ports is now running at about a fifth of the previous level, so the extra controls are visibly working.

T7. [28297] **Fiona O'Donnell** (East Lothian) (Lab): On Wednesday, responding to a question about correspondence sent by the UK Border Agency to asylum seekers in Glasgow who were tenants of the city council, the Under-Secretary of State for Scotland, the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell), reassured the House that lessons had been learned. On the same day, a 34-year-old single mother received a telephone call from the agency telling her that she would have to move not within the promised 14 days, but within 24 hours. What further steps is the Secretary of State taking to ensure that what is said in this place reflects what is happening in Glasgow?

Damian Green: I am afraid the hon. Lady is completely misinformed about the facts of this case. She need not take that from me; she can take it from her own colleague, the Chairwoman of the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs, the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Mr Davidson). He has been approached on this subject, as I have by many people. In response to an e-mail about it that he received, he wrote:

“It would...appear that the circular which prompted”
the e-mail he received

“was, at the least, not entirely accurate and thus mischievous.

Mrs Namir Rad's move has nothing whatsoever to do with the”

Glasgow city council and

“UKBA contract termination, she was not given only 24 hours' notice and her move is within her existing community area.”

He goes on to say:

“Scaremongering is not only unhelpful and misleading. It also undermines the credibility of any genuine appeals for help that are made.”

I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman on this matter.

Mr Speaker: Chris Skidmore. Not here.

T5. [28295] **Margot James** (Stourbridge) (Con): It costs an extra £100,000 a year on top of normal policing costs to police Stourbridge high street late on a Friday and Saturday night. What plans does the Home Office have to protect the taxpayer from the costs of alcohol-related crime?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (James Brokenshire): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her question, which underlines the pressures that dealing with the problems of the night-time economy put on the police. Indeed, a recent study found that about 46% of officers highlighted the night-time economy as one of the main causes of their overtime payments. It is for precisely that reason that we are seeking to introduce the late-night levy in the recent Police Reform and Social Responsibility Bill. It will be for local authorities and local communities to decide how best to use that power, as well as other powers that are very much about giving control back to communities and promoting a responsible approach to alcohol, which, sadly, the previous Administration did not pursue.

Alun Michael (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): In an earlier reply, the Home Secretary was a bit vague about the ending of the detention of children in removal cases. Does the commitment to end the holding of children in prison in those cases by Christmas still stand?

Mrs May: I was not at all vague. The commitment does still stand. I said in my earlier answer that the coalition Government's commitment to ending the detention of children for immigration purposes still stands, and we will be making an announcement to this House before the Christmas recess.

T8. [28298] **Andrew Griffiths** (Burton) (Con): The Minister will know that 50% of all violent crimes are alcohol related, and that 70% of alcohol is now sold through supermarkets and the off-trade. Given his commitment to tackling alcohol-related crime and binge drinking, does he not agree that the measures he set out earlier are weighted against pubs and that if he wants to take real action, they must be followed up with a ban on below-cost selling to tackle binge drinking?

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend makes a very important and powerful point on the approach to alcohol that needs to be taken and why the Government remain committed to banning below-cost sales as set out in our statements in the coalition agreement. We will be bringing forward proposals in due course. It is also worth mentioning that the late-night levy will apply to the off-trade as well as the on-trade, and that it will give local communities the flexibility to provide discounts for businesses who are members of Best Bar None and similar schemes.

Mr Geoffrey Robinson (Coventry North West) (Lab): Is the Minister aware that the chief constable of West Midlands police has already announced that there will be a reduction of upwards of 2,000 police officers in the west midlands? How much greater a reduction does he think the west midlands, and Coventry in particular, could take, in order to put to the test his absurd proposition that there is no link between police numbers and crime levels?

Mrs May: My right hon. Friend the Minister for Policing and Criminal Justice was absolutely clear that there is no simple link between police numbers and levels of crime. Indeed, that view was reiterated last September by the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw)—and perhaps the hon. Gentleman could have a conversation with him about this very point as they are sitting next to each other on the Opposition Benches.

T9. [28299] **Dr Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): In the WikiLeaks affair referred to earlier, was not the real problem that a low-level crime yielded such a high volume of confidential data? So is not the real lesson for the future that gigantic databases of this sort ought not to be created? Will the Home Secretary be spreading that lesson around relevant Departments?

Mrs May: As I said in response to an earlier question from my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell), the national security adviser has been in touch with Departments about the use of confidential information by the UK Government, asking them to review matters and provide him with assurances about their information security arrangements. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) will be aware that there is a balance to be achieved between the very real need for people to have access to information in order to be able to do their jobs properly and the need to restrict access to some of that information. That balance has to be achieved, and decisions are made on that basis.

Natascha Engel (North East Derbyshire) (Lab): Police community support officers are arguably even more important in communities such as North East Derbyshire that are rural and isolated, so what impact does the Home Secretary think cuts to the budget of Derbyshire police force will have on community policing in constituencies such as mine?

Mrs May: We have been absolutely clear about the need for forces to ensure that the cuts are made to the back office, procurement, IT provision and so forth. Forces must focus, in line with what chief constables up and down the country are saying, on front-line policing—on visible community policing—which is of benefit not only to forces in terms of catching criminals, but of course to local communities.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): What discussions has the Home Secretary had with police forces about the potential to increase police visibility by, for example, reducing the 100 or so processes that the police and police staff have to go through between the reporting of a crime and the final appearance in court?

Mrs May: I am pleased to say that a number of discussions are taking place with police forces about how we can ensure that we bring greater efficiencies into the whole criminal justice system in order to get the benefits and make the gains to which my hon. Friend referred. I am not just discussing that with the police forces; together with the Police Minister, I am discussing it with the Attorney-General and the Lord Chancellor.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Do the Government really intend to end the obligation for scientists to be members of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of

Drugs? Will this not result in the failing Government drugs policy ending up being evidence-free and prejudice-rich?

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question, because it allows me to underline the importance that the Government place on scientific advice and the important role that the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs plays in the formulation of our drugs policies. I can make it absolutely clear that our proposals are intended to add greater flexibility to the provision of advice given to government, in order to ensure that we are able to get more effective policies, given the changing nature of the drugs threat. The proposals were drawn up in conjunction with the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, and I should add that they have the support of the Government's chief scientific officer, Professor John Beddington.

Dr Thérèse Coffey (Suffolk Coastal) (Con): Can the Home Secretary update us on how many more countries she has been able to make arrangements with so that foreign prisoners who have served their sentences can return to their home countries?

Damian Green: We are constantly in negotiation with all foreign countries where a significant number of prisoners are involved, and we now have charters going back regularly to Iraq, Afghanistan, Nigeria and Jamaica. We are continuing with and trying to expand this campaign, because it is extremely important that when foreign prisoners have finished their sentence, they return to their own countries and do not hang around in this country, as sadly they have been doing.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): In the discussion about reducing police numbers, the Home Secretary puts a lot of emphasis on visible policing, but some of the most effective policing is invisible. This morning, I attended a briefing by the Operation Golf team, which has dealt very effectively with child trafficking. Can she assure the House that resources will be available for the police to tackle human trafficking and that they will have sufficient numbers of officers to mount similar operations with other police forces in future?

Damian Green: I completely agree with the hon. Lady about the importance of the effectiveness of combating human trafficking. Indeed, she was on the Front Bench when I revealed that early next year, as part of the new national crime strategy, we will produce a new anti-trafficking strategy precisely so that all the forces of law and order can be more effective in combating that disgraceful and evil crime.

Gordon Henderson (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Con): It has today been brought to my attention that all e-mails sent using the parliamentary system are redirected through computer networks in a foreign country. Will my right hon. Friend undertake a review of that arrangement to see whether there are implications for national security?

Mrs May: I have to say to my hon. Friend—I am looking at you, Mr Speaker—that I am not sure that responsibility for the processing of parliamentary e-mails is a matter for the Home Office. I think that it is a

matter for the House of Commons Commission and the parliamentary authorities.

Phil Wilson (Sedgefield) (Lab): On 31 October, on the “Politics Show”, the chief constable of Durham Constabulary, Jon Stoddart, said in answer to a question about the reduction in police budgets:

“Well what we are having to do is take more risks... That does not come without costs.”

What kind of irresponsible Government would make front-line police officers take more risks in their jobs?

The Minister for Policing and Criminal Justice (Nick Herbert): The Government’s determination is to support police forces in England and Wales in making savings in the back and middle offices, by becoming more efficient, sharing services, improving IT, procuring together and so on so that they can protect the visible and available front-line policing that the public value.

Duncan Hames (Chippenham) (LD): In relation to the use of control orders, the Government’s independent reviewer of terrorist legislation last week suggested that they should instead devise a new system. Will the Home Secretary heed his advice and replace them?

Mrs May: The review of counter-terrorism legislation is of course taking advice and representations from a wide variety of those who have interests in control orders and other aspects of counter-terrorism legislation.

Indeed, the reviewer of counter-terrorism legislation has made his views clear to the review.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Some 1,400 police officers and 1,500 police staff are to be axed from Greater Manchester police. Given that the Conservatives—and the Liberal Democrats, for that matter—locally pledged more not fewer police in the elections last May, will the Secretary of State take the opportunity to apologise on their behalf?

Nick Herbert: The test of the effectiveness of a force is not the overall number of people who are working in it but what those officers are doing. We share the determination of the chief constable of Greater Manchester police to protect the front line and to ensure that officers remain on the streets and available when the public want them.

Tony Baldry (Banbury) (Con): Is not my right hon. Friend concerned that some 2,000 police officers—almost equivalent to a whole police force—are off on long-term sick and unable to work? In any other occupation, such employees would probably be retired as unavailable for work. I do not understand why those provisions do not apply, because otherwise we have a number of police officers on the books who simply are not able to work.

Nick Herbert: I share my hon. Friend’s concern. It is an issue and we have set up a review of police officer employment and conditions, headed by Tom Winsor, that will make its first report shortly.

Points of Order

3.33 pm

Mr John Denham (Southampton, Itchen) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. On Tuesday, the House debated the need for more information on higher education policy, including the national studentship scheme. No information was forthcoming. Yesterday, a scheme was briefed to newspapers that means that students whose parents do not work will get reduced fees and students whose parents work but are on a low income will not get any help. What steps can you take, Mr Speaker, to ensure that we do not vote on Thursday without the House having all the necessary information about the Government's higher education policies?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving me notice of his point of order. I have not been informed of any imminent Government statement on that subject, but there will be other opportunities to canvass these issues in the course of the week. I should be very surprised if further particulars of policy were not forthcoming before the vote on Thursday, especially as a Minister will be speaking in the debate—I rather fancy that the right hon. Gentleman will be speaking, too.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it in order for me to put on the record what the Minister for Policing and Criminal Justice said on "The World This Weekend" on 21 November when talking about the link between the increase in the number of police officers—

Mr Speaker: Order. In keeping with his usual courtesy, the hon. Gentleman asked whether it would be in order to put this matter on the record, so I feel I should put him out of his misery and explain that, no, it would not be.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Office of the Leader of the House of Commons (Mr David Heath): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You will recall that the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) made a point of order last week, which was followed up by her and by the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Tom Blenkinsop) in last Thursday's business questions, regarding the transfer of oral parliamentary questions. My office took this matter up with the relevant Department and the questions have now been answered. However, in last Monday's point of order, the issue of transferring oral parliamentary questions was also raised. Having checked with the Department, I am assured that the questions were transferred within 24 hours of being tabled and that the relevant Members and the Table Office were notified. That is in line with the guidance given to Departments that oral questions should be transferred as soon as possible after tabling and never on the day for answer. My office has issued a reminder to parliamentary teams across Whitehall to ensure that best practice is always followed in this regard.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the Deputy Leader of the House for that. We cannot have an extended exchange on this particular matter, but because he referred—perfectly properly—to the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella

Creasy), who was jumping up and down, if she wants to raise a point of order, I am very happy to hear and respond to it.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I would be happy to go through the details of those questions with the Deputy Leader of the House, but it simply is not true that they were transferred within 24 hours. Indeed, we were given days on which we would get answers but we were getting none and when we spoke to the Departments, they had no idea about the questions. I think that further investigations are merited and I hope you will support that, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: There is now a dispute as to the facts but that cannot be the subject of extended points of order. I strongly suggest that the complaining Member and the responsible Minister or the Deputy Leader of the House should get together and try to sort this matter outside the Chamber.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. *[Interruption.]* I hope that the Home Secretary will stay a moment longer before she leaves the Chamber. I realise that this is not for you, Mr Speaker, but I am sure that you will have read, over the weekend, the substantial coverage of the action that the Home Secretary has taken in relation to a researcher working for a Member of the House. I am sure that you would not want to comment on that because it is still sub judice—I understand that that person is appealing the decision—but it would clearly be a very important matter if an agent working for a foreign power were to be employed in the House. I hope that you can assure the House that the Home Secretary will seek to make an oral statement to the House when that process is finished and that you, as always, are keeping all the security measures in the House, including the vetting of potential researchers, under review.

Mr Speaker: Well, I think that someone once said of the hon. Gentleman that his mind climbs mountains without any molehills. He is always thinking ahead of himself and I am not surprised, as he has a great elasticity of mind, but he is seeking to draw me into matters beyond where we have reached and he is absolutely right in his initial supposition that we do not discuss security matters on the Floor of the House. He has registered his concern that the Home Secretary should be ready to make a statement if the eventuality he fears could happen, but should not, actually happens. I have a strong feeling that her office reads *Hansard*. I think that will probably do for today.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Will you investigate whether there is some extraordinary pact or audacious dare between Ministers and broadcasters to insert a particularly unsavoury word into their performances—before this virus is allowed to spread any further?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. That is not a point of order, but he has made the point with his characteristic subtlety.

Alun Michael (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am sure that the Home Secretary wants to be accurate in her replies to the House and in view of a woolly reply that she gave to an earlier question, when I asked whether she stood by the pledge by Ministers to end by Christmas the holding in prison of children involved in removal cases—

Mr Speaker: Order. Let me anticipate what the right hon. Gentleman is likely to go on to say. I note the difference between the commitment that he is seeking and what the Home Secretary said, but as a very experienced Member of the House and former Minister, he knows that I am not responsible for the content of answers. What the right hon. Gentleman is about, of course, is trying to remind the House and his constituents of his dissatisfaction that his point was not answered as he would have wished. I think he has accomplished his objective, and we will leave it there.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Can you confirm that it is in order during a Division for hon. Members to walk through both the Aye and the No Lobby if they seek to register an active abstention? For those who are not sure how to vote on Thursday in the tuition fees vote, would that not have the advantage of allowing them to say that they voted both for and against it, depending on their audience?

Mr Speaker: Yes.

Huw Irranca-Davies (Ogmore) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek clarification for my constituent, Mrs Amanda Matthews, and myself. As the House knows, the whole House is on a three-month holiday through the summer, so it came as a great surprise that the Treasury received a letter from me on 4 August. I must have been working. The Treasury, however, must have been on holiday because there was no reply to that letter, or to the letters of 21 September, 13 October or 3 November. May I seek your guidance as to whether there has been some change in the Whitehall directive about answering MPs' correspondence on behalf of their constituents? I am pleased to say that in the past two days I have received the answer, only four months after I sent the original letter.

Mr Speaker: That is not a matter for the Chair. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving me notice of his intended and what I will describe as attempted point of order. I appreciate his frustration at not receiving a satisfactory reply, although he says that he has now received one. He has made his point and it will have been heard on the Treasury Bench. For wider application, he might want to consult the Table Office about other ways of pursuing these matters in the event of receiving no reply or replies that he regards as excessively tardy.

Opposition Day

[8TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Local Government Funding

3.42 pm

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House notes with concern that local councils will lose, on average, 27 per cent. of their funding over the next four years, compared to 11 per cent., on average, for Whitehall departments; regrets the frontloading of reductions in funding which means that the heaviest cuts will fall in the first year; believes that the unexpected severity of the cuts will result in substantial job losses in the public and private sector, undermine the voluntary sector and hit frontline services; regrets the inadequate level of capitalisation available to local councils to deal with redundancy costs of up to £2 billion; further notes the commitment in the coalition agreement to ensure that fairness is at the heart of decisions and that those most in need are protected; is disappointed that the most deprived areas will be hit hardest by the reductions in funding; and calls on the Government to revise its proposals before making the provisional finance settlement to ensure that any reductions in funding are more evenly spread over four years and do not fall disproportionately on the most deprived communities.

There is common cause across the House in recognising the need to reduce the deficit. Labour had a plan to halve Britain's borrowing over a four-year period. That would have meant cuts in spending and would have resulted in reductions to local government funding, but not like the Government's cuts. I will not let the coalition pass the blame for cuts of their choosing, their design and their timing on to us. Let me, once and for all, nail the myth that there is no alternative. The Government had a choice.

Sir Alan Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (LD): That would be reasonable position for the right hon. Lady to adopt if she set out in some detail how Labour's programme of cuts would impact on local government.

Caroline Flint: We are dealing with a package, which is what local councils will face. Even on the coalition Government's most extravagant predictions of what we might have cut, with which I do not concur, the cuts proposed by the coalition Government, of whom the right hon. Gentleman is an ally, would have meant another £2.2 billion worth of cuts over a four-year period, and they are front-loaded in a way that is dangerous for local communities and the services that they need.

Mr Dave Watts (St Helens North) (Lab): Is my right hon. Friend amazed to hear that question, bearing in mind that the Government have not announced what cuts are to take place? It is likely that local authorities will not know that until December, giving them just a few months to adjust the budget.

Caroline Flint: My hon. Friend is right: we do not know what the settlement announcement will be at this stage, but what we do know is that local authorities have been told that they will face cuts of 27% in their funding over a four-year period. As I will set out in more detail, much of that is being front-loaded in an incredibly short period of time, which makes no sense at all.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend realise that Coventry city council, for example, will lose not only front-line staff, but £45 million over the next two or three years in different types of grants? Is that not an horrendous thing to inflict on the people of Coventry?

Caroline Flint: It is absolutely dreadful. As we will see in this debate, not only are the cuts unfair for the whole of local government; they will attack the poorest communities up and down the country. That is neither fair nor right, and it is not something that we would have done. This Government had a choice. They have chosen to cut deeper and faster, taking a huge gamble with jobs and growth. They could have shared the reductions in spending between Whitehall and town halls, but instead, they have chosen to dump cuts on local councils up and down the country. The Government could have spread the cuts evenly over four years, giving councils time to plan where savings could be made, but instead they chose to front-load them, so that councils are crippled by the heaviest cuts falling in the first year.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): Does the shadow Secretary of State agree that a freeze in council tax will help hard-pressed families, who were hit by the previous Government's year-on-year increases in council tax bills?

Caroline Flint: The irony of the hon. Gentleman's point of view is that the most affluent areas will benefit from the freeze in council tax and the transition payments that the Government are providing. Those in the poorest areas, with the lowest amount of take from council tax, will have a double whammy, because to pay for the council tax freeze, the 2.5% is being top-sliced from the formula grant. The Government could have ensured that the cuts were spread fairly, but their choice was not to do so. Those are the risks that they are prepared to take. The danger is that communities up and down the country will pay the price, and we will not let the Government forget it.

Hazel Blears (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): Is my right hon. Friend aware that the chairman of the Tory party, Baroness Warsi, said to the *Manchester Evening News* in September:

"Regions like Greater Manchester will not suffer disadvantage under the coalition government...If anything the regions will be protected and supported to ensure they grow?"

With Salford council facing £40 million to £45 million of devastating cuts and West Oxfordshire district council—which contains Witney, the Prime Minister's constituency—getting a 37% increase, how can this possibly mean that regions such as Greater Manchester are to be protected?

Caroline Flint: As usual, my right hon. Friend makes an excellent point, based on facts, and the facts are that the cuts to local government will have a devastating impact on our poorest communities. Not only that, but local authorities up and down the country, of whatever political persuasion, are facing a huge task in having to tackle the front-loading of cuts in a matter of weeks, which is not good for either services, jobs or communities.

The Government like to talk about localism—about devolving power to local councils and empowering local communities. In fact, the coalition agreement boldly states that the Government will

"promote the radical devolution of power and greater financial autonomy to local government and community groups."

Well, the cuts have come, but we are still waiting for the localism. For all their talk of localism, this Government have imposed the largest cuts to local government funding for a generation—cuts that are much deeper than those to other Departments or those originally forecast in the Budget in June; cuts that fall heaviest in the first year and hit the most deprived communities. So much for fairness, localism, and devolving powers to local councils and community groups. The only thing that this Government want to devolve is the blame for difficult decisions.

Joan Ruddock (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): I wonder whether my right hon. Friend recalls the Chancellor saying:

"I am not going to balance the budget on the backs of the poor."

Does she agree that what we are seeing is breathtaking hypocrisy?

Caroline Flint: I do, and whether in local government, education or health, it is the poorest and vulnerable who are being hit the hardest, as well as those hard-working families who pay their way, but who also depend on local services to provide for themselves and their families. They do not ask for much from the Government, but they ask for them to be on their side—to make sure that work pays and that they can look after their families—and this Government are not providing that security. The whole House knows why that has happened—why local councils will lose almost one third of their funding over the next four years.

Simon Hughes (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (LD): A debate about local government is welcome, because local government and its financing are important, but as the right hon. Lady launches her attack on the Government, as she is entitled to do, will she make her position clear? Did not her Government, when in office, say that there would be a £52 billion cut in public services? How much of that would have fallen on local government? Was the decision to end the working neighbourhoods fund and to cut regeneration funding not taken in March by her Government's Chancellor of the Exchequer, when he was in office?

Caroline Flint: On the working neighbourhoods fund, I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman has fallen into his Tory coalition partners' trap. The Tories say, and he repeats the claim, that we planned to scrap the working neighbourhoods fund and had already cut money from it. In the March Budget we did announce savings, including £300 million through rationalising the regional development agencies, but we clearly distinguished between those programmes that were not a priority and would therefore be scrapped and those, including the working neighbourhoods fund, to which we were committed but would look to find savings in. It was a three-year programme in which, in November 2009—[HON. MEMBERS: "Three years."]. Three years' funding is more than the one year that we used to have under Tory Governments, and more than the non-existent funding that poorer communities had under the Tory Government from 1979 to 1997.

Indeed, in November 2009 we announced a £40 million boost to the fund, worth £1.5 billion from 2008-09 to 2009-10. Of course, we had to look at programmes, but there is no evidence whatever to suggest that we would have scrapped the working neighbourhoods fund. That is not the case.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): The right hon. Lady talks about devolution, but her Government took £13 million out of the housing budget in Harlow, where 45% of housing is social housing. The current Government are ending that and guaranteeing Harlow housing money for Harlow people.

Caroline Flint: I am afraid that is rubbish. The Labour Government, in so many different ways, contributed not only to boosting the refurbishment of homes that had been left to languish for too many years under the Tory Government, but to ensuring that there were ways and means for local councils, with other housing providers, to provide more homes.

The National Housing Federation, I think I am correct in repeating, says that, once the homes that Labour funded in its last period in office have been built, under the coalition Government's plans, no more homes will be built. In relation—[*Interruption.*] The Minister for Housing and Local Government says “nonsense”, but let us just wait and see, because even in a time of recession, it was Labour money that worked in partnership with others—[HON. MEMBERS: “Taxpayers’ money”.] It was taxpayers’ money with which a Labour Government decided that we should promote the building of more social homes. Even in the teeth of recession, I think we built at least 55,000 homes to provide for people who could not afford a house on the private market.

We all know why that front-loaded package is happening: because the Secretary of State gives the impression of being more interested in trashing local councils, chasing cheap headlines, calling councillors stupid or lazy and telling local authorities to grow up. The hundreds of thousands of decent, honest, hard-working people who work in local government, and the millions of people who depend on the services and support that they provide, hardly seem to warrant a second thought, but they will be the ones who pay the price for this Government's decisions.

To make matters worse, local councils are being forced to make deeper cuts than they expected and to do so much quicker, because the reductions in local government funding are front-loaded. As much as 50% of the cuts could fall in the first year. Councillors are looking at cuts of 14%, 16% or 18% to their budgets within weeks, but the Secretary of State still denies it. He says that it is a fiction, but he is about the only person left who still thinks so.

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): I hope that the right hon. Lady will not forget that from 1997 onwards the then Deputy Prime Minister, the Secretary of State responsible for local government funding, changed the formulas three times, each occasion moving money north to Labour authorities and away from London and the south-east. In one year, the year-on-year effect in Surrey, for example, was a £39 million loss.

Caroline Flint: I think I am right in saying that, for every year we were in power, there was an above inflation increase in local government spending. I am not going to apologise for trying to show leadership in addressing need, inequality and poverty in this country. Perhaps that is something that the Secretary of State and his hon. Friends on the Government Front Bench do not want to champion anymore.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): My right hon. Friend talked about the cuts being front-loaded. Figures from Newham council suggest that a large proportion of the nearly £40 million cuts for Newham—13% of the 25% total cuts that are being proposed by the Government—will take place in year one.

Caroline Flint: That is another example of the devastating impact of the cuts in the first year. I say to the Secretary of State: is that a fiction?

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Eric Pickles): Yes.

Caroline Flint: I am very much looking forward to the missives I can hear being typed out in town halls in London and across the country to put the Secretary of State right on that one.

Mr Watts: Is my right hon. Friend aware that the changes to the grant system are only putting right what the previous Tory Government had done? When I was the leader of St Helens council, the then Tory Government, in one year, took more than £13 million of grants from St Helens—a deprived community—to give to their friends.

Caroline Flint: As he did during a Westminster Hall debate last week, my hon. Friend lays out the real choices that are being made here about fairness and unfairness. What is happening is unfair and is not right.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): Talking of hypocrisy, does the right hon. Lady agree with her party's leader, the right hon. Member for Doncaster Central, who said on the “Today” programme in April, “as we look forward” regeneration spending is

“not the biggest priority we face”

as there are “other competing priorities.”? Is that not hypocrisy writ large?

Caroline Flint: The constituency of the leader of the Labour party is actually Doncaster North not Doncaster Central.

As I opened the debate, I did not hesitate for a moment to say that reductions and cuts would have had to be made. The question is how much, how deep and how fast. It is not just Labour politicians who are saying that; the chair of the Local Government Association, Baroness Eaton, a Conservative peer said:

“The unexpected severity of the cuts that will have to be made next year will put many councils in an unprecedented and difficult position.”

I could not have put it better myself.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Will the right hon. Lady give way.

Caroline Flint: I will give way shortly.

Grahame Lucas, the President of the Society of District Council Treasurers, said that front-loading was happening—not that it was fiction, Mr Secretary of State—and that its consequences would be disastrous. Even the Secretary of State’s Parliamentary Private Secretary, the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond) knows that there is a problem. At County Councils Network conference on 22 November, he told council leaders that front-loading

“has exercised ministers for some time”.

He asked them to “wait for the settlement.” Who knows, perhaps today’s debate and the cries from their own people across the country will have an impact. Today, we are trying to tell the Government that they should listen and try to do something to avert the disaster that will happen in a few weeks’ time.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I thank my constituency neighbour for giving way to me. May I say gently and in the most friendly way possible, that I served on a metropolitan northern authority for 10 years and the picture was not quite as rosy? Although there might well have been some extra resources, all too often, what came with that were huge burdens that were not fully funded—whether that was free swimming, local bus passes or whatever. Local tax payers, who are some of the poorest tax payers, had to pick up the bill.

Caroline Flint: The hon. Gentleman is indeed a neighbour of mine in Yorkshire. Correct me if I am wrong, but I cannot remember that there were many Tory-controlled councils that did not want free swimming when it was being offered or that did not want a number of other benefits for their communities. However, I would have to say to the hon. Gentleman, in the nicest possible way, that if people thought it was not rosy then, they must now be in despair about what is ahead.

We are hearing from councillors of all parties that if councils are not given enough time to plan which cuts to make, they will be forced into making rushed decisions with no time to plan for the consequences, which could end up costing more than they save.

Christopher Pincher (Tamworth) (Con) rose—

Mr Jim Cunningham rose—

Caroline Flint: I will give way shortly to hon. Friends and to Government Members. I want to be generous because this is such an important issue.

The Secretary of State—I agree with him on this—wants councils to think how they might transfer assets to the community, which we enabled when we were in government, and involve voluntary groups and share back-room functions, which we also encouraged when we were in government. There is absolutely nothing wrong with the principle, but it cannot be done in a few rushed months: it takes time and planning, which the Government refuse to give to local authorities. As a result, the worry is that councils will simply go for the easiest and quickest cuts instead of thinking about how they save money while minimising service cuts and job losses.

Henry Smith: The right hon. Lady said that we are apparently yet to see any localism or devolution to local government, but does she concede that greater flexibilities and the ending of the ring-fencing of many budgets will give exactly the flexibilities that many local communities need? It will certainly be welcomed by my local authority, West Sussex county council, which suffered eight years of the lowest possible Government settlements under the previous Government.

Caroline Flint: I recognise the hon. Gentleman’s experience in local government; I believe he was leader of West Sussex county council.

The Secretary of State says that local councils have a choice:

“They can panic; they can slash and burn services regardless of the impact that will have. Or they can take the opportunity to completely rethink everything they are doing, creating a modern, flexible and innovative council.”

Councils should be modern and should embrace flexibility and innovation, but by imposing such huge, unprecedented front-loaded cuts on them he denies them that very choice. How can councils completely rethink everything in a matter of a few weeks?

Mr Cunningham: Does my right hon. Friend think that we have here a re-run of the ’80s, when the Conservatives cut the rate support grant and the housing allocation, local authorities were forced to sell old people’s homes and there were reductions among teachers and front-line staff. The House should not be filled up with that lot over there—they are using the recession as an excuse to inflict Thatcherite policies. Last week the Prime Minister admitted to being a child of Thatcher. Does not this House recognise what is going on right under its nose?

Caroline Flint: It is actually worse than the ’80s, because these cuts are deeper and faster, and they leave local government with very little choice. There are positive aspects to devolving power; we did a lot of it while we were in power. *[Interruption.]* It is true. I know that the Secretary of State likes to issue his diktats from the Department like some Joe Stalin, but rewriting history is a stretch too far.

Hazel Blears: My right hon. Friend is making a characteristically powerful case against the front-loading of these cuts. I ask her, as I hope to ask the Secretary of State, to consider whether, as there is apparently likely to be a £3 billion surplus in national non-domestic rates, it would be a good idea to distribute that sum to smooth out the effects of the cuts next year and the following year. Would that not seem to be an eminently sensible course of action that may well commend itself across the House?

Caroline Flint: I understand that the Secretary of State has had a letter from John Merry on this important issue. What we are asking is pretty reasonable. We are saying: “Have another look. See whether you can stagger these cuts in a better way. See if you can dampen the cuts to tackle inequality, but also look at other opportunities that are available to get this right by minimising the impact on front-line services and the unnecessary loss of jobs.” That is what we are talking about: the people who will pay the price in their jobs.

Mr Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): My right hon. Friend rightly talks of what we did in government. Does she share my amazement and that of many hon. Members at the joviality of Government Members? In their first few months in office, the Government ignored the impetus that had been created by the Labour Government with Total Place? The Government had to be dragged, screaming, by their advisers to reconsider, and even then they renamed it.

Caroline Flint: There is a rewriting of history with regard to these good ideas. When I picked up one of the Sunday newspapers to read about changes to planning, I recognised a few changes that had been initiated when I was Minister for Housing and Planning and had been carried on by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey). Total Place was a very good idea. It was a system by which different organisations came together in common cause to tackle challenges in the community, and to share their funding and budgets. The scheme has had two names since the coalition Government came to power: place-based budgets and community-based budgets. The fact is, it was our idea. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Mr Marsden) will agree that such innovation is all very well, but that it is difficult to imagine the Total Place concept hitting the ground running in the context of the cuts faced not only in local government but in policing and through the reorganisation of primary care trusts.

Mr Rob Wilson (Reading East) (Con): The right hon. Lady is being most generous in giving way. May I clarify her position on cuts? She seems to be saying that her party would cut more slowly than the Government. Does she understand the implications of that? It would mean the Government borrowing more and paying more interest, because they would be borrowing over a longer period. Does she really think that taxpayers would thank a Labour Government for paying back money on their behalf to foreign Governments such as the Chinese Government?

Caroline Flint: The price being paid in this country is that of people being put on the dole and therefore not paying tax. The price will be paid by local economies and private businesses that depend on local government contracts and by the voluntary sector, which depends on local government to fund its services. There are prices to be paid and choices to be made. We would not have chosen to front-load the cuts in such a way as to fundamentally break the fabric of our communities.

Organisations that research this issue have shown that parts of the country, through no fault of their own, depend on public sector jobs to keep their communities afloat. Despite all the warm words in Government statements, the coalition agreement and the comprehensive spending review document about fairness and protecting the most vulnerable communities, there has been little sign in the statements of the Secretary of State, the Chancellor and the Prime Minister of how they will ensure that the cuts do not disproportionately affect our poorest communities. I hope we will hear something in the financial settlement. That is why we are having this debate today. At the moment, I am afraid that Government Front Benchers are not listening.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): Does my right hon. Friend appreciate the alarm that the people of Barrow and Furness are experiencing? According to modelling in yesterday's *Local Government Chronicle*, their community could be among the top three places in the country to experience the deepest cuts, despite its having many of the most deprived areas.

Caroline Flint: My hon. Friend's point about his constituency applies to others. It is clear that some of the most deprived communities in our country face the biggest impact and the brunt of the cuts, not those who are better off. I wish that every area was better off, but it is not like that. That is why we must tackle inequality and be fair. We must be a civilised and decent society, but that is not what is going on.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend share my concern that it is not only deprived communities that will suffer because of the way in which the cuts are being implemented, but women—and thereby children—because they make up approximately 73% of local authority employees?

Caroline Flint: My hon. Friend hits the nail on the head. About 74% of those who work in local government are women. It is rather ironic that on the day the Fawcett Society is again challenging the coalition Government's Budget in court because of its disproportionate effect on women and children, women are yet again being asked to pay the price. Women who work in local government, often part-time at the lower end of the pay scale, face the complete disruption of their family and working life.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Caroline Flint: I have been very generous in taking interventions, and I am conscious of the number of Members who wish to speak in the debate. [*Interruption.*] I do not think that hon. Members can accuse me of not being generous in giving way. I will take more interventions later, but I should like to make a bit of progress.

Christopher Pincher: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Caroline Flint: The hon. Gentleman heard what I had to say—I am going to make a bit of progress, but I may take more interventions later.

People will pay the price with their jobs. The Secretary of State likes to give the impression that savings can be made without causing job losses, as though simply by freezing recruitment, natural wastage, redeploying people and scrapping or sharing back-room functions, local councils will find the savings they need to make without hitting front-line services. Local councils cannot deliver such savings so quickly on top of the £1 billion of savings they have already made this year without cutting jobs or reducing services. Paul Carter, the Tory Kent council leader, said:

“There is only one way of bringing budgets into line. One is to employ less people and the other is to do fewer things.”

In fact that is two, but I take his point. Up and down the country, local authorities are already cutting vital front-line services and shedding staff.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Caroline Flint: No, I will not give way.

Councils are cutting not just staff in back-room functions but teaching assistants, social workers and street cleaners—hundreds of thousands of people delivering essential front-line services. There will be 140,000 of them this year alone, according to the Local Government Association, which has upped its prediction from 100,000. In Birmingham, 26,000 staff have been warned that they could lose their jobs, and in Bradford the figure is 10,000. They, along with the people who depend on the services they provide, will pay the price for the coalition Government's choices.

It is no good the Government trying to use last week's Office for Budget Responsibility forecast to obscure the heavy job losses that will be inflicted on local government. The OBR forecast shows that Whitehall Departments will lose fewer staff than had been feared, because the cuts were slightly less than had been predicted in the Budget. However, the cuts to local government are deeper and faster than had been expected, and, as a result, the LGA says that more workers, not fewer, will lose their jobs this year—40,000 more of them, all because the Government chose to impose such heavy front-loaded cuts on local councils.

Christopher Pincher: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Caroline Flint: No, I will not.

It is unclear how local councils will meet the costs of laying off so many staff. The LGA believes that redundancy costs alone could be as high as £2 billion, but the Government's capitalisation arrangements, which were set up to help councils with the cost of cutting jobs, come to only £200 million. That could be as little as one tenth of what is needed. If councils are not given more support and more flexibility to cover the costs of redundancy payments, it will simply mean more cuts elsewhere and ever deeper cuts to vital front-line services.

Local councils cannot deliver the savings they need simply by trimming a few salaries at the top, scrapping council newspapers or encouraging councils to dip into their reserves. Local councils have a duty to find the best deal for council tax payers, which includes ensuring that councils' executives are not paid over the odds. Labour introduced more transparency in chief executive pay, and restraint is vital, particularly in the current economic climate. It is absolutely fanciful, however, to suggest that reducing a handful of executive salaries across the country will solve the problem of huge front-loaded cuts, and the Secretary of State knows it.

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Caroline Flint: In a moment.

Nor is encouraging councils to dip into their reserves any sort of solution. As the Secretary of State well knows, most of the money is already earmarked for specific purposes. I had a look at the reserves in Ministers' areas compared with those of our shadow team and found that their areas have £100 million more reserves in their bank accounts than ours. Burnley, one of the

areas likely to be hit hardest by cuts in funding, could lose anything between 25% and 29% of its funding over the next four years, and it has just £1.1 million in unallocated reserves. Unless the Secretary of State wants to nationalise council reserves and redistribute them to the councils hardest hit by the cuts, this is just another red herring.

Stephen Mosley (City of Chester) (Con): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Caroline Flint: I will give way shortly—and I will give way to the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin) shortly too, because she caught my eye as well.

Let us be in no doubt that cuts of this magnitude and imposed this quickly will hit front-line services. Roads damaged last winter will go unrepaired this year, too; potholes will go unfixed, pavements will go unswept, street lights will be turned off, youth clubs will close, libraries will shut and, at a time when more people than ever need help with social care, fewer will find their local council able to help.

Harriett Baldwin: The right hon. Lady mentioned a handful of council chief executives who make significant salaries. In fact, a total of 129 make more money than the Prime Minister.

Caroline Flint: What I said is on the record. I am not going to defend some of the pay in local government, but the Secretary of State has appointed a new permanent secretary on, I think, £170,000 a year. He had the chance to ensure that he earned less than the Prime Minister, but he refused to do so. To claim that chief executives' pay equates to the level of cuts that local government are facing is to live in fantasy land—it is ridiculous.

The poorest communities will be the hardest hit. The Government have made much of their commitment to fairness. The coalition agreement reads:

“Difficult decisions will have to be taken in the months and years ahead, but we will ensure that fairness is at the heart of those decisions so that all those most in need are protected.”

Those are fine words, but the Secretary of State's own figures show that the councils worst hit over the four-year settlement include Hastings, Burnley, Blackburn with Darwen, Hull, Barrow-in-Furness and Hartlepool—all in the 10% most deprived councils in the country—along with Liverpool city council, which is the most deprived local authority in England.

Julie Hilling (Bolton West) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is unbelievable and wrong that children and young people in particular are facing enormous cuts? Youth services throughout the country are being destroyed, and youth workers throughout the country are getting their redundancy notices. Young people are only young once and need support and services now—it is no good their having them in the future—and they should not be paying a disproportionate cost in the cuts.

Caroline Flint: I am afraid that the coalition Government clearly do not care. On top of what they are doing to local government, they are scrapping the education maintenance allowance, which is the best chance to get

young people to stay on in education or training at 16 and possibly go on to university or other further education courses. They have scrapped the future jobs fund and the working neighbourhoods fund, much of which was directed at ensuring that young people did not leave school and enter a period of inactivity, whether out of work or training and education. They simply do not care.

Stephen Mosley: From what the right hon. Lady said, it seems that the more prudent councils have been preparing for this day for a couple of years, but many councils across the country have not been so prudent. Should she not aim her anger at councils that have been wasting money, increasing council tax and providing poor services over the past few years, rather than at Government Front Benchers, who are trying to do something about it?

Caroline Flint: Here we go again—let us bash local government and local councillors up and down the country trying to do their best, and let us tell them it is their fault. I do not think there is a local authority in the country that was preparing for this level of cuts. The suggestion is quite ridiculous.

Gordon Birtwistle (Burnley) (LD): As the MP for Burnley, which has been mentioned on numerous occasions, I would like to advise Members that the Liberal Democrat-controlled council is doing its best under the circumstances. Does the right hon. Lady remember that in the last three years of the Labour Government Burnley received a 0.5% increase in grant from national Government? The Labour Government nailed councils to the wall in their last three years by not financing them properly. It is strange that she is having a go at the coalition Government given that Labour bankrupted the country in the first place.

Caroline Flint: I would rather defend an increase, no matter how small, than defend the indefensible, as is happening here today.

Let us look at the disparities. As I have said, a number of councils, including Burnley, are facing the most devastating cuts. At the same time, a handful of district councils in the south-east, including South Cambridgeshire and West Oxfordshire—two of the least deprived areas in the country—could see not a reduction but an increase of up to 30% in their funding, as a consequence of funding that was previously ring-fenced for deprived authorities being rolled into the overall grant.

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): I am delighted that my right hon. Friend has managed to give way. She mentioned Burnley, the neighbouring constituency to my own. Housing market renewal worth £9 million to Burnley and £8 million to Hyndburn has just been cut, and the working neighbourhoods fund, which is worth £2 million, has also been slashed. Burnley borough council has been funded in the past two or three years by enormous sums from the Government, as has Hyndburn, and I do not accept the point made by my colleague, the hon. Member for Burnley (Gordon Birtwistle).

Caroline Flint: It is always helpful to have a wider debate, and I thank my hon. Friend for that contribution.

Mr Rob Wilson: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Caroline Flint: I have already given way to the hon. Gentleman, and I will not do so again.

How is it fair that the communities most reliant on public sector employment will lose the greatest number of jobs? How is it fair that the areas most in need will find their services most cut? How is it fair that the communities least able to shoulder the brunt of cuts to local councils will bear the heaviest burden? Yet that is exactly what will happen, as the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) let slip earlier in the year, when he said:

“Those in greatest need ultimately bear the burden of paying off the debt”.—[*Official Report*, 10 June 2010; Vol. 511, c. 450.]

The same is true of the Government's plans for a council tax freeze. It might sound fair, but it is not, because it gives the most to the wealthier councils with the biggest council tax yield—the councils with the broadest base of middle and high band properties—and the least to poorer councils with more modest properties. This involves money that has been top-sliced from local councils' funding, resulting in a double whammy for our poorest areas.

It is not just people who work in local government who will lose out. Hundreds of thousands of people across the country who work in the private sector—plumbers, builders, electricians, IT companies and office suppliers—depend on local council contracts. Local councils spend nearly £35 billion every year procuring services and supplies from the private sector, with more than £20 billion going to small and medium-sized businesses. Some of those firms rely on public sector contracts for 50% or 60% of their business, and if local council contracts dry up, some of them will have to lose staff and might even go out of business altogether. PricewaterhouseCoopers forecasts that for every job lost in the public sector, another will be lost in the private sector, so cuts in local government funding will hit not just those who work in local government and those who rely on its services, but the wider local economy.

What of the Government's suggestion that if local councils do less, voluntary groups will miraculously emerge and seamlessly fill the gap left by local authorities? The week before last, the Secretary of State warned the House that local councils would “rue the day” they cut funding to voluntary organisations, but what choice will they have? When nearly a third of voluntary organisations rely on funding from local authorities, and local authorities are losing nearly a third of their funding—much of it this year—voluntary groups will lose out. Local councils and voluntary groups are not adversaries—they work together and rely on each other. Voluntary groups reach parts of the community and fulfil certain roles that local councils sometimes cannot, and local councils have the resources and support at their disposal that voluntary groups do not always have. Without each other, they are both weakened.

Christopher Pincher: I am indebted to the right hon. Lady for giving way. It is nice to hear her support for the big society and voluntary groups, but she seems to have rather a selective memory. May I remind her of the BBC report published on 1 March this year, when her party was still in government? It stated that very significant

[Christopher Pincher]

cuts in local government would have to be made, whichever party was in power, to deal with the depth and scale of the recession that her Government had created. The right hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Mr Brown) also said that there would have to be economies. With friends like those, does she need enemies?

Caroline Flint *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. Before the right hon. Lady responds, I will make two points. First, interventions are becoming rather long and need to get shorter. Secondly, for the good conduct of the debate, I want to touch on an earlier intervention by the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Stephen Lloyd). I did not hear it clearly at the time, but reference was made to the alleged hypocrisy of another Member. Such references must not be made on the Floor of the House. Making a personal accusation of hypocrisy is disorderly. I recognise that the hon. Gentleman is a new Member, but I hope that what I have said will be helpful for the House as a whole.

Caroline Flint: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I will not hold the hon. Gentleman too harshly to account for what he said in the heat of the debate.

We must recognise that the deficit has to be reduced—and we do. [Interruption.] We have been very clear about that. There are choices to be made, however, about how far and how deep the cuts should be. What does the hon. Member for Tamworth (Christopher Pincher) have to say to Baroness Margaret Eaton, Tory leader of the Local Government Association, who only last week issued a press release on the “unprecedented” levels of the cuts and the impact of front-loading? It is not just Labour people talking about this—[Interruption.] I hear an hon. Gentleman shout “What would you do?” from a sedentary position. We would not front-load the cuts in this way for a start, and we would not have gone as deep.

Mr Watts: Is it not clear that people will judge the Government not on the cuts, but on how they are distributed. So far, what we know is that they will hit the most deprived. Is that not what it is all about?

Caroline Flint: I am afraid that there is another motivation, and it has absolutely nothing to do with the deficit. I think I am right in saying that the Office for Budget Responsibility report suggested that a surplus would start to appear in a few years’ time. Given how the coalition Government like to sing from the rafters about OBR reports, it is a shame that they do not think about areas where they could use that information to minimise the damage of the cuts that local authorities face and adopt a much more thoughtful approach to their impact on the ground.

There is no doubt about it—the impact on local communities up and down the country will be harsh and, I think, undeserved. Whatever plans local authorities might like to make—working with the voluntary sector and the private sector and looking at ways to share functions and of delivering services differently are all, I think, subjects worthy of debate—they can do only so much in the time available. That time is simply not enough.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Caroline Flint: I will give way to the hon. Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen), but after that I shall take no more interventions. *Hansard* will show that I have already taken more than my fair share.

Andrew Bridgen: I thank the right hon. Lady for giving way. My local council in North-West Leicestershire is already right-sizing its top management to protect essential front-line services. Is that not the way forward? She will be well aware that almost a third of Government spending is channelled through local government, so no credible deficit reduction plan can leave local government immune. Without a credible plan, and in the absence of her telling us what a Labour Government would cut instead of local government—perhaps defence, health or education—she has no credibility whatever in the debate.

Caroline Flint: I agree with the hon. Gentleman in so far as there has to be a sharing of the reductions across the different sectors of public spending, but I do not agree that the disproportionate expectations of local government are fair. I just do not think they are fair. In a less partisan arena, the hon. Gentleman might agree that even if we were to pursue the level of cuts proposed by the Government, it would be worth thinking about staggering them over the four-year period rather than expecting the largest amounts to be cut in the first year. Local authorities have been set an incredible challenge in that respect. In a more reasoned environment, most sensible people would recognise that fact and say, “Let’s do something about it before the financial settlement is announced and try to put right some of the wrongs created by the package following the comprehensive spending review.”

In so many ways, the motion says that the Government are not listening. Let me tell the House and the country that Labour is listening and that there is an alternative. The financial settlement is yet to be settled; there is time to put this right. Savings need to be found and, yes, cuts will need to be made in local government—but not like this: not in this way and not in this time scale.

Today, the Government have a choice. They can plough ahead with their plans and impose huge cuts on local councils, forcing them to find savings in the next few weeks—councils will have to decide their budgets by February 2011. They can impose cuts that will unnecessarily cost jobs, undermine the voluntary sector, hit front-line services and create huge uncertainty in the private sector. They can force through cuts that will hit the poorest communities the hardest, or they can choose to listen. They can listen to Members throughout the House—publicly or privately—who I know will take the opportunity here today, and in other forums, to speak about the damage that huge front-loaded cuts will cause. They can listen to the people who work in local government and provide the services on which we all rely, often with very little reward. They can listen to the voluntary sector, and to the small business community.

Will the Secretary of State ensure that any reductions in funding are more evenly spread over four years? Will he introduce more flexible capitalisation arrangements, so that local councils are not forced to make even deeper cuts in services and jobs to meet the cost of

redundancy payments? Will he introduce damping measures to stop our poorest communities being hit hardest? Those are the three questions that the Secretary of State must answer today.

I commend the motion to the House.

4.31 pm

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Eric Pickles): I am most grateful to the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint). I could hear the gentle scribble of history being rewritten. I think that had Winston Smith been part of the process, he would have been down to his second stub of pencil by now. I would happily have walked into Room 101 just to hear the end of it.

We are really very pleased, in a way, that the motion has been tabled. We in the Department are very sensitive people, and we felt that we had done something wrong as far as the right hon. Lady was concerned. She doesn't phone, she rarely writes, she asks few questions, and she seems to be unaware that we have laid statements. We thought somehow that she was not all that interested. So we are very pleased that she is now back in action, and is taking an interest in the Department. Admittedly it seemed a weird time for her to do so, given that the settlement is just a few days away, but then it occurred to me: she has a plan.

It is all about the business of the blank piece of paper. The right hon. Lady is actually going to write something down. She is going to give us some Labour policy. We are going to be told, in this debate—*[Interruption.]* I am optimistic. We are going to be told what percentage of cuts the right hon. Lady thinks reasonable. The Local Government Association has already given us a percentage. If the right hon. Lady—who spoke for hardly any time—wants to give us a percentage that she considers reasonable for the coming year, I will happily give way to her.

Mr Watts: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr Pickles: I will happily give way for a trip down memory lane. What does the hon. Gentleman want to tell us about the 1980s?

Mr Watts: It is the 1960s that I want to talk about. The Secretary of State is trying to take us back to them. Can he explain why he is front-loading the cuts? Everyone knows that he is doing it because a general election is coming. [HON. MEMBERS: "What?"] Well, he knows when the election will come. Can he tell us why he is front-loading the cuts? It is a simple question.

Mr Pickles: The hon. Gentleman may be wondering why he is sitting on that side of the House. We have had a general election. His party lost and we won, which is why we are on this side of the House. As for the front-loading—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Secretary of State is not a notably softly spoken man, but I am having considerable trouble hearing him. He says that he is a gentle and sensitive soul; that is as may be, but I can normally hear him. There is so much noise in the Chamber that I cannot hear him now, and I want him to be heard.

Mr Pickles: I am most grateful for your protection, Mr Speaker. As for the front-loading, the settlement has not been announced. Opposition Members are getting very excited about press reports, which is not a very sensible thing to do.

Mr Rob Wilson: I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way so early in what I am sure will be a brilliant speech. Does he agree that although we are very pleased to be having the debate today, it seems from the number of Labour Back Benchers who have turned up that they are not very pleased at all?

Mr Pickles: There is a point in that, but I have to say to my hon. Friend that we must give all the encouragement we can to the right hon. Lady the shadow Communities Secretary because it is very important that we have an Opposition and if we do so she might table the occasional parliamentary question, in which case we would have an opportunity to come to the—

Hazel Blears: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Pickles: Of course. I am reminded of "Life on Mars".

Hazel Blears: The right hon. Gentleman appears to be floundering a little at the start of his contribution, and I wonder whether I might, in a constructive spirit, offer him a small lifeline. My right hon. Friend the shadow Communities Secretary has made a powerful case against the front-loading of these cuts. As I understand it, there is a surplus of about £3.4 billion in the national non-domestic rate pool, and the leader of my council in Salford, Councillor John Merry, has written to the Secretary of State suggesting an ingenious way of smoothing out the front-loading of these cuts. If we were to put the £3.4 billion back into the formula grant, that would enable us to reduce some of the devastating impact of that first year of cuts, certainly on Salford council, which is facing cuts of £40 million. If the right hon. Gentleman accepts my lifeline I will be very happy.

Mr Pickles: I am most grateful to the right hon. Lady for that, and, to start on a positive note, may I say that the entire Front-Bench team likes her new hairstyle?

There is not a £3.5 billion surplus in non-domestic rates in the year coming. There is a potential £2 billion surplus in 2013-14. It is hoped that the new system of local government finance, which I will be making some reference to in the statement, will be in the process of being brought in, so it is theoretical at this stage.

Caroline Flint: The right hon. Gentleman teased the House a few seconds ago when he told us to wait and see what the financial settlement provides. Local council leaders have been pressing him to give some hint on, and recognition of, the problem of front-loading and whether that can be looked at. Can he not give some steer that the Government have listened to some of those concerns, because at present they are planning for huge cuts, based on what they expect to have to deliver come April 2011-12?

Mr Pickles: May I reassure the right hon. Lady both that we will be making a statement to the House, unlike

[Mr Pickles]

last year when the statement was relegated to a written ministerial statement, and that we are going to ensure that the distribution is fair?

Hazel Blears: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Pickles: I want to make some progress first, but I will give way to the right hon. Lady in due course.

It is reasonable for us to have expected to hear in the speech of the right hon. Member for Don Valley how much she would cut from the budget. What percentage reduction does she want from each tier of local government? If she does not like the phasing, which other Department should be cut more next April?

The Opposition have simply lost touch with financial reality. They have got their head in the sand in respect of the urgent need to tackle the nation's record overdraft and the slide towards a national debt of over £1 trillion. We need to reduce the deficit to keep long-term interest rates down, thereby directly helping families and businesses through the lower cost of loans and mortgages. By reducing spending and restoring the nation's fiscal credibility, we avoid the massive debt interest bills—over £42 billion a year—which is sucking taxpayers' money from front-line services.

We had a choice in the most recent spending review: we could face up to the legacy left by Labour—the crippling public debt, the black hole in the nation's finances—or we could simply let Britain fall into the economic abyss. Looking around Europe, the situation that some of our neighbours continue to face reminds us just how dire the challenges remain.

Mr Marsden: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Pickles: In a moment.

The financial mess that the coalition has inherited is not just because of big banks; it is because of the irresponsible behaviour of big Government.

Simon Hughes: I sincerely hope that all Members, on both sides of the House, realise that local government must do its share of reducing expenditure to deal with the public debt and deficit that we inherited. Will the Secretary of State give me one explanation and one assurance? Will he explain why the comprehensive spending review's four-year plan set out a greater reduction in the budget in years 1 and 2 than in year 3? Will he reassure me that, as I think Ministers have heard when we have come to see him in the Department, the whole of this year's funding settlement for local government is being taken into account when the assessment of the reduction is made, not just the direct core funding provided by the grant from central Government?

Mr Pickles: My hon. Friend raises a very important point. The rules are different when sums are being reduced, rather than increased, so it is massively important that we examine all the finance available to local authorities and the gap in spending. I am going to address that most carefully, as I shall do for the precise phasing of the amounts. It is sensible to see these sums taken out at the beginning of the period, because the only way in which local government can approach a 26% reduction

is not to salami-slice here and there, but to restructure, share services and the like. If it is going to do that, it had best get on with it.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): On phasing, will the Secretary of State accept that it is hugely important for boroughs such as Knowsley that the process of damping stays in place? If it does not, incredible swings will take place within a year—even greater than those he is proposing.

Mr Pickles: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Hon. Members may not be aware that some authorities, such as Knowsley's, are heavily dependent on grant; if I recall it correctly, the percentage is in the upper 70s—

Mr George Howarth *indicated assent.*

Mr Pickles: It appears that that is correct. There are other places, such as Surrey, where we are talking about 20%. If we were dealing with a cut across the board, the effect of an amount coming out of Knowsley's budget would be considerably greater than if it came out of Surrey's. That would not be desirable and we will be putting together a system that offers help.

Despite all the bluster and all the complaint, the Opposition would have made some of the same choices had they clung on to office. Perhaps Opposition Members would not like to be reminded that the Labour Government were quietly planning cuts of £52 billion over the next four years. The Treasury's own figures show that those were front-loaded cuts, with a hit of £14 billion to fall in 2011-12. A small amount of those cuts were made public in the dying days of the previous Administration. The back of a fag packet small print of the March 2010 Budget reveals £480 million of cuts. Those were cuts to regional development agency regeneration, cuts to the working neighbourhoods fund, cuts to the local enterprise growth initiative, cuts to the housing and planning delivery grant, cuts to smaller Department for Communities and Local Government programmes and cuts to time-limited community programmes.

Let us deal directly with the issue of the working neighbourhoods fund. Whether the right hon. Member for Don Valley likes it or not, it was a three-year figure; the programme was coming to the end in March and no money was provided for it to be extended thereafter. We would have been facing precisely the same problem as we are now. Some Members have complained about the end of the working neighbourhoods fund, but we would have been facing this in March.

Stephen Lloyd *rose—*

Mr Pickles: As was rightly said by my hon. Friend, to whom I shall give way in a moment, the current Labour leader made it very clear during the election that regeneration spending

“is not the biggest priority we face as we look at other competing priorities”,

and the then Prime Minister said:

“Housing is essentially a private sector activity...I don't see a need for us to continue with such”

renovation programmes.

Stephen Lloyd: In the past 12 months, Eastbourne borough council restructured its senior management, producing a more dynamic and customer-focused team, while cutting the cost of its senior team by £300,000 a year. Does the Secretary of State agree that other local authorities can follow the example of Eastbourne borough council, saving money for the taxpayer and bringing local authority executive pay under control, which was something that Labour singularly failed to do?

Mr Pickles: My hon. Friend is right. There is increasingly a trend towards reducing backroom services and I welcome the support from the right hon. Member for Don Valley. Perhaps the clearest message that should go out from the Chamber today is that there is broad consensus on the sharing of services and it would be a very wise chief executive and leader of a council who continued with that process.

Of course, part of the problem is that the so-called operational savings that the Labour party promised were simply not met. When I opened the Department's books, I noticed that almost £1 billion of planned efficiency savings promised by the Department and announced in the 2007 spending review and the 2009 Budget were never delivered by Labour Ministers.

We know that Labour had secret plans for cuts for local communities, but it did not have a route map to get there through constructive reform. The Labour Government had 13 years to improve the system of local government funding but they fluffed it. They introduced 10 different Acts that affected local government finance. They scrapped capping, then they reintroduced it. They gave pensioners an extra payment for their council tax, then they dropped it. They passed a law to hold a council tax revaluation, and then passed a law to delay it. They published a local government finance Green Paper, then a White Paper, then they held a balance of funding review, and then they held the Lyons inquiry review. They then extended the Lyons inquiry review and when the Lyons inquiry reported they did not even bother to issue a formal response.

In the 2010 Labour manifesto, we were promised a cross-party commission on local government finance. Perhaps Labour just ran out of ideas and wanted to ask us. The final Labour initiative, with the third leader in three years, is the famous blank piece of paper. No wonder the shadow Housing Minister, the hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Alison Seabeck), has admitted "we won't rush into policy making"—

[Interruption.] I am glad she has confirmed that. Perhaps they are waiting for the next Labour leader. I suspect that that will not be long now—like with buses, one waits around for ages and three come along pretty quickly.

Mr Watts: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr Pickles: I am sorry, but if I wanted to visit the 1980s I would watch an episode of "Life on Mars".

I welcome the opportunity to lay to rest some of the reckless scaremongering that the Labour party has peddled in recent weeks, and particularly in the past few moments. We are a few days away from the settlement and it is important that we do not create a climate in which wacky, fictitious figures end up scaring people unnecessarily without adding anything to the debate.

Andrew Bridgen: Does the Secretary of State remember the words of the previous Chancellor of the Exchequer, the right hon. Member for Edinburgh South West (Mr Darling)? Before the last general election, he said that if the Labour Government were re-elected this country faced the biggest cuts in its history. My right hon. Friend might have noticed that that statement has not been repeated by those on the Opposition Front Bench.

Mr Pickles: I do indeed. From what I can understand from what the right hon. Member for Don Valley was saying, it seems that she is in favour of cuts but not specific cuts. She is in favour of financial prudence, but not if it involves cuts to local authority spending.

The key argument about the forthcoming grant reductions is that the right hon. Lady seems to think that they will be unfair. How she can assert that when she does not know what the settlement will be is a mystery to us all. Opposition Front Benchers point to briefing figures from the pressure group SIGOMA, without realising that they are being played. SIGOMA understandably wants to paint a dire picture for its members as part of a lobbying exercise ahead of the settlement. It is playing metropolitan areas off against shire counties.

Mr Marsden: The Secretary of State asks why these points are being raised by the Opposition, but he and his colleagues have a record on this issue. The figures and cuts that the Government Front-Bench team produced in June, with the abolition of area-based grants and various other measures, disproportionately hit the parts of the country that we have been talking about.

Mr Pickles: The hon. Gentleman is well aware that in the emergency Budget we had to prevent money that had not been paid out from being paid—it is difficult to take money from areas that have not received any at all. He seems to think that we live in a vacuum. Has he seen what has gone on in other parts of the continent and the problems that other Governments face? Had we not taken these decisions we could have found ourselves in precisely the same position.

Robert Halfon: Would not councils have had a lot more money in recent years if they had not had to spend millions on ridiculous inspection regimes?

Mr Pickles: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As part of the deal in which local government will have less money and more power, we will reduce the number of unnecessary regimes.

Hazel Blears: I am glad that the right hon. Gentleman has got back to reality regarding what, if anything, can be done to mitigate the impact of the cuts on some of the poorest communities. I put to him again the issue of national non-domestic rates. He said that there would not be a surplus until 2012-13.

Mr Pickles: No—2013-14.

Hazel Blears: Well, the Office for Budget Responsibility's forecast in the Treasury's June Budget report indicated that there is likely to be a surplus of £3.4 billion. If that is the case, will the right hon. Gentleman agree now to

[Hazel Blears]

redistribute the whole of any surplus there might be, as the legislation covering this area provides that any such surplus will be redistributed? That is something practical that he could do to mitigate the effects on the poorest communities.

Mr Pickles: I always enjoyed it when the right hon. Lady occupied my role, so I am sorry to tell her that this is not like a deficit; we have to pay down the debt in relation to non-domestic rates, so the money that she suggests will be available will not be available for what she suggests. In case she thinks I am just making a rhetorical point, I am willing to write to her, copying in the right hon. Member for Don Valley, explaining this issue. If £5.5 billion were suddenly available, I think I might have used it by now.

The points that SIGOMA makes could be made by the county councils network, the district councils network, the SPARSE Rural group and my dear chums at the London councils. They could produce similar figures on how the funding system seems to channel more money to certain areas. Before Labour jumps on these bandwagons, it needs to realise that it cannot play the mets against the shires and then campaign honestly at the May district council elections.

Mr Watts rose—

Mr Pickles: We will listen to all representations. We are moving to meet the points made by the Local Government Association and other interested parties. We intend to deliver a fair and sustainable settlement that protects the most vulnerable communities and spreads the impact in a manageable way.

Mr Watts: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr Pickles: Of course—I cannot stand it for another moment.

Mr Watts: I thank the Secretary of State for giving way. Will he give an undertaking to the House today that any changes in the grant system will be based on academic evidence that takes deprivation into account, or is he intending to fix it as he has in the past?

Mr Pickles: The hon. Gentleman seems to have left the 1980s for the 1970s and “Jim’ll Fix It”. There is no intention to fix this or to hit vulnerable communities the hardest. We will be doing our best and I hope that the hon. Gentleman will be ready to praise me next week when we produce our proposals. Frankly, he should take with a pinch of salt some of the more alarmist predictions of jobs cuts that have been fed to the media by the unions and others. Such dossiers are based on looking at local media and projecting them out. We see unions being upset by stories that unions themselves have placed.

Reducing the number of posts is not the same as job cuts, as staffing can be reduced through natural wastage and freezing. The unions have intentionally misled on the issuing of section 188 notices, which allow the terms and conditions of workers to be changed to save money. The GMB has claimed that 26,000 staff in Birmingham face “the threat of redundancy”. Indeed, that would be

a shocking figure—26,000 workers faced with redundancy. In fact, the process seeks to reform car allowances and staff parking, and is nothing more than that. It is designed to reduce the scope for redundancies. Even Leon Trotsky at his worst would not have taken to the streets over car parking. Such reforms reduce the scope for redundancies and do not increase them.

Sir Alan Beith: Speaking of redundancies, my right hon. Friend has some discretion over the limited amount of money that he has to allow capitalisation of redundancies in those authorities that have low reserves. I ask him to look carefully at Northumberland, whose reserves were low because of a forced reorganisation under the previous Government, and there is a very heavy claim on the county council at present because of the incredible snowfalls that we have had in Northumberland.

Mr Pickles: My right hon. Friend makes a good point. We warned about the effects of the various reorganisations, and stopped those intended for Norfolk and for Devon. Where money is tight, we cannot afford to waste it on a reorganisation of local government.

I am actively reviewing the amount available for recapitalisation. Clearly, there will be tough choices. The sharing of services and back-office consolidation will reduce the number of staff posts needed over time. The priority of local government is not to be a municipal job creation scheme, but rather to provide quality front-line services, keep local taxes down, and provide a positive environment for private sector job creation and the expansion of local business.

Mrs Mary Glendon (North Tyneside) (Lab): Will the right hon. Gentleman comment on PricewaterhouseCooper’s statement that for every public sector job lost, a private sector job will be lost too?

Mr Pickles: I do not believe the figures. If that is the case, we are beyond economic ruin, because our country has reached a point where we can no longer afford to level off spending. If the hon. Lady would like the United Kingdom to enter the world of Greece and our friends in Ireland—[*Interruption.*] Let us be fair. What is the biggest problem? Sovereign debt. Which country has the largest sovereign debt? Had my right hon. Friend the Chancellor not taken those brave decisions in the emergency Budget and in the spending review, and if we did not take those brave decisions to their logical conclusion, we would have been in the danger zone. We all know where the Opposition would have been—they would have been running for cover.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I am interested in the Secretary of State’s references to Trotsky and other people, but how many local government workers does he expect to see made redundant at the end of this year on the basis of his policies?

Mr Pickles: That is just a typical Labour intervention. It is not about the economy; it is all about getting as many bleeding stumps as possible. What we do know, through research, is that despite the various daft claims made about the number of people being made redundant in Birmingham, for example, the majority are going by way of natural wastage, turnover, mutuals and co-operatives being set up—something that Trotsky would have approved

of—voluntary redundancies and early retirement. When it comes down to it, the likelihood is that the number of compulsory redundancies will be less than 4%. Frankly, these things can be managed with a will, and it is our intention that councils will manage them sensibly.

Owing to Labour's planned cuts and the dire state of the public finances, the vast majority of councils have seen these difficult and challenging times coming, and they have been making sensible, constructive plans to address them. I want to support them with action, not meaningless words. I can make councillors' and councils' jobs a lot easier by scrapping regulations, tearing up unnecessary guidance and cutting through red tape. The Government are restoring real democratic accountability to local government, giving the power, the freedom and the authority to those who actually make the decisions. We have to be realistic. We realise that there is less money, but unlike the former Government, I do not intend to tell councils how they should spend it. The money given in this settlement will not come with strings attached. As we said during the spending review, with very few exceptions we have ended the ring-fencing of grants, so that councils can decide for themselves how their money should be prioritised and spent.

Under the spending review, we will allow councils to borrow against future business rates. We are also introducing powerful new financial incentives for councils, such as the new homes bonus. In addition, there is the £20 million through capitalisation, referred to by my right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Sir Alan Beith). Councils can top that up with the sensible use of their £10 billion of reserves—they were prudent and repaired the roof when the sun was shining, unlike Labour, and they can now spend that money when it is rainy. There are a whole range of measures that proactive councils can take—for example, improving transparency, sharing services, cutting out waste, improving procurement practice and bringing senior pay under control.

Joan Ruddock: May I tell the Secretary of State that my council of Lewisham has done all the things that he has just mentioned? Over the past five years, it has saved £40 million through efficiency savings. He made the point about jobs. Let me tell him that the council has just taken a decision to cut £16 million from the budget. That would cost 300 jobs, but only 50% of them could be found through natural wastage. However, the council tells me that front-loading means that it will not be able to plan to get down even to that level, let alone the 4% that the Secretary of State has just spoken about.

Mr Pickles: The right hon. Lady's council has just £1 million short of £60 million in reserve. The decision that has been taken is its own decision, and I would urge it now to look at other measures. I would urge the council to look towards a joint—*[Interruption.]* It might not be for the right hon. Lady—I know she lives a champagne lifestyle—but £60 million is a lot of money. Let the council look towards sharing a chief executive, or sharing an education authority or planning authority. Let it look at working together right across back-office services.

At the heart of the settlement, we want to ensure the protection of hard-working families and pensioners; support for vulnerable individuals; help for vulnerable

communities; and fairness, for both north and south, and rural and urban England. Practical policies to protect the vulnerable include: £1 billion in extra grant for social care and a further £1 billion from the NHS; a new role for councils in public health, backed up with extra funding; £2 billion for decent homes, improving the quality of life for those in poor-quality housing; and £6.5 billion to support people and allow the vulnerable to lead independent lives. Labour talks about fairness, but when it was in government council tax more than doubled—in some years, above inflation—thanks to fiddled funding and unfunded burdens.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman mentions funding for public health, which is estimated to represent at least 4% of the NHS budget. Will that move across to local government?

Mr Pickles: The right hon. Lady is playing a game whereby if money moves from the health service it represents a cut in the health service, but if it moves to local authorities it fills a hole. Conservative Members have been saying for years that there is a role for councils in public health, and we are backing that. I recall, at the Opposition Dispatch Box, asking the then Government for the kind of financial commitments that we are currently giving to deal with adult social care. Frankly, the right hon. Lady should be thanking us—*[Interruption.]* Well, I'm glad you're supporting it. Just get behind the programme then, dear. That'd be marvellous.

Working families, pensioners and, indeed, the squeezed middle were hit the hardest. The hikes were equivalent to 3.5p on income tax, and the Labour Government were planning further local tax rises, as their local government manifesto for a fourth term revealed: removing the retail prices index cap on business rates, hammering local high streets; a council tax revaluation and rebanding, hitting cash-poor pensioners; and new taxes to empty bins, punishing struggling families. Labour's answer to every policy problem was an extra rise in tax or more red tape. But, in six months, the new Government have scrapped Labour's bin taxes, called off the council tax revaluation, increased small business rate relief and found £650 million a year of funding in each of the next four years to help to freeze council tax next year. Let me make it clear: that is completely new money; it is not top-sliced.

I intend this settlement to be the last ever to rely on such a complex and outdated system, which is not fit for purpose. It has trapped too many councils, making them financially dependent on central Government, and there is no incentive for them to invest in their local economy, given that the proceeds simply vanish to central Government to share out nationally. It makes planning difficult, weakens local accountability and stifles local innovation. It is part of the same trend that has led to some areas of the country becoming almost completely dependent on the public sector.

All that will become clearer when I present the full settlement to the House, but let me reassure Members that I and my ministerial team are doing everything possible to ensure that local government has a fair and sustainable settlement, to the good of the country and to the good of local communities.

5.8 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): May I take this opportunity to thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to speak in this important Opposition day debate? I am pleased to follow the Secretary of State, who, in his calm Yorkshire way, said not a lot. What he did say, however, will send a chill through communities in my constituency.

The Conservative-Liberal Democrat Government's cuts will clearly have an effect on all constituencies, but I believe they will impact more unfairly on areas with additional social need, such as my constituency in Greater Manchester. I benefit from representing a constituency that covers two very different local authorities, Stockport and Tameside metropolitan boroughs, and, although both authorities plan major reductions in spending in the years ahead, I fear that the cuts will impact particularly on Tameside, which has been ranked as an area of high deprivation and the 56th most deprived local authority area in England.

People in Tameside earn lower incomes than the national average, and in their time of need they might find themselves calling on council services, just when the council is least able to assist them because the massive reduction in its overall budgets will impact on those crucial services. To be fair, it is a similar story with the two Reddish wards in the Stockport part of my constituency. Although those wards are located in a much more prosperous borough overall, they are also areas of very high social need.

Duncan Hames (Chippenham) (LD): The hon. Gentleman makes a very interesting point about how poverty can be localised much more than on the basis of local authority area. Does he accept that that is a shortcoming local government finance in the past? The assumption has been that an area is either poor across the whole of the local authority or not at all?

Andrew Gwynne: For the past 13 years of the Labour Government, Stockport received additional money because of those deprived Stockport wards. It is a shame that the Liberal Democrat council chose not to spend the money in Reddish and in those wards.

It is true that we are facing one of the worst rounds of spending contraction ever experienced. That is likely to have a massive impact on every part of our public services, not just local government. However, we should not forget that local government provides, or co-ordinates, the delivery of some of the most valued public services—from children's services to adult social care, from leisure, parks and libraries to schools and from fixing roads and pavements to public transport and refuse collection.

I am concerned about how the cuts are being implemented and their unfairness to more socially deprived areas. My constituents in Tameside and Stockport accept that there needs to be a reduction in public spending and that local government must play its part, but it is certainly difficult to see any fairness—as was promised in the comprehensive spending review—in the fact that some councils in the most deprived areas will have reductions in their budgets next year of, as has been suggested, up to 25%, 30% or more, whereas other councils—many in the south—will feel the impact of those reductions far less.

Research from SIGOMA, a group of 44 metropolitan and unitary authorities outside London—I know the Secretary of State's view on that grouping—demonstrates that the councils that expect to be worst hit by the CSR are in the 20% most deprived areas. Clearly we know that the cuts will hit places such as Denton and Reddish very hard indeed.

Tameside council is planning for a total funding reduction of around £100 million over the next four years—a massive amount for one fairly small metropolitan borough to lose. We also know the cuts are being front-loaded, so Tameside council will need to save more than £37 million next year. It must save more in one year than it has saved over the past seven, despite making extremely tough choices to meet its Gershon savings. There is very little meat left on the bone. These cuts will hurt our services. Ultimately, the proposed cuts will mean a reduction in Tameside council's work force of about 800 over the next four years.

Gavin Barwell (Croydon Central) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is speaking up for his constituents, and he is to be applauded for that. He says that there is very little meat left on the bone in Tameside. What will he say to my constituents when they realise that under the previous Labour Government Tameside received a real-terms increase over the past five years, whereas Croydon received a real-terms cut of 3%?

Andrew Gwynne: I am not sure that those figures are correct. However, if that is what the hon. Gentleman says, people in Croydon should vote Labour. When combined with the new year rise in VAT, it is clear these cuts and the impact they will have on public services means that those people with the least—especially the elderly and most vulnerable—will pay more and lose the most.

I have had sight of recent research showing the overall impact of the Government's spending plans on local authorities, including Tameside. It calculates that from 2014-15, as my constituents make their contribution to the Government's deficit reduction, Tameside's economy will lose £50 million a year. It also shows that residents of working age will, on average, contribute £39.79 per person compared with the Chancellor's constituency of Tatton, where residents will contribute only £22.62 per head, or those living in Kensington and Chelsea, who will contribute just £5.91 per head.

George Hollingbery (Meon Valley) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on defending the constituents whom he so ably represents. He can, of course, cherry-pick statistics as he wishes, but I should like to let him know what is happening in part of my constituency. East Hampshire district council—the provenance of these statistics, incidentally, is the council itself, and they are historical—has seen a real-terms 25% reduction in the grant from central Government over the past 10 years. Does he think that that is fair?

Andrew Gwynne: Of course, the hon. Gentleman makes the case for his area, but I would say that areas such as Tameside, which I represent, do not have the capacity to raise the money locally, so they suffer disproportionately when central Government grants are cut in the way proposed by this Government.

Tom Blenkinsop (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab) *rose*—

Andrew Bingham (High Peak) (Con) *rose*—

Andrew Gwynne: I will not give way—I want to make some progress.

It is a similar story when we look at the changes to long-term sickness benefit, which is being cut by £2 billion a year. Tameside will lose £11 million a year: £85.14 per head of the working age population, compared with £45.18 for Tatton or £13.18 for Kensington and Chelsea. This is hugely unfair, and it clearly illustrates who is bearing the brunt of the spending reductions.

Let me turn to how the Stockport part of my constituency will be affected. The Liberal Democrats who run Stockport council are being very evasive—to put it politely. We know that they have to make about £20 million of cuts next year, but so far they have announced only £15 million—they will not yet say where the other £5 million will come from. That uncertainty is chronically unfair on their dedicated and hard-working work force. I find it ironic that the Liberal Democrats tabled one council motion after another condemning Labour's grant settlements—real-terms increases, year on year, on a frequent basis. Since their Government announced cuts, there has been not a single peep from any of their councillors. Nobody likes to be unpopular, least of all the Liberal Democrats, who have become past masters at blaming somebody else, but they are not being straight with the people of Stockport about where the axe will fall and what the impact will be on front-line services. Instead, they are using convenient managerial phrases such as “service redesign”, “restructure” and “reprioritise” when they really mean cuts.

Cuts on this scale mean big job losses. Only last week, Stockport council announced 250 job losses, which will mean unprecedented reductions in services that will be felt in every corner of our community—although given the previous form of Stockport Liberal Democrats, no doubt many of the cuts will hit the Reddish wards in my constituency hardest.

There is suspicion about where the axe will fall next. It is alleged, for example, that all the youth centres will be closed, including the one in Reddish, which does an invaluable job in keeping young people engaged with their education and away from trouble. This is a wider problem within the coalition Government and their ill thought-out plans regarding local government finance. How can they possibly create the so-called big society when the voluntary sector, which will be fundamental to it, will face such substantial reductions in its core funding as these local government cuts start to bite hard? Of course, as we heard earlier, many workers in the public and voluntary sectors are women who work in the heart of our communities as teaching assistants, care assistants, school crossing patrollers and dinner ladies. It is truly hypocritical of the coalition Government to talk about the big society, and then to attack ordinary people working in their local communities in a range of important jobs.

It is perhaps not sufficiently understood that many jobs in the private sector are dependent on local government and public sector funding. Demand will be taken out of the local economy, so many retail and service companies will suffer. Tameside pioneered a scheme called Tameside

Works First that prioritised the granting of smaller contracts to local companies to assist them through the downturn, helping local companies such as Denton-based Anvil Masters, which provided new park railings for Granada park in the town. Tameside should be lauded for pioneering such a scheme. However, the cuts will have a ripple effect in the private sector in my constituency and in every constituency.

Finally, the poorest, those who are most at risk and those who are most in need in our communities will be affected heavily by the cuts to council services. Some of the same people will be affected by the cuts to housing benefit. Recent research has shown that about 3,700 people in Tameside and 3,600 people in Stockport will lose out because of the proposed changes to housing benefit, some by as much as £42 a week. We should not forget that since the economic downturn, some households will have lost a wage and some people will have moved to lower paid jobs. That means that there are now even more low-paid families and that even more help is needed from local council services, at a time when councils are least able to help.

There is an emerging pattern across the country of who will be affected the most by local government cuts and the changes to the way in which central Government funds are handed out to councils: poorer areas in cities and metropolitan boroughs will face the brunt. The Labour Government had a strong record of increasing funding for local authorities in such areas, and of using those authorities to deliver national priorities by harnessing the best locally. Worse still, it is clear to all Labour Members that the Government have taken no account of how areas such as Denton and Reddish will fare with the massive reductions in spending. Sadly, we face a bleak future with trepidation.

5.21 pm

Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to catch your eye in this important debate.

Having served as a local councillor for a number of years before coming to this place, I praise the Secretary of State for deciding to free local councils from the chains of red tape that stifled local government throughout the years of the Labour Administration. In the current economic climate, there is no doubt that there will be pain and that it will apply to local government as much as to any other area.

Last Friday, my local council in Cornwall adopted an emergency budget and took the early initiative to consider where savings might be made before the settlement announcement. It is predicted that the cost of delaying that decision would have been £55,000 a day. Sadly, opposition parties in Cornwall were promoting further meetings and the delaying of decisions. Ten days of delay would have cost £500,000 and twenty days of delay would have cost £1 million. Opposition parties seem to be engaging in delaying tactics just for the sake of it.

I ask the Secretary of State to note that, on the creation of the new unitary council, the authority inherited a significant number of reserves that were held for specific reasons. Most came with a variety of commitments against them and, as such, remained untouched last year, although there was a minor review through which

[Sheryll Murray]

some reserves were swept up corporately. A new strategy has been introduced, the main theme of which is to reduce radically the number of reserves that are held; to manage all capital reserves centrally as part of the corporate approach to capital financing; to create one budget equalisation reserve per directorate to allow minor budget variations to be funded without recourse to the corporate centre; and to ensure that the authority's general reserve is sufficient.

The council acknowledges the need to consider alternative models of service delivery, including trusts, joint ventures and arm's length management organisations, some of which involve services being delivered in partnership with the private sector.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): On the sharing of services and facilities, does my hon. Friend agree that we must work across service areas with neighbouring authorities and external organisations to deliver value for money and to drive up standards?

Sheryll Murray: Absolutely. I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend.

The arm's length companies will remain under the direct control of the council, but will free up trade with partners and trade outside our borders to bring more business into Cornwall. An example of that shared service is that back-office corporate support functions will be brought together in a single organisation alongside the council's customer-facing front desk. That new organisation, although council controlled, will be able to sell its services to other partners within and outside Cornwall, generating more investment in our local economy. That will not only safeguard jobs in Cornwall but give the council a vehicle to create new employment opportunities: integrating those services will alone generate £2.7 million of savings.

Other ways of working include outsourcing, which is where organisational functions that could be delivered by in-house teams are contracted out to external organisations. The council has no intention of widespread outsourcing, but it will explore that option where it makes sense and delivers the best solution for local taxpayers.

Social enterprise is another likely model for service delivery, particularly in relation to the integration of health and social care services. Developing new models of service delivery is a radical shift, and the council has said that it will explore the details further in a series of business cases. It has said that it has a major role to play in decisions on how local health services will operate in future. It is keen to benefit from joint commissioning of care services and take the lead through its statutory role in health and well-being. Adult care services could be integrated into health services and new social enterprises, and public health services will become part of the council. The council will offer to provide a joined-up support service for GP consortiums, and there will be an integrated children's service led by the council.

In Cornwall, the council has been talking about public sector reform for some time. It is resourceful and pragmatic, and it can deliver the big society.

5.27 pm

Mrs Mary Glendon (North Tyneside) (Lab): The Secretary of State recently said that councils should use the cuts as an

"opportunity to completely rethink everything they are doing, creating a modern, flexible and innovative council."

I was a councillor for 15 years in North Tyneside, and that is nothing new to me. The big society and localism are just about reinventing the wheel, because many of us who were local councillors in the past know how hard councillors work and how much they have done to use their budgets wisely.

During my 15 years as a councillor I saw many changes. At first, I was a councillor under the former Tory Government, and when Labour took power in 1997, it was good to see changes such as how we were able to bring houses up to the decent homes standard over 10 years, and to see our neglected schools change, becoming new or refurbished buildings and providing fantastic places in which to educate our children. There was Sure Start, and in my borough there were new swimming pools. We were also able to put in place the "Fuel for kids" scheme, giving children a free breakfast at the start of the school day. For many children, that made a difference to their learning ability, and there is empirical evidence to prove that.

We were able to do many of those things when we moved to a mayoral system and had a progressive Labour mayor, who followed two years of a Tory mayor. Under the Tories many services were cut, and in fact the voluntary sector service in which I worked was closed. When we got our progressive Labour mayor, John Harrison, all the things that I have referred to flourished.

Just over a year ago, the previous Tory mayor was re-elected, and, as he has mentioned in the House, she happens to be a favourite of the Secretary of State. That Tory mayor, when leader of the council opposition, wrote to the then Housing Minister and asked him to withdraw £100 million of credits that were to be given to the Labour council to build older people's homes for the future—she simply did not want that done. Since taking office, she has drastically reduced that project, which means we will see not new, fantastic, refurbished properties, but old houses simply remodelled not to the standard people wanted. She has also prevented 800 new council houses from being built with money that would have come from the former Labour Government, because she did not want it to happen in her end of the borough.

It is interesting to see how, until tonight, the mayor has fought against so much that Labour put in place and praised the new Government. The mayor I am talking about is Mayor Arkley, and tonight, in North Tyneside's section of the *Newcastle Evening Chronicle*, she is pleading with her Government to have a change of heart. She has urged Treasury and other Ministers "to think again about the speed of the cuts".

Tom Blenkinsop: It is not just in Tyneside and the north-east where Conservatives are vocally opposing the Government's measures; it is also in Teesside, where the Conservative leader of Stockton council, Ken Lupton, has said that the Con-Dem Government's position on the cuts is wrong. Also, Mayor Mallon from Middlesbrough—an independent, and not necessarily a loving friend of the Labour party—has said that the Conservative party and Liberal Democrats have declared war on the north.

Mrs Glindon: My hon. Friend is right. It is good to see those people waking up to the realities of these deep cuts.

On this occasion, I would like to join our Tory mayor in pleading with the Government. She said:

“At a recent meeting with an official from HM Treasury, I have requested officials to reconsider this issue and spread the reductions more evenly over the four-year period of the Spending Review and to allow additional freedoms to local authorities to capitalise redundancy and equal payments to enable more effective planning to take place for workforce changes”.

I ask that Ministers listen not just to the Opposition, but to their own party members, who are trying to deliver a service and believe that the cuts are too deep, too soon.

5.33 pm

Heather Wheeler (South Derbyshire) (Con): I declare an interest, because I am still a councillor on South Derbyshire district council and am married to the new council leader. I was leader myself for three years, and was previously a councillor there for 15 years—it seems to be a popular choice. Prior to that, for four years, I was a councillor on Wandsworth council. My antecedents in local government are strong and long. I have an abiding love for it.

I am appalled at tonight’s debate. It is astonishing that yet again we have hour after hour of prime television in which all the Labour lot do is scaremonger—it is hour in, hour out. There is no substance to what they say, because of the appalling way Labour councils have run areas year after year. They have never considered value for money for their taxpayers.

Tom Blenkinsop: By the sound of it, the hon. Lady has a great record in local government in South Derbyshire, so she will be aware of the Gershon savings over the past five years, under which 3% to 5% of council tax spending was looked at in terms of savings across the board. In my area, that has led to significant savings over the past five years.

Heather Wheeler: Of course, I know about the Gershon savings. I also remember the squeals about it and the synthetic savings that were made. The opportunity was not taken to look root and branch at what local councils need to do and should do, at the way they should do it and at the value for money they provide for their residents. It is hugely important that people take an innovative look at the way in which local councils work, and that they take this opportunity. The whole country is in a financial crisis, and nobody should be in position where they do not have to take their percentage of it. That would be completely wrong.

The new coalition Government are going to look at the floors and ceilings, the caps, the huge amount of ridiculous comprehensive area assessment-type targets, and the millions of pounds that all our councils have had to spend on this sort of thing. This coalition Government are about freeing people up to organise themselves in such a way that they provide the vital services that their people want at the same time as having the guts to say, “We don’t want to do that any more. We’ll have a referendum on it. Do you agree with us?” In our council in South Derbyshire, 1% on the rates raises £50,000. Given the floors and ceilings that I

have had to put up with for the past 13 years of the Labour Government, we have easily lost £2 million there. The same goes for the fire authority in Derbyshire, and the police authority as well.

Mr Watts: May I inform the hon. Lady that those floors were introduced to protect her local authority? Local authorities such as St Helens should have received a far bigger grant allocation every year, but we did not put right what the previous Tory Government had done, which was to take money from the most deprived parts of the community and give it to the most affluent parts.

Heather Wheeler: That is a really interesting point. All I know is that I have lost £2 million in South Derbyshire. I do not know whether it should have been £2.5 million or £0.5 million; I know that I lost £2 million.

Gavin Barwell: I should just like to put the record straight, following that previous intervention. According to the House of Commons Library, two of the local authorities that did worst, along with my own council, over the past five years under the previous Labour Government were Newcastle upon Tyne and Liverpool.

Heather Wheeler: That was a very helpful intervention. Fortunately, someone has some facts at their fingertips, rather than the usual pure emotion.

Mr Watts: The hon. Lady and the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Gavin Barwell) need to understand the amount of money that has gone into Liverpool. Under the Labour Administration, many millions of pounds went into the regeneration of the city. The Labour Government had a good record on Liverpool city council.

Heather Wheeler: What an amazing situation. We are completely blind to the reality of what has been going on. The ratepayers of South Derbyshire also know about how much money comes in. They were used to council tax rises of 9%, 13% and 17%, which was absolutely outrageous for hard-working families. It was completely ridiculous. We were left to fend for ourselves, and it just was not good enough.

The new localism Bill, and the new arrangements for the rate support grant, will have a major effect on what we do. We will be able to do away with the horrendous top-down targets that our accountancy and finance staff used to spend hundreds of hours dealing with. All of that will be swept away, and thank goodness for that. I am really looking forward to the announcements just before Christmas. There is one more Christmas present that the Minister can give me, relating to Gypsies and Travellers, but we can talk about that another time. We have had to put up with scaremongering for the last however many hours, and the debate is to go on until 10 o’clock, apparently, so goodness knows what else the Opposition will come up with.

Tom Blenkinsop: Those were not my words that I mentioned earlier; they were the words of Ken Lupton, the Conservative leader of Stockton borough council. He has said that the proposals were wrong.

Heather Wheeler: If the hon. Gentleman would like to phone me later, I will sort him out.

It really takes the biscuit that we can sit here, having had 13 years of local government being raped by top-down targets, London telling us how we have to do stuff, ignoring local priorities and spending hour after hour on a meaningless load of nonsense including having different languages printed on council papers all the time—

Tom Blenkinsop *rose*—

Heather Wheeler: No, I think that I have given way enough. It is a delight to hear the hon. Gentleman, but perhaps another time.

I am really pleased that the Ministers have given robust answers from the Dispatch Box, and I look forward to hearing some quieter comments later on, along with some apologies from the Labour party for what we have had to put up with for the past 13 years.

5.39 pm

Mr Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): It is a pleasure, albeit a sad one, to speak in this debate about the impact that this Government's policies have had on my constituency and my local authority. I speak not only for Blackpool, however, but on behalf of many other seaside and coastal towns that have suffered disproportionately under the policies of the Minister's Department and the Government since they were formed—I will not say since they were elected—in May.

As many Members know, Blackpool and many other seaside towns have always had significant problems that are not just particular to them, but are greatly emphasised. The problems are connected with mobility and transience, and they often have severe pockets of deprivation. It is to the last Government's credit that significant attempts were made to ameliorate the situation both through spending formulae and through the working neighbourhoods fund, area-based grants, the local enterprise growth initiative, the sea change programme and others. They helped to soften some of the particular problems faced by those areas.

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Marsden: Not at this point, but I may do later.

I shall not stray far from the motion before us, but I want to mention, in passing, the significant assistance provided by the Northwest Regional Development Agency, and the same point applies to seaside and coastal towns elsewhere.

Brandon Lewis (Great Yarmouth) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Marsden: I would like to make a little progress before giving way. As I was saying, the regional development agencies provided a significant benefit.

What has happened since June this year? First, we had the area-based grants cuts in the emergency Budget. If we look at the figures on the cuts in seaside and coastal towns generally, and particularly at those in Blackpool, we find that in most cases the cuts were

twice the level of those made in other areas. It is not necessary to take just my word for it; let me cite the words of Peter Callow, the leader of Conservative-controlled Blackpool council. On Radio Lancashire, commenting on the cuts, he said that

“it is 33 million for a part year remember which equates to £4 million for the whole year, that is a sizeable sum and what I have got to explain to government and what I am doing is saying look behind the glitz and the glamour of Blackpool there is deprivation, we are one of the most deprived areas in the land and we shouldn't be singled out like this, I understand some of the leafy lanes of Surrey and places have got away with it, well that can't be right”.

That is what the leader of our Conservative-controlled council said back in June.

Lyn Brown: I am interested in the point my hon. Friend is developing. I understand that Newham council is likely to lose approximately £70 million over three years. Newham, as my hon. Friend will know, has the sixth highest level of deprivation in the country. Richmond, on the other hand—I am sure we all who know who represents that constituency—is to lose only about 9% of its net grant, which amounts to only £4.6 million.

Mr Marsden: I am grateful for that intervention, in which my hon. Friend highlights the disparities that can arise between two boroughs in a relatively small geographical area in London. Those disparities, of course, have been reflected elsewhere. Blackpool had the cuts I mentioned, for example. Then we had the spending review.

I see in his place the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill). When he was tackled on these issues during questions immediately following the spending review, he came up with the immortal phrase:

“Those in greatest need ultimately bear the burden of paying off the debt which this country has been left”.—[*Official Report*, 10 June 2010; Vol. 511, c. 450.]

If there were ever a Freudian slip to demonstrate the position of Conservative Members, who want to punish deprived areas for the problems they face, that was it.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Robert Neill): The hon. Gentleman could at least quote me properly. He should remember that I said that that would be the case if the deficit were not paid down. We are paying down the deficit precisely to protect the most vulnerable—something that his party singularly failed to do.

Mr Marsden: If the Minister consults the *Hansard* report of the day in question, he will see that he said what I have quoted, that Mr Speaker said “Order”, and that we moved on to other subjects. There was no reference to what he had said.

The spending review speaks of front-loading, and we heard—unusually, coming from a blunt Yorkshireman—some quite waffly references to it by the Secretary of State. We must wait to find out whether all the waffle produces anything, but I can tell the house that the abolition of the area-based grants, and the effective abolition of the working neighbourhoods fund in the second spending review, have had a devastating effect on towns such as Blackpool, not least because—as was pointed out earlier—it is not just a question of what the

working neighbourhoods fund did for the public sector, but of what it was also able to do for the private sector in conjunction with that.

We in Blackpool, like those in several other areas, have experienced a double whammy. We have also been left off the list of areas that will receive funds for decent homes, although our borough and community feature on the index of local deprivation as the 12th most deprived in the country.

Labour Members and, to be fair, one or two Government Members have talked of the knock-on effect on other services. In my area the Connexion service, youth services and other services of that nature have already suffered badly, and are likely to continue to suffer badly if anything like the 16% overall cut that is currently being proposed for Blackpool borough council is imposed.

At this year's Labour party conference, I went to a fringe meeting that had been organised by Action for Children. It was a good, non-party-political meeting, which discussed the involvement of young people in their local communities. It was attended by some very good youth workers from all over the north-west. Virtually all those people, who were doing good work in their communities, had already lost their jobs or were about to do so, either because of the abolition of the future jobs fund or because of cuts resulting from the area-based grant system.

In case Government Members think that this is simply a bit of propaganda from the Opposition, let me remind them what the chief executive of Blackpool council wrote to me in a letter back in July about the reduction in revenue and capital support. He spoke of cuts of £3 million in the area base grant, £1.3 million in education, £731,000 in local enterprise growth initiatives, £116,000 in Supporting People, and £526,000 in the working neighbourhoods fund. The list could go on. In fact, the north-west generally faced the biggest share of the £1.17 billion of local authority cuts that were announced in June. It lost £1 of every £6 that was cut across the United Kingdom.

Gordon Birtwistle (Burnley) (LD): I was a Burnley councillor for many years. We had the working neighbourhoods fund, but we were well aware that it would end this year. Were Blackpool councillors not aware of that? We made provision for it.

Mr Marsden: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. I understand that he wishes to mitigate some of the criticism that his own councillors have made of the various settlements, but I remind him that the cuts in area-based grant had to be effected in year, in this year, quite apart from what would happen after 2011.

Mr Watts: The Government keep talking about the three-year period for the working neighbourhoods fund. At that stage we had a three-year settlement, so all grants were based on three years, not just this one.

Mr Marsden: I am indebted to my hon. Friend. He is, of course, absolutely right.

Lyn Brown: Will my hon. Friend give way one last time?

Mr Marsden: Very briefly.

Lyn Brown: I thank my hon. Friend, who has been most generous. Does he agree that the withdrawal of the working neighbourhoods fund is a false economy? Getting just one single parent into employment through the use of the fund saves the public purse about £5,300 per year.

Mr Marsden: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. In common with many other seaside and coastal towns, Blackpool has a lot of small businesses and micro-businesses, and they are precisely the kind of businesses that benefited from the application of the working neighbourhoods fund and who are now suffering as a result of its potential withdrawal.

I want to talk about the situation in Blackpool as it is now. My local authority has told me that, on the basis of a 16% cut, it is looking for cuts of £32 million in its overall budget. Unsurprisingly, that led the leader of Blackpool council to write to the Secretary of State—he has been having quite a sustained correspondence with the Secretary of State, but without a great deal of success. On 6 October he said that he had written in June to highlight the disproportionate impact that the first tranche of funding cuts was having on a needy and deprived local authority and to make a plea that the autumn comprehensive spending review considered a more equitable sharing of any other pain. It did not do that, of course, and he then felt constrained to write again on 5 November saying that his assessment and that of many of his colleagues is that the front loading of formula grant cuts will have an adverse effect of between 12% to 16% next year, which is very significant. He said that there was the anticipation of major job losses in 2011-12 alone and that for a town like Blackpool, where nearly 30% of the working population are currently employed by the public sector and which has seen a 91% increase in JSA over the last two years, such a radical step reduction in central funding would have a catastrophic effect on the local economy. He said that he fully understood the need to reduce the overall deficit over the four-year period but he urged the Government to reconsider their approach prior to the announcement of that provisional settlement in early December.

That is also what all my party colleagues are urging. We are not suggesting that the Secretary of State has a magic wand he can wave to solve all the problems—not that I have ever seen him in Christmas panto. Rather, we are talking about sensible settlements.

We are also talking about the cumulative effect of what this Government have done, because it is not just about the cuts in the working neighbourhoods fund or local government cuts. It is also about what is being done in respect of education maintenance allowances. Some 2,500 young people in Blackpool are now going to be deprived. I went to my sixth-form college last week, where I met the brightest group of first-year sixth formers—all of them girls, incidentally. I have been meeting them for some time. They were all full of enthusiasm for where they were going, and they had all come through the Aimhigher programme. They were also all—bar one, I think—in receipt of EMA, and, of course, they were the last cohort to be receiving that. We are therefore talking about this whole conglomeration of subjects.

The fact is that, even if the Secretary of State believes he has made a significant impact on the current situation,

[Mr Marsden]

that is not what the journalists are saying. On 25 November, the *Local Government Chronicle* said that the Secretary of State

“has been rebuffed in a last-ditch plea to the Treasury for funding...Sources close to chief secretary to the Treasury Danny Alexander”—

who was obviously not singing from the same hymn sheet as the Secretary of State today—

“confirmed that the Secretary of State made an unsuccessful plea for more cash earlier this month to mitigate the impact of front-loaded local government cuts.”

The Secretary of State was singing a cheerful song today, but whether he was whistling to keep his spirits up, we will wait to see with the local government settlement.

When we move aside all the statistics, we are talking about the impact of real cuts on real people. I want to conclude by sharing with the House the account of a visit I made to a project in the summer. It is a community garden in a very deprived area in the centre of Blackpool. Everybody had worked hard on it, but the efforts had been co-ordinated by a woman from the council who had worked with the police community support officers and the residents association. The mayor attended, and we all had a wonderful afternoon. At the end the woman from the council came forward and said a few things, and we were then all told to put our hands together and give her a big round of applause because it was her last day. Why was it her last day? It was her last day because she was one of the people losing their job under the area-based grants cut that this Government have brought forward. I do not want—and I am sure many other Members do not want this either—to spend the next 12 months going around my constituency from worthy project to worthy project having similar experiences. Therefore, despite the philosophical and ideological differences between the Government and Opposition Members, I urge the Government to think again. They should look again at the disproportionate effect these policies are having on some of our most deprived communities.

5.55 pm

Simon Hughes (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (LD): I am pleased to have this opportunity to speak in a debate on local government. As I said in an intervention on the shadow Secretary of State, local government is very important, as is funding local government properly, and I think it is perfectly proper for the Labour Opposition to choose the funding settlement for local government as the general subject for an Opposition-day debate. The title of the debate is therefore entirely appropriate; we should debate the distribution of local government funding and the effects of changes to it.

The only real matter of dispute that I have with the right hon. Lady and her colleagues is that many of them are making comments today as if the settlement had been announced, when instead we are, I hope, using our last chance to tell Ministers what we would like to happen. A whole succession of colleagues on the Labour Back Benches have reeled off figures as if they were the final settlement, and one has complained that one of his councils has not finally decided what cuts it should make. The hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) complained that Stockport council has not

finalised that. My hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mark Hunter) used to be the leader of Stockport council. Those of us who know that council, and many other councils, well understand that it has not yet finalised its budget—and neither has my local authority, which happens to be run by Labour, whereas Stockport is run by Liberal Democrats. They are waiting—

Lyn Brown: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Simon Hughes: No, the hon. Lady entered the Chamber only a few minutes ago and has already intervened twice, and I want to deal with the contributions that have been made.

Most councils wait until the provisional settlement, which will be announced next week, after which they make representations if they feel it is not fair or appropriate, and then there is a final settlement. Of course there is planning for a budget, but today's debate is an opportunity for us not to be doom-mongers about decisions that have not been taken, but to make sure we put cases and arguments publicly, that some of us have been making to Ministers and colleagues privately, as to what we believe will be the best possible settlement in the difficult financial circumstances of the time.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): As the hon. Gentleman is accusing the Opposition of saying things in a particular way, we must be clear that local councils have been pleading with Department for Communities and Local Government Ministers for a steer on this because of the unprecedented level of cuts. The comprehensive spending review clearly shows front loading, yet the Secretary of State today still calls that fiction and will still not answer questions. Does the hon. Gentleman not agree that it is right that when councils ask for a steer they should be given a steer, yet we are still not getting a single answer from Ministers?

Simon Hughes: Of course councils make representations both collectively and singly and, understandably, once councils of all parties, including those run by Liberal Democrats, heard the announcement of the CSR in October, they told the Government that they thought the front loading of the four-year settlement was not as desirable as a more evenly spread reduction. I share that view. I intervened on the Secretary of State asking him if there was an opportunity to have a flatter reduction over the four years. He did not give a final answer because, of course, that is a decision that will be left until the formal announcement, but he indicated—I agree it was not definitive—

Caroline Flint *rose*—

Simon Hughes: Wait a minute; I want to deal with the question from the right hon. Lady's colleague first.

The Secretary of State indicated that he was understanding of that point, and it is clear that the Government have done work to see if they can mitigate the effects of a more severe front loading. I, like others, will wait to see the outcome of that. I hope it will be possible to mitigate the effects. If it is, that will be a major achievement; if it is not, it is to be regretted. However, there are many good things about the settlement so far that was announced in the CSR, as there are also

some proper concerns, one of which the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) rightly enumerated.

Caroline Flint: Part of the reason that the Opposition decided to use a whole day of Opposition time to debate this subject is that we think we should lobby and pressure the Government on it. I must ask the hon. Gentleman something. Would it not have been better if, instead of having the formula grant profile announced in the comprehensive spending review show a decrease next year of 10.7%, and then reductions of 6.4, 0.9 and 5.6% for the following three years, the Government could have spread the cuts evenly over that four-year period? They have created completely unnecessary mayhem and fear out there.

Simon Hughes: I say clearly to the right hon. Lady that, as I have indicated, I have argued publicly and privately that it would be better for the spending reduction to be spread more evenly. I have been into the Department to make that case. A parliamentary committee of Liberal Democrats from both Houses has collectively made that case, and it includes people who have been leaders of local councils. I understand and share the view that it would clearly be easier for local government to manage a gradual reduction than sudden and bigger reductions in the first two years, a small reduction in the third year and then an intermediate reduction. There is no disagreement on this issue between the right hon. Lady and me, and there is not much disagreement between councils of all colours around the country, which are making that point to government. I hope that the Government and Ministers in the Department for Communities and Local Government have been able to make some progress on that point, given that they obviously have to start with an announcement made by the Chancellor which reduces their flexibility—we will doubtless hear when the settlements are made.

Joan Ruddock: I do not know where the hon. Gentleman's local authority lies in the indices of multiple deprivation, but mine is the 39th most deprived in the country. I say to him that there is a need for him to advise the Government on how to create fairness between boroughs such as ours and the Prime Minister's local authority, which has been cited and is in the 5% least deprived areas in the whole country.

Simon Hughes: The right hon. Lady would expect me to be sympathetic to that point and I have acted in the past few weeks on that very issue. I have been in to see Ministers; I went to see the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Andrew Stunell), and civil servants to discuss exactly that issue. I believe that it would be wrong if all the funding currently given to councils, including the working neighbourhoods fund, which was a top-up in order to assist deprived communities, was not taken into account as the starting point for the calculation for the next grant. I have also argued that it would be inappropriate for there to be a greater decrease in percentile terms for authorities such as hers and mine, which have significant deprivation, than for smaller authorities, just because we happen to have had a larger amount of public money before. I have been given reassurance that an upper and lower percentage reduction

will be common across all local government—a band above and below which the reduction cannot happen—and that there is a likely inclusion of at least some, although I hope all, of the other funding, not just the core formula grant.

I understand the point that the right hon. Lady makes, and she would expect me to go into bat for deprived communities, because I represent a borough that has a higher deprivation index than the next-door borough of Lewisham—I believe that is the case. Relative deprivation is not a competition we are proud of, but this is something we have to deal with. Of course one of the things that we have to do is try to get a fair settlement that reflects the needs of and deprivation in all the local authorities in that settlement. Again, I can tell her that I have been doing the job that she, my constituents and my local authority, although it is run by Labour, would expect me to do, just as I would have done when my local authority was run by my colleagues.

Mr Watts *rose*—

Simon Hughes: I will not give way, as the hon. Gentleman has intervened several times in this debate and I want to press on.

It is not just local government that is important; I want to pay tribute to councillors, of all parties, who serve in local government and to many extremely good officers in local government. It contains some brilliant officers, some less brilliant ones and, as in any walk of life, some people who may not be in their right vocation. Southwark council has some excellent officers, and I pay tribute to them and thank them for their courteous and regularly helpful service.

We know the background to today's debate: we have to deal with a huge economic legacy of the combination of international problems, the banking crisis and the previous Government's policies. We know that we have to save public money and we know that local government has to bear its share. I note that the Department for Communities and Local Government has imposed on itself a larger percentage reduction in its funding than it is asking local government to bear.

There will also be good things in the settlement, according to the comprehensive spending review. For example, it is clear that there will be additional money—£1 billion a year—for personal social services, in order to deal with the fact that there are more older people and people are living longer. That is a good thing. There will also be far fewer ring-fenced grants—90 will reduce to 10—and that is a good thing for most local councillors, who want to have that choice. In addition, a set of local community budgets will be trialled around the country. We should be positive about those good things.

The Government have to take two other things into account. The first is that some councils have much more reserve than others. The second is that some councils have the ability to raise much more money through council tax than others, because they serve much richer communities. Those background considerations are absolutely relevant.

Mr Marsden: On that specific point about revenue-raising ability, does the hon. Gentleman agree that this is why, regardless of philosophical arguments about dedicated

[Mr Marsden]

streams, the severe attack on area-based grants for councils with significant areas of deprivation has been so devastating?

Simon Hughes: That is why a debate has taken place in which some of us have been trying to discuss a formula that is fair. Some bits of funding that are nothing to do with the local government funding settlement will still go to “affluent” and to “less affluent” areas. Such funding cannot be affected by it, which means that those areas will continue to get public money because it is protected in other ways.

I hope—I was going to say this at the end of my speech, but I will say it now—that one of the things that this Government can achieve, given that they are already a Government of two parties, is to work with the Labour party to try to get a more settled, agreed formula for distributing money to local government. Of course the cake size will vary, but the way in which it is divided between county and district council, and between unitary authorities, metropolitan boroughs and London boroughs, is always the subject of terrible struggle every year and has never been entirely satisfactory. This is neither coalition policy, nor Liberal Democrat policy, but I see no reason, given that we have set up an Office for Budget Responsibility to give independent advice, why we could not have an office that does that sort of job for local government and seeks to offer independent advice as to what the formulae should be. That would take that issue out of the inevitable political bartering, which does not, in the end, necessarily produce the right answer. This involves a terribly complex set of issues and I hope that we can find a better way of doing it.

I wish to make a final generic point and then say a couple of specific things relating to today’s agenda. I know that the Government have met and heard from the Local Government Association and London Councils, which are both cross-party bodies. I shall put on the record the LGA’s five considerations, which I share. I have dealt with one, which is the desire for a reduction, if possible, of the impact of front loading. My right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Sir Alan Beith) has touched on another, which is the desire for an increase in capitalisation limits.

I raised that issue with Ministers the other day. The Government have set aside £200 million to pay for potential redundancy in local government. I understand exactly what the Secretary of State said, which was that we hope that many of the job losses will come through natural wastage and other things, not enforced redundancy. My noble Friend Lord Shipley managed well a reduction in staff when he was a council leader in Newcastle, working with the unions, in a way that mitigated all the worst consequences—that is how it should be done. There are good models for doing that, and they are very much supported by the TUC and its member unions. I have had good and authoritative reports that the real figure is much more like the one that the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) and I have used and, thus, the total bill may be nearer £2 billion, or thereabouts, than £200 million—that clearly needs to be addressed. It is no good our thinking that local authorities can necessarily find the money that they will need if they are to reduce their staff costs.

Sir Alan Beith: It is perhaps worth reiterating that some authorities could meet a larger proportion of the redundancy requirement out of reserves and that others, through no fault of their own, are not in that position—I mention Northumberland as an example.

Simon Hughes: I remember—my right hon. Friend alluded to this fact—that the situation in Northumberland, which went through an enforced change in its local authority nature, boundaries and so on, was more difficult. Others are in difficult situations, too.

The LGA’s third point concerns accounting for what it calls “missing grants”. There is uncertainty about more than £1.1 billion of specific grants on which councils rely and where the Government have yet to announce future funding levels. I do not know whether the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), can tell us when he winds up whether those announcements can be made at the same time. The sooner they can be made the better.

The fourth point concerns fees and charges that are set centrally, such as licensing fees, which have often been shown to be inadequate in covering the full cost of the related services and I ask the Government to deal with that across Government. There are many sub-issues with fees and charges. I hope, for example, we stop the nonsense of having differential fees for burials depending on which side of a boundary one lives—[*Interruption.*] This is a serious point. People who happen to have moved across a boundary, having lived all their life in one authority, find they have to pay, say, 10 times as much to have their late husband or wife buried. Those things are offensive nonsense and we need to deal with them.

The last point is that we need fair grant distribution. That is where I make the strongest plea, alongside the right hon. Member for Don Valley. We must ensure that all the funds that have come from Government to local government this year are the starting point for the calculation for the next year. I have been reassured that things are moving in that direction and I want them to move completely in that direction over the next few days.

London Councils makes similar points. Southwark, like Lewisham, is a borough that has had the protection of a floor and cap, as many authorities have had to. Southwark, like London Councils, argues that funding floors should be set at the highest possible level to prevent cuts falling disproportionately on the local authorities with the highest need. That is important. Those points have been made, by and large but not exclusively, by authorities that are not Conservative-run, but authorities run by the Tories are in that boat, too, as well as authorities where there is a joint administration.

Let me make a final couple of points. Also included should be any other local authority funding that has been cut, if for understandable reasons. For example, in Southwark there was the Aylesbury private finance initiative for our largest estate, which was due to be rebuilt. Because that work had not started, the Government have said that they cannot advance the money. I understand that argument, but it needs to be taken into account as part of the picture. I make a specific plea on that point.

I am conscious that the Government will go down the road of returning business rate control to local government. That is a good thing. I am very conscious that in the

localism Bill, which I think is coming into the public domain this week, the Government will give much more discretion to local government on how it raises and spends its money. That is a very good thing. I have always argued that the Department that looks after local government should stand up to the Treasury so that local councils can have the power of general competence, including total general financial competence. For example, they can then borrow against their asset base—their housing stock in the case of Southwark—without having to go to the Government cap in hand to get permission. The Treasury's hand has been unnecessarily authoritative. I understand why, but in any other parts of the world local council spend does not count in the same way and in the same accountancy column towards public sector borrowing requirement totals.

I have a couple of messages to give local councils through the Government. Again, I shall reflect some things that have already been said. Councils must be careful not to pick on the voluntary sector when times are hard for them. It is easy to do that. It is easy suddenly to decide to take all or the bulk of the money away from organisations that are not in-house. Sometimes, councils must reduce their own management and costs. That might be a more effective way of dealing with reductions than taking money away from the voluntary sector, where local authority funding contributes towards a larger whole. I hope that there will not be any such abuse of the relationship. Voluntary sector organisations are often valuable partners and they need to be given as much support and encouragement as possible.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I agree with the hon. Gentleman, but does he not think that that is the basis of the debate? If the cuts are early and quick—if they have to be decided in three months—people will go for the easy options rather than the restructuring, because the restructuring will take longer to come into effect. Cutting a voluntary sector budget is almost immediate.

Simon Hughes: I will not dissent from that. I am trying to act in a spirit of consensus and I hope that we will be careful. To put it bluntly, there are both good and poor voluntary sector organisations and although I am not saying that they should not have their grants checked and revisited regularly, the good ones need protection. There is sometimes scope for rationalisation in the voluntary sector. In Southwark, the three pensioners' organisations are becoming one. That should have happened a long time ago—I argued for it—and it will make them a stronger body. I also make a plea that non-statutory youth services should be particularly protected. Colleagues on both sides of the House have argued for that.

Local government must get the message that it should not be paying anybody more than the Prime Minister. It is very simple. Salaries have been ridiculous and unjustified. It has been everybody, and it is not the fault of a council of any particular colour. They have been following each other into this competitive game. To put it bluntly, nobody in the public sector needs to earn more than about £150,000 a year. I am sorry, but I have a really hard-line view about this. We need to start to scale down the ridiculous salaries. If the public sector behaved properly, perhaps we would have some morality in going to the private sector to say that it should not pay such ridiculous salaries either.

Times might be hard, but I ask local government please not to sell off the family silver, which it might live to regret. I am having a local spat with my local council leader because Southwark council has decided that it wants to sell off the three historic metropolitan borough town halls. That is unnecessary. The buildings could be reconfigured and kept in use and they would be far better places and venues that would be far more valuable than the alternatives that have been mentioned.

I have followed the example of the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Mr Marsden) in being positive about trying to find a way of doing things much better in the future. We need common agreement on how to decide the formula. I hope that we will minimise redundancies in all cases, because nobody wants any more redundancies than there should be. I hope that when we get the settlement—probably next week—there will be the maximum collaboration between the major parties to try to ensure that where there is still unfairness, we seek to persuade the Government to make adjustments between the provisional settlement and the final settlement so that the latter is better. This will not be an easy time for local government—no one is pretending that—but I hope that today's debate will mitigate that and that we can all encourage Ministers in the Department to ensure that they win as far as possible every remaining battle they have to fight with the Treasury.

6.17 pm

Steve Rotheram (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): I am delighted to have been given the opportunity to speak in this important debate as, once again, yet another announcement—this time on local government funding—will see areas such as Liverpool lose out in favour of more affluent areas of the country. I have no doubt that some Tories on the Government Benches would agree with the rich getting richer—after all, it is part of their political philosophy—but they could at least come clean about it and not try to kid us that this makes things fairer.

Andrew Percy: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Steve Rotheram: Not just yet.

To hear the Secretary of State tell one of my hon. Friends not to take us back to the '80s shows the brass neck of the man. That is exactly what Labour Members wish to stop. If he wants to know about that torrid decade of Tory rule, I would be happy to sit down with him for a few days to outline the devastation that the Tories wreaked on our great city and specifically on the people of Liverpool, Walton.

This decision on local government funding by this coalition Government will have a disproportionate effect on the area I represent. When I made my maiden speech, I warned—hon. Members can check *Hansard*—that I would fight against a return to the devastating Tory policies of the '80s that nearly destroyed places such as Liverpool. That is a fight that I will not shy away from.

The Government are rapidly gaining a reputation for saying one thing and doing another, and I fear that their gung-ho approach to local government funding is yet another shameful example of the widening gulf between the coalition's rhetoric and the harsh contradictory reality on the ground.

Gavin Barwell: The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful case against funding being cut in deprived areas and the money going to affluent areas. If I told him that, according to the Library, Liverpool, like my authority, had one of the lowest increases of the past five years—a 3% cut from the Labour Government—and that the biggest increase went to Rutland, which got a 25% increase, what would he say about the Labour Government's record over the past five years?

Steve Rotheram: I would say that it is not just about one specific funding stream; it is about an overall package. Liverpool benefited greatly under the Labour Government—so much so that the hon. Gentleman's friends on the Liberal Democrat Front Benches used to say that the Lib-Dem controlled Liverpool city council was a flagship council because it had got so much money from the Labour Government. Don't try to give me lessons about what happened in Liverpool, mate!

In June, the Department for Communities and Local Government wrote about the immediate front-loaded and ongoing savings to be made by local authorities that

“the Government is satisfied that it has adopted a fair approach to making the necessary reductions.”

In the comprehensive spending review, the coalition promised to

“limit as far as possible the impact of reductions...on the most vulnerable in society, and on those regions...dependent on the public sector”.

The Government never tire of reminding us that we are all in this together, in the new age of austerity, and insist that their belt-tightening is fair and progressive. So much for the rhetoric. The reality is that the proposed one-size-fits-all local government finance settlement, with its removal of ring-fenced funding for poorer regions and its top-slicing of the formula grant, is set to hit the poorest councils the hardest—none more so, unfortunately, than Liverpool city council.

Whether the Secretary of State likes SIGOMA or not—he did question its findings—its research shows that of the 20 worst-hit local authorities financially, all but two are in the top 20% of most deprived areas in the country. Conversely, of the 20 councils that do best out of the comprehensive spending review, all but two are in the top 10% of wealthiest local authorities. The SIGOMA report concluded:

“The current finance settlement perpetuates inequality rather than allowing areas to operate on an equal footing.”

SIGOMA is not alone in its findings. Following its own analysis, the TUC has affirmed that the Government's budgetary policy

“will risk the recovery, increase inequality and threaten social cohesion”.

Tom Blenkinsop: Some interesting facts came out today from the construction industry. The Construction Products Association said that it was going to slip back into recession and the Engineering Employers Federation said that it would not be able to pick up the slack from public sector cuts as the Government have said it would.

Steve Rotheram: I thank my hon. Friend for those comments. Having been a bricklayer and an apprentice, I know the construction sector all too well. I once described myself as the only bricklayer in Parliament;

unfortunately, one of my colleagues, who is not present, also did an apprenticeship but he was not indentured, so I can still legitimately claim to be the only indentured bricklayer in the House of Commons.

In addition to the statistics I have quoted and the bodies I have mentioned, the Centre for Local Economic Strategies has noted that the areas most at risk are those with relatively few private sector jobs, high levels of unemployment, poor transport links and high vulnerability to national public sector job losses.

Brandon Lewis: The hon. Member for Blackpool South (Mr Marsden) made some comments about coastal towns, and my constituency fits that bill. When Labour came to power, Great Yarmouth had a couple of the most deprived wards in the country and they were still in the handful of most deprived wards when it left power. Surely the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram) must agree that it is time to try something different.

Steve Rotheram: I would love to ask the people of Great Yarmouth whether they would like some money with strings or no money at all. I think they would rather have money with strings than what you are proposing—cuts across the board. *[Interruption.]* That is about local authority spending, not how much money you get. You cannot have it both ways.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dawn Primarolo): Order. If the hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis) wants to make a further intervention, he should stand and do so, not shout a conversation across the Floor of the House.

Steve Rotheram: I apologise, too, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am quite passionate about this. I do not normally just stand up and say things in the Chamber; I stand up when what you are trying to do affects the area that I represent. Believe me, this is one of the areas where we are going to be most affected.

Expert analysts up and down the country agree that the evidence is overwhelming that the rich will get richer and the poor will get poorer—so much for progressive politics. This might be far too grave and pressing an issue to exploit for party political reasons, but I cannot help but notice the findings of the House's own researchers that

“the average proportion of grants cut is lower for Conservative controlled authorities than the average for authorities controlled by other parties.”

Tory-led West Oxfordshire district council, which is in the Prime Minister's constituency and is one of the least deprived in the country, can look forward to a budget increase of up to 37% over the four-year spending review period, while Labour-run Liverpool city council is set to lose—*[Interruption.]* I would love you to come to Liverpool and laugh in the faces of those people who are going to be forced—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The Minister knows better: if he wants to make an intervention he can do so. Let me say to the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram) that although he feels very passionately about this issue, he must direct his comments to me in the Chair, preferably not blaming me for the Government's

policies—or the Opposition’s for that matter. He should not respond to any points unless they are made by way of an intervention.

Steve Rotheram: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The Labour-run Liverpool city council is set to lose up to 38% of its funding. Clearly, some of us are more “in this together” than others. I mention Liverpool, as I always try to, because it is the very reason I am here in the first place. Let me focus briefly on precisely what the new funding regime means for my neck of the woods. I should point out that the very nature, speed and extent of the cuts represent a double whammy for Merseyside, which is home to two of the most deprived councils in the country—Liverpool and Knowsley. Indeed, Liverpool is the most deprived local authority area in the land according to all the key poverty indicators, despite the transformation of our city into a true international destination of choice.

Robert Neill: I understand the hon. Gentleman’s concern for his native city, but has he seen the local government finance settlement? No one else in the House has.

Steve Rotheram: No, I have not, but if the Minister can tell me that Liverpool will not suffer disproportionate cuts, I will allow him to come back in.

Robert Neill: As the hon. Gentleman has not seen the figures and therefore cannot know what they are for any authority, does he think it right to speculate and scare people when he has no evidence on which to base his assertions?

Steve Rotheram: I am more than happy to give way to the Minister if he can allay the fears of people in Liverpool, Walton. Can he tell them that what I am saying is not true and that Liverpool’s funding will not be disproportionately cut? I did not think so.

Robert Neill: Will the hon. Gentleman wait for the settlement and perhaps look at this then?

Steve Rotheram: What we are doing is preparing for the worst cuts for generations in areas such as Liverpool.

George Hollingbery: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Steve Rotheram: I have already allowed enough interventions, as hon. Members must admit.

Mr Watts: Does my hon. Friend think that the confusion about the likely size of the cuts is because the spending review that was publicised is the document that everyone is working from? If there is a problem with it, it is because the Government have done the figures wrong.

Steve Rotheram: I thank my hon. Friend. In the spending review framework, the Government committed themselves to limiting the impact of reductions on areas heavily dependent on the public sector. To meet their stated commitment to fairness, should not the Government apply the same logic to the local government settlement? I will give way if the Minister wants to answer that.

I was speaking about the Tory-led West Oxfordshire district council in the Prime Minister’s Witney constituency, one of the least deprived areas, and about Liverpool, the most deprived local authority area, getting a 38% funding cut. I mention Liverpool, as I always do, and Knowsley. As an aside, both the Labour party and the Lib Dems have had their conferences in Liverpool. I ask the Tories to do the same so that they can see our wonderful city for themselves. Maybe then they would be less likely to destroy all the progress that we have made in the past few years.

George Hollingbery: I have huge admiration for the passion with which the hon. Gentleman defends his constituency. I freely admit that I have little idea how the cuts will impact on Liverpool. However, he probably has as little idea how they will impact on places such as Hampshire, which outwardly may appear to be leafy, rural and wealthy, but Hampshire has suffered a loss of £45 million of formula grant since 2003-04, and expects to lose another £20 million over the next few years. Furthermore—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Not “Furthermore”; it is an intervention. The hon. Gentleman can make a speech in a moment.

Steve Rotheram: I shall be interested to see whether the hon. Gentleman will allow me to intervene, as I have allowed him to do.

Liverpool city council has established that the in-year cuts announced by the Government in May will have a more than £20 million impact in its ongoing annual reductions. Almost half of this will come from the 2010-11 area-based grant programme, the very programme designed to support deprived communities according to their needs. Funding for a programme to reduce health inequalities by reducing smoking will be cut by 48%. The local enterprise growth initiative, which the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Simon Hughes) spoke about, focuses on increasing entrepreneurial activity. It will lose 14% of its monies.

The transitional employment programme, which supports the long-term unemployed back into employability and employment, will see a 13% cut in its funding. The working neighbourhood fund, which has been mentioned by other speakers, was introduced under the previous Government to tackle worklessness in deprived areas. It has been done away with altogether, depriving the city of £3.5 million this year alone; and another £3.5 million of cuts have been made in area-based grants which directly affect children and young people.

The Government have been consistently slick in their assurances that the delivery of key services need not be adversely impacted, that the vulnerable will be protected, and that the Government are serious about job creation, tackling the skills deficit and getting people back to work. That is starting to sound like a load of old guff.

Simon Hughes: The hon. Gentleman’s city, Liverpool, is a fantastic city. Whatever our differences, our two parties have run it over the years and they have both contributed to it being the great city that it is. I am not speaking for the Government, but I know that they are keen to try to pull together all the effects of spending changes from all Departments as they affect a city or a

[*Simon Hughes*]

region, so that none ends up with an unfair or unnecessarily severe burden. That is a tall order. It has never been done before, but the Government are trying to do it, and I hope that people such as the hon. Gentleman and I will work together with the Government to ensure a fairer spread of funding decisions across the—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman knows that interventions should be brief. It is not his role to mediate—not in the Chamber, at any rate.

Steve Rotheram: What a shame that the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark is not speaking on behalf of the Government and in a more elevated position. If he were, the concerns that he highlights would be brought to the attention of those making the decisions.

Following extensive research and analysis of the impact on Liverpool of the unfair distribution regime, the TUC summed up its findings as follows:

“Experience on the ground suggests that even at this early stage of spending cuts it is simply not possible to make such steep reductions in spending, without hitting the worst off. The impact of cuts in the area based grant also shows that spending reductions so far have been about far more than reducing waste—front line services have been affected.”

I seriously begin to question at best the competence, and at worst the integrity, of the present Administration when programmes, services and initiatives which clearly contribute to the declared aspirations of the Government are held in such contempt.

I have not even touched on huge job losses, with the compounding impact of central Government cuts, or the longer-term prognosis, and there is much more that I would like to say, but I have been told by somebody not too far away that my time is almost up. I am desperately hoping to prevent the disproportionate effect on the area that I represent. I finish with a plea to the Government ahead of their local government finance settlement.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North (Mr Watts) tabled early-day motion 1088. In it, he succinctly outlines issues of particular concern affecting less affluent areas of the country, makes sensible and reasonable recommendations, and calls on the Government to take serious heed of the incontrovertible facts and to deliver on their promise to ensure fairness. It is future generations that will reap the social consequences of the Government's unfair and pernicious policies, so I urge coalition Ministers to study carefully the points that my hon. Friend and many other right-thinking Members have made, and to think again before careering headlong into a finance settlement that will prove punitive, self-defeating and irrevocably damaging to those who need and deserve that the least.

6.37 pm

George Hollingbery (Meon Valley) (Con): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram), who spoke with real passion for the area he represents. None of us would expect anything less of hon. Members than to defend the areas that they represent. However, there is no doubt that some cuts had to be instituted, as those on the Opposition Front Bench admitted. There would have had to be cuts, whoever was in control.

In the comprehensive spending review, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor outlined a programme of cuts and spending changes that would allow us to put the country back on a firm footing, among which were changes to local government funding. I know that my saying this is likely to arouse groans from the Opposition Benches, but there is no doubt that, as the Secretary of State pointed out earlier, if changes are to be made to the amounts paid to local government, the period in which they are granted and the amounts in each period, Opposition Front Benchers will have to identify areas elsewhere in Government they would cut. It is no good saying that there are no consequences; there plainly are.

We on the Government Benches could talk eloquently about closing hospitals and about body armour for soldiers. I shall not use that ploy, but something will have to give somewhere if we change the numbers for local government.

I shall address one or two of the points made in the document from SIGOMA. I entirely understand why an organisation of local authorities should get together to try to defend their position. Clearly, that is the right and proper role of local authorities in the current circumstances, but one of the points made in the document is about the imposition of floors. I think I am right in saying that the right hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Mr Raynsford), the former Local Government Minister, was responsible in 2002-03 for the imposition of the floors, which protected some local authorities from huge reductions in local government spending as a result of the formula having changed enormously. The floors have remained until the present day, so any disparity or inequality that might be felt across local government has been entrenched by that rule, which resulted from enormously complicated changes in local government funding rules. It is therefore very difficult at this stage to imagine that in one fell swoop we on the coalition Benches will even out the inequalities created over the past 10 years.

It is reasonable to question the funding formula itself. It has changed a great many times, as hon. Members will know, resulting in enormous confusion across many local authorities and, in my part of the world in particular, a real reduction in funding over a great many years. I have already brought up some of these examples in the House, but East Hampshire district council saw a real-terms funding reduction of 25% from 2001 to 2010, while Havant borough council saw a 13% real-terms reduction. Havant council has almost no assets. It is not a Wandsworth or a Westminster, with a huge parking income or buildings it can rent out to third parties; it is a straightforward council that takes in council tax and receives grant from the Government, yet its funding has been reduced by 13%.

Barbara Keeley: Would the hon. Gentleman like to inform the House what the balance is between the formula grant and the council tax base for those councils? That is one of the big disparities, and it is not helpful to talk just about the formula grant, because many councils in places such as Surrey and Hampshire have a good, substantial council tax base.

George Hollingbery: I absolutely understand what the hon. Lady is saying. If I remember rightly, the SIGOMA report includes a table—I think on page 4

—of the differential rates of council tax between authorities. I cannot tell her exactly what the numbers are, but the overall band D council tax charged in East Hampshire, taking in the Hampshire county council precept and the local parish precepts, is higher than in the SIGOMA authorities. There is already a disparity in the amount that local citizens pay in my part of the world towards the funding of their councils, which is taken into account in the grant settlement, as I understand it. As I mentioned in my earlier intervention—I apologise again for making it overly long, Madam Deputy Speaker—the amount for Hampshire county council reduced by £45 million between 2003-04 and this year, and it is expected to reduce by a further £20 million over the next several years.

Those are not the only sources of funding for local government—there is the business rate and council tax. The UK Statistics Authority says that 56% of local council revenues comes from the council grant. If we apply the cut that the Government propose to that 56% and look at the totality of what local government takes in, we find that the cuts amount to about 14%, or 3.3% a year. The Government have been brave and transparent in talking about the totality of cuts to the revenue grant allocations, because the cut across local government is rather less.

Furthermore, an article in the *Municipal Journal* from 4 November last year said that studies of Total Place had suggested that only 5% of all spending in a local area comes through democratically accountable bodies, which leaves 95% to come from central Government—funding that can continue to be spent without the cuts applying, even though there may be cuts elsewhere. Therefore, a lot of the talk that we have heard—about fire and brimstone, a cleansing across local government, and local businesses going out of business because there is no longer any money—needs to be taken in that context. Plainly, a great deal of Government money is still spent locally.

One or two points have been made about the Government not doing anything to help local businesses. Indeed, the converse point—that the cuts will have a disproportionate impact on areas with high local government employment—has also been made. The Secretary of State did not mention it, but the Chancellor has provided for national insurance contributions holidays, which are granted to small business formations and are specifically targeted on areas with high levels of employment in local government—or, indeed, in government across the board. The Government have therefore taken into account the fact that although there will be cuts in local government, new business formation will be important. Much as many of my colleagues in the south-east would like the NIC holiday to come to the south-east, we have at least some understanding of why it is not.

I do not for a moment misunderstand the fact that anybody who loses their job faces a difficult time, particularly in the current conditions. Therefore, I take seriously the loss of employment in local government. However, it is also worth pointing out—to use the cliché—that when it comes to innovation, necessity is the mother of invention. De-ring-fencing has allowed local councils a world of flexibility to find new ways of doing things: to work differently with partners, and to take budgets that were predicated on particular activities occurring in a certain way and use them differently.

Various representations have been made to the Select Committee on Communities and Local Government, from people across the country and across many subjects, but I was particularly struck by one contribution—I think it was about Birmingham; it could have been about Manchester. *[Interruption.]* Opposition Members will have to forgive me—we have had many representations. Some 15 or 20 agencies were offering similar services to the local population. If we have such duplication of services in local councils—and I believe that in some of the large metropolitan boroughs we do—there are surely innovations to be made. There is money to be saved, and there are new, different ways of doing things. I commend that to local councils.

Andrew Bingham: For the past two or three years, the council in my constituency has shared a chief executive with Staffordshire Moorlands council, which is not only in a different county but in a different region. The councils now have a shared management team and shared services, which shows the innovative ways in which local authorities can save money and preserve local services for residents.

George Hollingbery: Indeed, and I will return to a couple of examples of my own in a moment.

There is a real need for local councils to work much more closely with third sector organisations in their areas. The hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Simon Hughes) has already made the point that we must not encourage councils to take the easy way out, which is to save money by cutting direct grants to local charities.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): I hear what the hon. Gentleman says about reinventing local government and finding new ways of doing things. I am still a local councillor, and I agree with him, but does he agree that front-loading the cuts when we still do not have the local government settlement, but when we have had the CSR, will make it harder to do those things? Councils will have less time and will have to go for easier, quicker cuts to balance the books.

George Hollingbery: Indeed. It is difficult to make plans at this late stage, but we have known about the cuts for some considerable time. Most councils have known for at least two or three years that the economic times are difficult. My local councils have been planning for such changes for two or three years. Frankly, it is no great excuse to say at this stage that we do not yet know the level of the settlement. We all know—and we have known for a long time—that it will be difficult.

Gavin Barwell: Did not the previous Government's 2009 pre-Budget report set out clearly that public expenditure in unprotected Departments was going to fall by 25% over the course of this Parliament? Given that local government was not one of those protected areas, any local authority would therefore have been aware that such reductions were coming, whoever was in power.

George Hollingbery: My hon. Friend clearly demonstrates that there is no real excuse for local authorities pretending that we cannot do anything because we do not know

[George Hollingbery]

how big the cuts will be. Straightforwardly, we know that there will be cuts, and we know that they will be serious.

There are any number of innovative third-sector partners out there doing a fantastic job. I would like to pick just one example from my local area—although it works out of the constituency of the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for Fareham (Mr Hoban)—which is the You Trust. I recently met Nicola Youern, who runs the trust. The You Trust has a fantastic way of dealing with new cases, which Hampshire county council brings to it, of difficult-to-house young people. The trust first asks, “What can we teach you to do for yourself?” and then asks, “What can we teach your relatives and friends to do for you that will stop us having to intervene?” The trust goes through that sequence of trying to help people, before saying finally, “The only way we can deal with this is through a public sector intervention.” If there were more of that thinking across the public sector, we would get better results for less money.

I also welcome one or two changes that I think—I hope—will shortly appear in the localism Bill. The reporting changes are clearly very welcome. As the performance management portfolio holder for Winchester city council until recently, I was in charge of producing the statistics that we had to relay to central Government, almost none of which was used to create real change in the council but almost all of which were incredibly burdensome to collect.

Justin Tomlinson: Does my hon. Friend agree that the statistics rarely, if ever, matched what local residents said on the doorstep?

George Hollingbery: Indeed. My favourite was on the time taken to re-let a council house, whereby the better we did in re-letting a difficult-to-let council property the worse the statistic became, because of the longer average period for which we had not re-let the house. Every time we re-let a house that had been on the books for three years because it was in a poor condition, the worse our statistic became.

The work also involved a huge amount of management time. We had specialist employees dealing with just that issue and a specialist computer system just to monitor performance management, so I very much welcome rowing back the amount of information that local councils will have to report to central Government. I also became extraordinarily fed up with the number of strategies that we had to deal with, and I would very much welcome an assurance from the Minister that we will not have to do anything like as many of those, either.

I remember fondly the black and minority ethnic strategy for Winchester city council, an entirely necessary document.

Tom Blenkinsop: I hear the hon. Gentleman’s comments about reporting by local authorities, so does he have any worries about the £500 rule, whereby anything on which a local authority spends more than £500 will have to be documented?

George Hollingbery: The accounts departments already record most of that information, so I see no great difficulty in councils reporting it more widely. It is already on the books, on computers and there to be reported.

Tom Blenkinsop: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

George Hollingbery: If I may, I will carry on.

Strategies were piling up and gathering dust on shelves, but the black and minority ethnic strategy at Winchester city council was, I agree, entirely necessary in small amounts. We, like anybody else, had to be held to account for what we did in that area, but, despite only 1.5% of our population having that background, we were forced to put £50,000 into employing consultants, who produced an enormous great report telling us that what we did already was okay. That is the sort of imposition by central Government to which I hope the localism and decentralisation Bill will put an end.

The wretched Standards Board for England has also accorded a vast amount of work to local government, especially to its legal employees. The board has been used as nothing more than an excuse for the petty battering of officials and parish councillors throughout the country.

We can do more imaginative work in-house, as was said a moment ago. Winchester city, East Hampshire district and Havant borough councils now have a choice-based letting arrangement. That comment has been noted by Opposition Members, but I am sure that such schemes exist in many parts of the country. The arrangement has saved our councils an enormous amount, and we have achieved a better result for our clients. East Hampshire district and Havant borough councils share a joint management tier, and the same individuals hold all the senior management roles in the two authorities: there is one team for two different councils.

Hampshire county council now sends less waste to landfill than any other council in the country, and—furthermore—it generates power for 50,000 homes by incinerating the remainder. Hampshire built itself a new headquarters entirely without cost to the public purse, managed to halve its carbon footprint and is selling other Winchester office blocks that are redundant to its needs. It recently invested with the NHS in 10 state-of-the-art nursing homes, so it is no longer fined millions of pounds for being held responsible for bed blocking—another innovation whereby the council invested to save money. On top of all that, it has made £48 million in efficiency savings—I emphasise, real efficiency savings that can be counted—over the past two years.

I leave my final words to Simon Eden, chief executive of Winchester city council, who says that

“our approach in all this has been to avoid salami-slicing, and instead...re-design services, taking into account changes...made to performance reporting and inspection, planning and in other areas. We have also used that process to look at the best way of focusing on delivery of key priorities for the district, cutting out that which might be seen as lower priority.”

I commend that approach to all local councils and hope very much that the House rejects the motion.

6.54 pm

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this important debate, and it is good to follow a well reasoned contribution from the hon. Member for Meon Valley

(George Hollingbery), in which he made a number of interesting efficiency suggestions. All local authorities throughout the country need to think about the efficiencies that they can fairly and equitably make, but this debate is not about whether local authorities need to make them. It is about the way in which the funding settlement will be distributed throughout the country, and the unfair way in which it will impact on some of the most needy areas in the country.

It is unfortunate that we remain in the dark at this late stage of the funding cycle. The Minister complains that people are speculating about the final outcome, but this debate is his opportunity to tell us definitively what will happen and to reassure the House that the scenarios that the special interest group of municipal authorities, among others, has modelled will not come to pass. I am afraid, however, that in the absence of any hard answers from the Ministers, SIGOMA's analysis is a good one that will continue to gain a great deal of currency.

Barbara Keeley: Was my hon. Friend as surprised as I was to hear that the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Simon Hughes) seems to have received from the Government reassurances that have been denied to the rest of us? I wonder whether the Minister is prepared to share the reassurances that he has given to that Member with other Members.

John Woodcock: Members from all parts of the House will have noticed that, and the Minister has an opportunity now or later in his winding-up speech to share that information.

The hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Simon Hughes), who resumes his seat as I speak, gave an eloquent speech in which he took issue with a number of his Government's key policies, but he fell into the trap that even the Secretary of State has fallen into. The hon. Gentleman said, "Wouldn't it be outrageous if any local council were to cut the budget of the voluntary sector to try and balance the books?" I say to him and the Minister, however, that local authorities are looking at the dire situation they face and the appalling decisions they have to make, and from the feedback, I have they do not welcome Ministers telling them what they ought not to do.

Christopher Pincher: The hon. Gentleman says that local authorities are worried. Perhaps Barrow and Furness is worried, but a cabinet member on the borough council in Tamworth, which is not a rich place or wealthy borough, says:

"We have been planning for a long time to cope with the spending round. The previous government gave with one hand and then took twice as much back with the other. So local government is accustomed to saving money. I am confident the councils services will grow despite reduction in grants, partly thanks to the new homes onus, removal of ring fenced budgets and less red tape. It is a careful balancing act but not one that will lead to massive service cuts. It is business as usual in Tamworth." If it is business as usual in Tamworth, why not in Barrow and Furness—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dawn Primarolo): Order. Interventions are supposed to be short—I have said that a number of times—and if the hon. Gentleman reads a very long quotation on to the record he is going to tend to get cut off before he makes his final point.

John Woodcock: I was getting worried, but thankfully there was a question in the last six words of that diatribe. Of course, as hon. Members would expect, I shall go on to talk about the particular difficulties that Barrow borough council will face in the months and years ahead. No one is suggesting that pain will not be felt right across the country. I have to say to the hon. Gentleman that, although every council knew that we were approaching difficult times for continued funding, local authorities have not been given enough time to plan for the front-loaded cut that it seems will be imposed on them. Such an approach will cut into areas that it would not have been necessary to cut if the process had been more spread out.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): On front loading, Sefton council is facing £38 million of cuts in year one, which will decrease to £16.7 million in year two and £3.8 million in year three. It has been a hung council for 24 years and local councillors of all parties are used to working closely together and resolving such problems. However, they are now finding it incredibly difficult to do so. I hope that the Secretary of State will take on board the challenges that such councils are facing as a result of front-loading.

John Woodcock: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. His remarks illustrate that, with the top slicing of the formula grant and if the cuts are front-loaded—the Minister is welcome to make the announcement about that today and end the speculation—it will pretty much guarantee that the most deprived areas of the country, which most rely on extra support, will bear the greatest burden of the cuts.

Simon Hughes: On the voluntary sector grant, if the hon. Gentleman looks at the record, he will see that I did not say that such a situation would be outrageous. I was simply asking councils to be careful not to turn all the heat on to the voluntary sector, rather than looking first at themselves.

John Woodcock: The hon. Gentleman is quite right. I was actually paraphrasing the Secretary of State, who I believe said that local authorities would rue the day that they cut voluntary sector grants. I am sure that they will be delighted to hear how they should be balancing their books, given that the cuts are being front loaded so that a great proportion will fall in the next year.

According to the SIGOMA model, Barrow borough council, which covers the majority of my constituency, will receive a proportional cut in funding in the next financial year that will be exceeded by the cut in funding to only two other local authorities. Despite being in the top 30 most deprived council areas, according to the 2007 indices of multiple deprivation—and if the modelling is even close to accurate—Barrow borough council can expect to lose around 20% or up to 25% of its central Government funding next year. Relatively wealthier local authorities will have levels of cuts imposed that are far less than those that might be inflicted on Barrow borough council.

Although this is an Opposition day debate and many Labour Members have spoken with great passion about the huge damage that could be wrought on their

[John Woodcock]

constituencies, Government Members should be clear that this is not simply a partisan issue. Councillors from all parties are concerned about the potential cuts. I hope that the Minister is aware of a letter from the Conservative leader of Barrow borough council—perhaps he will confirm whether he has received it—who I think has written to him or to the Secretary of State to express his concern at the disproportionate cuts that will hit Barrow severely if what is proposed is followed through next week.

Tom Blenkinsop: Conservative leaders in Barrow and in Stockton and an independent mayor in Middlesbrough all say that these cuts are disproportionately hurting the north compared with the south. Does my hon. Friend think that the Secretary of State would consider those people to be the cigar-chomping communists that he talked about in a recent article in *Total Politics* magazine?

John Woodcock: I am not sure who the Secretary of State would consider to be a cigar-smoking communist. However, my hon. Friend makes a good point. It is not solely Labour councillors or Labour MPs who are speaking up about this matter and it is not just the north of England saying to the south of England that the present funding arrangements need to continue. We are making the case for the broad approach taken by the previous Labour Government. They recognised that areas where deprivation, poverty, unemployment or economic isolation are entrenched need extra resources to improve their situation and to grow the private sector in a way that all hon. Members want to see.

Geographical isolation has always posed economic challenges for the area of Cumbria that I represent. That is never more so than in periods of recession or limited growth. Savage cuts in funding to the local authority at such a time can only exacerbate those challenges. A vicious cycle will be created because not only will jobs directly provided by the borough council disappear—taking with them the multiplier effect that they have within the local economy—but the prospect for investment that will attract new jobs and businesses to the area will also go. Over the past decade, local authority funding has worked well in partnership with funding from the regional development agency to stimulate growth in the Furness area. The situation has not been perfect and we have wanted some things to be more efficient. However, there has undoubtedly been a balance positive over the past 10 years, and there are grave concerns about that being cut.

The people of Barrow are watching anxiously. The Government have imposed added uncertainty on the region through their delay of the vote on the Trident replacement project, which will sustain many thousands of jobs in Barrow's shipyard for decades to come. Such a severe cut to funding will strike a real blow to economic confidence in the area.

However, this is not simply about Barrow or any one area. The matter is also about more than swingeing cuts to local government funding on its own; it is about whether we make the ideological leap into a funding model and into a public policy world where the funding of local areas is blind to the real needs within those areas. Such a simplistic approach may be superficially

attractive to some coalition Members, but they must know that the reality will be neither fair nor progressive. Such cuts will mean that the poorest areas of the country carry the greatest burden of cuts, while wealthier areas escape relatively unscathed.

There is still time for the Government to rethink such an approach. It cuts adrift the most economically vulnerable areas of Britain—Barrow is counted as one such area. These cuts would not only jeopardise economic growth in Barrow, but could lead to a situation where any recovery is geographically lopsided and passes by many of the most deprived areas of the country. If the Government want to prevent a situation in which one sector or one region overheats economically, they must think again on this.

I hope that they will listen to the strong calls that have been made in this House and by councillors of all parties across the country to think again about the settlement that they are about to impose—to think about its level, the way in which it is being front-loaded, and the fact that it seems disproportionately to hit some of the areas which, at this difficult time for the country, need our support the most.

7.10 pm

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I am grateful to have caught your eye, Madam Deputy Speaker, to contribute to this important debate. There have been many interesting contributions, on both sides of the House, in which Members have put the case for their particular councils and areas with some passion.

Before I came to this House, I served for 10 years as a city councillor. In fact, I was exactly one half of our group on the council—I doubled its size when I arrived. However, our lack of electoral success does not mean that we were not involved closely in running the local authority. Our council was originally run by Labour and then eventually became one with no overall control, so we were heavily involved in running it for several years.

We have heard some very thoughtful speeches today, particularly by the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Simon Hughes), who made some sensible and interesting points. In relation to burials, I can certainly relate to the issue that he raised about people on different sides of the same street, in some cases, paying different amounts. Anything that the Government can do to alleviate that would be greatly appreciated.

However, some of the speeches have been more about creating and enforcing divisions where they may not exist, and that has not been helpful to the debate. Neither has the scaremongering that has occurred in some cases, although that does not apply to the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock), who made a sensible contribution. That approach may get headlines in local papers, but it will not do anything to protect services, or do anything for the people who work in local government, many of whom are dedicated public servants.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman referred to the contribution by the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Simon Hughes); I, too, agreed with much of what he said. However, does the hon. Gentleman agree that, if

the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark had started by saying that, during the election, his party agreed with the same deficit reduction policy as mine, his words might have been more plausible?

Andrew Percy: I am not sure how I am supposed to respond to that intervention, but I suspect that it has served its purpose. However, the hon. Gentleman's Front Benchers have told us absolutely nothing about what they intend to do. They cannot have a serious debate on any subject regarding public spending unless they come forward and say what they would do. All we know is that their plan is to protect local services. Is that still the case? If so, something else would have to be cut: is it to be schools or the health service? They have no credibility. It may get them a few cheap headlines, but it will do nothing to contribute to the debate about how we tackle the very serious deficit which this country faces.

Simon Hughes: It was unfair for the hon. Gentleman to be asked a question about what I said, so I had better give him the answer, which lies in something that he said earlier. He will know from his city council experience that when one is not running the show oneself, one has to work with others—by definition, one cannot get all one's own way. That is fairly obvious.

Andrew Percy: Absolutely. That is what we should be doing on an issue as important as this. We should all be working together on the whole way that local government is structured to try to change it for the better.

Tom Blenkinsop *rose*—

Andrew Percy: I will give way in a moment to my train colleague; we sometimes catch the same train.

Lots of references have been made to going back to the 1980s, or to the 1970s and "Life on Mars", but some of the contributions have been like listening to "The Twilight Zone". In my 10 years serving as a councillor under the previous Labour Government, I seem to recall the picture not being quite as rosy as that painted by Labour Members. We have heard many comments about Conservative and Liberal councillors criticising this Government's settlement, although we do not know what it is yet. In my 10 years on the council, Labour, Liberal and Conservative councillors tended to criticise the settlement coming forward from any Government. That is the way of local government, largely because the formulae are so complex that there is always something that one is not happy with in any settlement.

When I was a local councillor, our authority went through a number of assessments, first, through the corporate governance inspection regime, and later through the comprehensive performance assessment regime. Labour Members cannot possibly be defending the millions of pounds that went into those schemes. I will explain what those schemes did to a city council such as Hull, which at the beginning of the Labour Administration had some of the most deprived communities in the country, and still had them 13 years later. If hon. Members want to carry out a value-for-money analysis of that, I will leave it to them to do so. The decisions that we were forced to take as a result of going through the CGI process cost our city council millions of pounds over those 10 years.

The council, which was Labour-run, was judged to be a failing council. There was some fair criticism, no doubt, but I do not know whether we needed the expensive regime process that came in to tell us that the authority was not necessarily being run as it should be. One of the most appalling recommendations that followed the CGI process was that we should appoint five corporate directors, but they were not to be employed on the same salary as our previous service area directors—no, we were to employ five corporate directors on salaries of £105,000.

Justin Tomlinson: Like my hon. Friend, I served for 10 years as a councillor. I fully echo his point, given the number of times that we were encouraged, following inspections, to spend huge sums of money on members of staff just to prove that we were heading in the right direction.

Andrew Percy: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. This is not something that my council experienced on its own—it happened across the country, as we know.

As I said, we were expected to pay our corporate directors a salary of £105,000, which most people in the city of Hull, and indeed across east Yorkshire and northern Lincolnshire, can only dream of. Then, in time, we had to appoint a new chief executive. Needless to say, they were not appointed at the same salary as the previous chief executive—there was a massive salary increase that had a knock-on effect on other local authorities in our area, which judged themselves against how much the neighbouring authority was paying. If we cannot get people to work in local government on salaries lower than that of the Prime Minister, we are doing something badly wrong.

I also well remember the settlements that we used to get from the Labour Government—it was a case of giving with one hand and taking away with the other. Nowhere was that more clear than in the best value process, which required us to measure 100 to 200 different things and report back to central Government. One of our best value performance indicators was to measure how many of our park benches had arms. I am sorry, but when I go drinking in the Dog and Duck, or in my real pub, the Percy Arms—[*Interruption.*] It is conveniently named. People do not come up to me and say, "Andrew, what we want you to do as a local authority is to measure how many park benches have arms." They want their council to be providing services—over the past couple of weeks, gritting, snow ploughing, and so on. They do not want it to be spending hundreds of thousands of pounds every year reporting back on such silly measures.

Jonathan Reynolds: Is the hon. Gentleman suggesting that local authorities should be subject to no inspection regime whatsoever?

Andrew Percy: No, that is not what I said. I am saying that local authorities should be subjected to an awful lot less inspection, and that we certainly should not be running around paying people fat salaries to go measuring how many park benches have arms. If Labour Members are seriously suggesting that they want to maintain that system, I will happily give way to the hon. Gentleman so that he can explain to my constituents why my local council should continue to do that.

[Andrew Percy]

We all understand that there has to be some measurement of public services, whether they are in schools, the health service or local authorities, but we have to consider the proportion of time, money and resources spent on that. Under the previous Government, it got out completely out of hand—some of it was well meant, but it had unintended consequences. It was alleged at that time that money was thrown at some councils, but it was not always thrown to provide better services; often it was spent on employing more people to sit behind desks and measure things that the public would, frankly, not consider to be a priority. That is what happened in my authority in relation to councillor training. We were suddenly told, following our CGI and CPA inspections, that we had to spend more taxpayers' money on training councillors to do the job that political parties should ensure that they can do before they stand for office. That is why I refused to undertake councillor training—perhaps that says a lot about me.

One of the most ridiculous things that was produced by our council—no doubt by somebody on a good salary—was a guide to professionally appropriate language for councillors. At great expense to the taxpayer, we were issued with a guide to tell us that we must not call women flower, duck or love. If that is considered a good use of taxpayers' money, I am afraid that I am in a different camp.

My other recollection from the past 10 years serving as a local councillor is that, although everything was fantastic and rosy, as we have heard from Labour Members, there were considerable hikes in council tax. The last time the Labour party ran Hull city council, it raised council tax by 10%. If that is evidence of good central Government funding to some of the poorest authorities, I do not know what planet I have been living on.

There is a sensible debate to be had about local government funding, but today's attempts to create division are unhelpful. The hon. Member for Barrow and Furness made the point that I was going to make.

Tom Blenkinsop: I thank my fellow travelling companion, on certain days, for giving way. Labour Members are not coming up with scare stories. My information comes from the independent mayor of Middlesbrough and the leader of the Tory council in Stockton. We have also heard the example of the leader of the Tory council in Barrow. Those people have legitimate fears about the Government proposals. Yet again, we hear Back Benchers saying that they are aware of the situation, while the Minister says that he does not know what figures or information we are talking about. That only perpetuates the fears. Does the hon. Gentleman appreciate that?

Andrew Percy: One of the burdens of local leadership is to take the information that is provided and decide whether to perpetuate a possible myth that would cause hundreds or thousands of people to fear for their jobs or to disseminate the information differently.

Tom Blenkinsop *rose*—

Andrew Percy: I will not give way any more because I have detained the House already and do not wish to whine on for too long.

Division has been created today by the image that many Tory shire authorities around the country are about to get a windfall and are doing very nicely, whereas everybody else faces cuts. No doubt there will be the slaying of the firstborn and all the other extreme language that we have come to expect from Labour Members. Such arguments are not helpful. I represent Goole and East Riding, which have some of the most deprived communities in England. East Riding suffers from being part of a larger authority that has very wealthy areas, with the consequence that its funding settlement has been among the worst in the country for the past decade. The council has tried incredibly hard over the years.

Mr Watts: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andrew Percy: No, I will not, because the hon. Gentleman has had a lot to say today.

As the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness said, large rural authorities, as well as having considerable pockets of deprivation, face other challenges that are not taken into account. One of my two authorities is the largest unitary authority in the country. It is time that we looked at the structure of the grants system and made it take account of issues of rurality. For example, we know that rural poverty is hard to identify.

If the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) speaks, I am sure that he will talk more about our Labour local authority, which seems to take a different line on the spending cuts. I will allow others to conclude whether that is for political reasons, given that there are elections next year. However, my Conservative-run authority of East Riding has accepted that it will be tough. It has made decisions to prepare for that over the past two years, because it has known that it is coming. It knew what the Labour party was saying about 25% cuts—some of the biggest cuts in history—coming its way, so it started to make decisions accordingly. Even after the comprehensive spending review, one of my local councils said clearly:

“The programme involved a carefully planned reduction in expenditure in response to anticipated funding cuts.”

The council had been planning for the cuts already. Any half-decent leader of a local authority should have had that in mind, not least because they should have seen the previous Government's plans. It is nonsense suddenly to pretend at this late juncture that it is all wicked and terrible, that nobody could have seen this coming, and that it would not have happened in the strange world that the Labour party currently seems to inhabit.

I have highlighted some of the waste and inefficiency that I saw as a local councillor. There are some very good people working in local authorities and providing services. The challenge for local authorities is to navel gaze, to look closely at what they are doing at the moment and to decide whether they can do that better. I give way one last time.

Justin Tomlinson: Does my hon. Friend agree that the decision to publish expenditure over £500 will allow a greater number of eyes to look over the information and identify much needed efficiency savings?

Andrew Percy: Of course I agree. That can be done relatively simply through programmes such as Oracle, which my former council spent millions of pounds investing in—perhaps investing should be in inverted commas.

Karl Turner: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andrew Percy: I will give way because we are near neighbours and I like the hon. Gentleman.

Karl Turner: I am very grateful. I am tempted to agree with some of the points that the hon. Gentleman makes, but will he be kind enough to admit that when he was a councillor in my authority, I never heard him complaining about the grants that he received from my party in government?

Andrew Percy: The hon. Gentleman has obviously never been to a Hull city council meeting. Forgive me; after he was selected, he did come along. The first hour of most council meetings tends to be spent railing against whichever Government are in power and saying, “We haven’t got enough money. Can we have some more please?” I was no exception. I spent 10 years saying, “Wouldn’t it be nice if we could get a bit more?” The serious point is that, whenever we put forward an alternative budget, it was fully worked out and contained huge savings on such things as building rationalisation.

Tom Blenkinsop: Cuts.

Andrew Percy: No, not cuts—building rationalisation. There appears to be an irregular verb: they make savings, we make cuts. Any hon. Member who believes that we can continue to fund local government at the same level as in the past couple of years is living in la-la land. Nobody with a serious agenda would suggest that.

I make one final plea to the Minister on the funding of fire authorities. I have the highest regard for the fire authority in Humberside. In the past couple of years, it has faced challenging times because of changes to legislation made by the previous Government. Although there is an acceptance that savings must be made in fire authorities, I urge the Minister to keep a close eye on them and to ensure that reductions impact on the front line as little as possible.

The message should go out to all councils that there are tough decisions to be made, but that they can be made in a way that protects front-line services if our local leaders are brave enough. Local councillors have the choice of whether to scaremonger and make political points in the run-up to next year’s local elections, or, like my well run Conservative council of East Riding, to get their heads down, get on with it, make savings, but pledge to protect services.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. May I remind hon. Members that some 13 Members still wish to contribute to this debate, and that the wind-ups are due to start at 9.30 pm? Out of courtesy to their colleagues, I therefore ask hon. Members to pay a little bit of attention to the clock and do the maths themselves, to ensure that everybody can speak, otherwise we will have to have a time limit.

7.30 pm

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this very important debate. I will echo many of the sentiments of

my hon. Friends and of many council leaders of all political persuasions up and down the country.

The speed, depth, spread and front-loading of the Government’s cuts to local government funding are unfair and unjustifiable. The devastating impact that they will have on the most deprived communities in our country, including many in my constituency, demonstrates that the coalition’s pledge to “ensure fairness is at the heart” of its decisions is as phoney as the Liberal Democrats’ pledge not to increase tuition fees.

The Government are using the deficit as an excuse to pursue their ideological aim of shrinking the state and destroying public services on which ordinary people rely. The Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), certainly got it right when he said in the House on 10 June:

“Those in greatest need ultimately bear the burden of paying off the debt”.—[*Official Report*, 10 June 2010; Vol. 511, c. 450.]

The Government are balancing the budget on the backs of the poorest in our society, something that the Chancellor said he would never do.

In October’s spending review, the Chancellor announced cuts to local council funding of £5.6 billion. Although that in itself might seem like a shocking figure to anyone listening to the debate, the biggest scandal of those cuts is in the detail. DCLG figures show that far from the cuts hitting all communities across the UK equally, some councils will not see cuts to their budgets. In fact, they will get an increase in funding.

Over the next four years, the worst-hit councils will be in some of the most deprived cities and communities in the country. Hastings, Burnley, Blackburn, Hull and Barrow, and Liverpool city council which covers my constituency, are all in the most deprived 10% of councils in the country, and those councils will have their funding cut by at least a quarter, some by as much as a third. That, as we learn from the figures available from the Library, is while two of the least deprived councils in the country, West Oxfordshire and South Cambridgeshire, will have an increase in funding of up to 37%.

It cannot be a coincidence that every single council forecast to see an increase in its funding of between 27% and 34% is Conservative-controlled—and that at a time when my constituents are learning that Liverpool city council estimates that the city will be hit with £1 billion of cuts over the next four years. I repeat that figure: £1 billion. It simply is not fair. That follows the 9% cut to our area-based grant that Liverpool sustained earlier this year, before the Budget—the largest of any core city across the UK.

My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotherham) articulately outlined the raft of cuts that Liverpool will sustain, which are in the process of being instigated. The truth is that we are not all in this together. The Government have a plan for unfair cuts that will support areas where it is electorally beneficial and hit those where it is not.

The Chancellor would have us believe that after the Government have cut back the state, making thousands redundant, the private sector will be there to move in and clean up the mess. If only it were that simple. The Government underestimate the relationship between the public and private sector. Far from increasing private sector demand, cuts to local government will damage

[Luciana Berger]

small and medium-sized enterprises that rely on local authority contracts. Some £20 billion of the local government procurement market goes to SMEs, and the Federation of Small Businesses has stated that many small firms rely on public sector contracts for 50% to 60% of their turnover.

In addition, the cuts will reduce consumer demand. In some parts of Merseyside, 60% of the work force rely on the public sector for their income. For every £1 that a local government worker earns in Liverpool, they spend 70p in the local economy. When public sector wages are taken out of our local economy, we will see local businesses close, a spiralling welfare bill and public services under strain because of underfunding. It is bad economics and bad government. The Government are hitting the poorest hardest and tearing the fabric of our society. What this country desperately needs is jobs and growth, and what the Government have chosen to do will lead to misery and despair for people right across the UK, particularly my constituents.

Simon Hughes: I was perplexed when the hon. Lady said that the Library had stated what the outcome of the review was. I have just read the Library note again. She is entitled to express her concerns, but she cannot suggest that the decisions have been made when we have not had the announcement yet. We have not even had the provisional announcement. Please will she just back off from all this shroud-waving stuff?

Luciana Berger: The figures have been arrived at from the comprehensive spending review, which is freely available to everyone in the House.

Robert Neill: It's not the same thing.

Luciana Berger: I can hear comments from the Minister, and if he would like to say that it is not true, I will give way to him.

Robert Neill: I do not often intervene when time is short, but if the hon. Lady is competing to make the most cliché-ridden speech yet heard in the debate, she might at least have the decency to accept that she is citing figures that have no verification at the moment. She shames her argument by the cynical way in which she makes it.

Luciana Berger: Will the Minister therefore reject the analysis of many organisations, including SIGOMA and the Library?

Tom Blenkinsop: I do not think the Minister can question the integrity of my hon. Friend's speeches, given the bicephalous nature of the debate. Back Benchers are saying that we all knew the cuts were going to happen, and that it was all on the cards, but at the same time the Minister is saying that there are no figures to draw upon.

Luciana Berger: I conclude by saying that I urge the Government to think again and not to introduce these savage, front-loaded, unfair cuts that will have a disproportionate impact on the areas and communities that need the most help.

7.37 pm

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger).

As other hon. Members have remarked, the debate comes at a crucial time for local government. Many local authorities have been preparing for these tough times because, as others have pointed out, if there had been a Labour Government there would probably have been cuts of about 20 to 25% in local government anyway. Responsible local government leaders and chief executive officers have been making plans over the past two years to deal with the overall fiscal situation that we face. In my previous capacity before coming to the House, as chief executive of Localis, the local government think-tank, I worked with a number of local authorities across the country that were already beginning to make strategic plans to cope with the situation. They knew that whatever the outcome of the general election, there would be significant service transformation.

I think we would all agree that the outcome of the comprehensive spending review is a tough settlement. As has been pointed out, we do not know the exact figures that the Minister will reveal next week, but we know they will be tough. However, the review also provides local government with a serious opportunity to consider how it can transform its services and improve its service delivery.

Some Opposition Members have touched on the hypothetical distribution of the spending cuts around the country and questioned their potential fairness. As the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Simon Hughes) pointed out, the way in which the formula grant is calculated is very complicated, and we would all agree that for many years it has been thought to be completely lacking in transparency. I agree with him that there is an urgent need to reform how we calculate the distribution. In fact, in the last Parliament, the Communities and Local Government Committee recommended that the Government increase the transparency of the existing grant allocation process. I hope that will form part of the Government's review of local government finance, because more transparency in the allocation process is critical.

I represent a constituency that straddles two metropolitan authorities in the west midlands—Dudley and Sandwell—one of which is Conservative-controlled and the other is Labour-controlled. My central focus is to ensure fairness in the grant allocation process. However, there is a discrepancy between these two metropolitan authorities. Dudley metropolitan council receives £60 million less funding than Sandwell metropolitan authority. They have similar levels of population and deprivation, yet there is a £60 million discrepancy. I am not making a value judgment about either authority; I am simply saying that we need to get to a point where this grant allocation does not throw up such significant discrepancies, not just between metropolitan boroughs and the shires—that has been debated tonight—but between metropolitan authorities within particular regions.

Funding shortfalls were not the only legacy that Labour left the country. As my hon. Friends have argued, the previous Labour Government kept local government on a tight leash through centralised control and regional bureaucracy. The changes implemented

over the past 13 years have stifled innovation locally, and given local government and communities the feeling that they have limited control and ability to make decisions and effect change. Unaccountable quangos, such as the Standards Board for England, the regional development agencies, including Advantage West Midlands, and the regional spatial strategies, all contributed to this feeling, and I am pleased to say that they are all on the way out. Removing those unelected, unaccountable and unwanted regional structures and bodies is a first step in a vital development for a new era of local government.

Tom Blenkinsop: What will areas without a local enterprise partnership do to get money through the regional growth fund?

James Morris: They will need to make clear arguments to the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and the Department for Communities and Local Government about why there should be a local enterprise partnership. However, local politicians should be arguing in favour of making applications to the regional growth fund because, even outside the LEPs, businesses, the voluntary sector and local authorities can make applications to the regional growth fund.

Local authorities will now be given back responsibility from central Government to start making real decisions about how they spend their money. As the Secretary of State said, the Government have freed up, or un-ring-fenced, grants worth £7 billion from 2011-12 onwards, which the Local Government Association described as

“an important move towards a simpler funding mechanism that will help councils do their job”.

However, that should be only the beginning. There is huge scope for the introduction of other levels of financial innovation in local government. For example, hon. Members have talked about the potential productive use of tax increment financing. This lack of ring-fencing, this devolution of financial autonomy to local government, should be only the beginning. We also need a systemic reform of the services delivered and a re-evaluation of how local people can influence the way services are run. This transformation, with the coming presentation of the localism and decentralisation Bill, is at the heart of Government policy. A bottom-up approach to service provision is vital.

Graham Jones: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that a bottom-up process involves cost, and local authorities are worried now that such a process, which he has suggested, will double the pain following the cuts in the comprehensive spending review?

James Morris: Over the past 13 years, as I said, we have had centralised policy dictated from Whitehall. At a difficult time for local government, it is even more important that we invert that pyramid and have a bottom-up decision-making process in which local government can take more control of its decision making.

Mike Freer (Finchley and Golders Green) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that top-down policies cost more than bottom-up ones? Under the previous Government, local authorities had more than 1,000 targets to report on, which cost my local authority £3 million a year.

James Morris: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. What he says is true.

The Government have asked local authorities and businesses to join forces in a bottom-up process, where they feel it appropriate, and through local enterprise partnerships, rather than top-down, regionally imposed structures. That will allow for economic development to be based on genuine local economic geographies, for investment to be tailored to local areas, and for LEPs, such as the one I have been advocating for the black country, to focus with laser precision on the particular issues affecting the 1 million people living in the black country.

That also illustrates that local authorities are capable of working together, often across political boundaries, to deliver services more proactively. In my region, Dudley, Sandwell, Wolverhampton and Walsall councils are demonstrating, by working together on shared services, such as information technology, trading standards, legal services and human resources, that we can save money and deliver better services for local people. That is happening across the country. For example, Hammersmith and Fulham, Westminster and Kensington and Chelsea councils are implementing a substantial shared-services programme across education and other services.

Andrew Bingham: My councillors would not forgive me if I did not intervene at this point. I have mentioned High Peak borough council already, but with its shared services with Staffordshire Moorlands district council, we saved more than £1 million last year, and will save a further £1.27 million this year. That exemplifies my hon. Friend's point.

James Morris: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. This is the future of local government—working together, shared services and making savings, while delivering services more effectively.

I have long been an advocate of place-based budgets, which were touched on at the beginning of the debate. To give the previous Government their due, they introduced the Total Place pilots. Regrettably, it took them 12 years to come up with the idea, but it was a good one. The implementation of place-based budgeting can radically change how services are delivered by pooling funding from a wide range of public, private and third sector organisations to tackle specific issues. I welcome the fact that the Government have announced that initially 16 areas will focus on the broad theme of helping families with complex needs. That model will help to make the delivery of services cheaper and allow for an improved focus on the needs of specific communities and individual users. This model needs to be expanded to encapsulate further policy objectives in the medium term. The Local Government Association estimates that doing so could save £20 billion a year by the end of this Parliament.

There are examples up and down the country of local authorities taking up this strategic challenge. As the Minister remarked, the recent announcements on public health demonstrate new roles and potential funding streams for local authorities that are also very welcome. However, that is not the only way to improve service delivery. The Cabinet Office recently introduced a right to provide for employees of public sector organisations. What this will mean in practice is the extension of

[James Morris]

mutuals and co-operatives in the provision of public services. The people at ground level often have a knowledge and understanding of the issues at hand, and they will now be able to start delivering services better. I am keen to see this model progressing in my constituency, and I can see the potential of mutuals in offering local services and youth services. The Government are also committed to providing local people with specific powers to improve their local area. These include devolving planning reform back to communities from unaccountable regional quangos, allowing local people to elect their own mayors and police commissioners, and extending the use of local referendums.

In summary, therefore, power is being handed back to local authorities, public sector workers and local people. Unlike what happened during the past 13 years, this will be real localism in practice, not the top-down centralisation that was passed down by the previous Labour Government. Such an approach can lead to a more personalised approach to the delivery of services, greater accountability and transparency and, crucially, given the economic mess, real savings, which the Local Government Association estimates could be as high as £20 billion over this Parliament. Local authorities need to see the current situation as an opportunity fundamentally to rethink how they deliver services, so that they can begin to do so more efficiently, more effectively and in the interests of the local people they serve.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. There is still a large number of Members wishing to participate in the debate, so I am going to impose a time limit on Back-Bench speeches, to see whether we can manage to get everyone in. We still might not, and the time limit might need to be revised. I should like to inform each Member that there will be a nine-minute limit on each speech, and that will be reviewed if there are still a lot of Members waiting to speak.

7.52 pm

Mr Dave Watts (St Helens North) (Lab): I am delighted to be able to take part in this important debate. I do so not only as the MP for St Helens North but as the chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on the special interest group of municipal authorities. Several Members have referred to the SIGOMA document, and I would recommend reading it to anyone. I know that the Minister has already read it. I would also recommend that he read the document produced by the Alliance group entitled “Hard Times”, which will nail some of the lies we have heard over the past few hours. I know that the Minister has read it, but I doubt whether the Secretary of State has done so.

Before I move on to my main points, may I say to the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Simon Hughes) that it will not wash if he tries to take no responsibility for the cuts that are heading his constituents’ way? He said he did not want to see cuts in voluntary sector budgets, or in leisure and youth service budgets. He said that he did not want to sell the family silver or sell off any assets, but he is going to see cuts in all those areas because it will be impossible for his

council to make the cuts that are heading its way without doing many of the things he does not want to do.

When the Minister responded to an Adjournment debate recently, he got very excited. I notice that he has also got very excited today. May I suggest that he keeps cooler than he did in the previous debate, because a number of us are worried about his health, and we do not want anything to happen to him before he has the chance to sum up the debate?

I should like to touch on the background to the cuts, the fairness of the last round of cuts, and the question of who will be affected by the cuts heading their way. I should also like to address the key issue of what the Government need to do to prove their own message that we are “all in this together”. I want to make it clear from the start that, like my own party, I accept the need for some cuts in public expenditure, and that local government had to make its contribution. There is no doubt that we had to reduce the deficit, and my party has been responsible for setting out how we would do that. The difference between us and the Government is the mix of tax increases and cuts. We also have a different view of the period over which the cuts packages should be spread. We would spread them over a much longer period than the Government propose, and we would not front-load them. We have heard a lot about front-loading today, and it has been suggested that the Secretary of State is going to review the position on that. The reason that most local authorities and communities are concerned is that the spending review made it quite clear that that is what the Government intend to do. I suspect that they are now trying to retreat from that position, knowing the implications of their proposals in their own areas as well as in ours.

My constituents accept that there has to be some pain and some cuts, but they do not like the fact that this same Government, while making dramatic cuts in public services, have allowed the banks to continue to pay massive bonuses to their staff and given the banks—the banks again!—a £1 billion tax cut. The Government have also now reneged on a promise to publish the details of those bankers who were being paid large bonuses. My constituents accept the need for cuts, but they do not think that the Government have been fair with them. They want to see a much fairer package of cuts and tax increases to address the plight we are in. My constituents—and, I suspect, those of the Minister—know who is at fault for the present financial crisis: it is not the previous Labour Government but the bankers, here and across the world, who turned the world economy upside down some months ago. It was only the straightforward action of the previous Labour Government that prevented the kind of recession that we saw under the last Tory Government.

What do my people want? They want a fair system of cuts. If there are to be cuts, they want to ensure that they are fair. They want to ensure that the most deprived communities and the most deprived people are protected, and that the cuts that have already been made in our communities are taken into account in any future round of cuts. They also want the cuts to be adjusted so that councils—not just ours but Liberal and Tory councils as well—will have the time to adjust their budgets. That means that we want to see more back-loading, rather than the front-loading that the Government are proposing.

It has been suggested that this is also about efficiency. The Secretary of State is quite good at putting out stories about the cost of plant pots in the Department for Communities and Local Government but, quite frankly, that is a smokescreen. These cuts will hit some of the most well run local authorities, including my own. My local authority, of which I was leader until I came into this place, is a five-star authority. It has excellent education and social services, and other council services. It has kept its council tax increases below the rate of inflation for the past 10 years, yet it faced massive cuts in its budget in May. It now faces cuts of up to £12.7 million in 2011-12, and £24 million worth of cuts in 2014-15. That nails the lie that it is only the wasteful councils that are being hit; some of the most efficient and effective are also being hit. My council will experience great difficulty because it is already efficient. Councils that are already efficient are going to have to cut services to the bone. Some of the comments from those on the Government Benches have suggested that their councils could make some savings, and I suspect that that is because they are very inefficient, compared with authorities such as my own.

I want to comment on the fairness of the proposals. I think that the Secretary of State has suggested that my contributions hark back to the 1970s and 1980s. The only good thing about being my age is that I have some experience of the previous Tory Government. I was the leader of the council when it lost £13 million and had to find a way of implementing that cut overnight.

I raised Westminster council with the Minister on last Tuesday's Adjournment. It has been in contact with and written to me because it is upset about some of the things I said; I will respond in due course. Under the system that was in force under the previous Tory Government, if St Helens had received the same level of grant as Westminster, we would have had no cuts whatever, we would have had to pay no council tax whatever and we would have had enough money left over to send every one of my constituents to Spain for a week. That shows the level of fiddling that went on under the previous Tory Government, so we will take no lectures from this Government about fiddling the system.

The Minister said that we were going to cut the neighbourhood renewal fund—that is not true, and Government Members know it. The only argument they have relates to the three-year review, but all the grant systems were for three years. That did not mean that we were going to do away with the fund; it meant that we would reassess local government spending over the next three years. I am prepared to blame my own party for not introducing the changes as quickly as it should have, which meant that millions of pounds from our authorities went to some of the richest areas, including Westminster and many others. We did not move fast enough—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Time is up.

8.01 pm

Gavin Barwell (Croydon Central) (Con): Before I was elected to this House, I had the privilege to serve as a councillor in Croydon for 12 years, to be a cabinet member responsible for a number of different service areas, to work with senior council officers and to meet council staff who were delivering services on the front line. I completely understand their feeling that it is

deeply unfair that some of them are going to be asked to pay the price with their jobs of dealing with the mistakes made in our banking system and the mismanagement of the public finances by the previous Government.

I speak in opposition to the motion not because I think the concerns expressed by Labour Members are misplaced or phoney—Members have spoken with passion about this issue—but because they fail to recognise that the Government's approach is very similar to the one a Labour Government would have adopted. In opening, the shadow Secretary of State said that the coalition Government were going deeper and faster than a Labour Government would have gone. Let us take each of those assertions in turn.

The suggestion that we are going deeper is palpably untrue. Labour policy was to get rid of the structural deficit over two Parliaments; the coalition's policy is to get rid of it over one Parliament. There is no difference whatever about the size of the cuts; there can be no argument whatever about that.

As for speed, let us look at the previous Labour Government's policy, as set out in the pre-Budget report of 2009. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, it meant reductions in non-protected Departments—the Labour Government were going to protect health, education and Sure Start—of 25%. If we look at what the coalition Government have delivered, because of the cuts in the welfare budget, some of which Labour Members perfectly reasonably wish to oppose, we see an aggregate 19% reduction in the non-protected departmental spend. In other words, the pace of change for cuts in non-protected Departments in this Parliament is slower under the coalition Government than it would have been under the plans of the previous Government.

The first two lines of the Opposition motion seek to make capital out of the fact that the reductions that local government is being asked to make are larger than those demanded of central Government. It is a nonsense for the Opposition to criticise us on that basis because Labour policy was to protect the NHS, the Department for International Development budget, the schools budget and the Sure Start budget. If they are to be protected, it is an obvious consequence that the average reduction across central Government is going to be lower than the reduction in local government, which the Labour Government had not chosen to protect.

I have been a Member for just over six months. During that time, I have had to support a number of measures that, in an ideal world, I would not support. Time and again I hear from Labour Members that they do not agree with our proposals: they do not agree on tuition fees; they do not agree on the mobility component for people in residential care who receive disability living allowance; they do not agree on local government funding; and they do not agree on cutting the teaching grant for universities. It is all very well for Labour Members to tell us all the things with which they do not agree, but that has no credibility unless alternatives are advanced. I have yet to hear from the Opposition one area where they believe that the coalition Government are not cutting enough. They have not told us that instead of reducing local government spending or teaching support for universities, alternative cuts can be made that the Opposition are prepared to announce. Until they come up with an alternative package, their objections have no credibility.

Tom Blenkinsop: One small but significant point relates to fiscal policy and taxation. This Government have made large promises about imposing greater levies on bankers and other such people, but they have quickly run away from them. Labour Members would look to have a far more stringent regime to hold those types of people to account.

Gavin Barwell: I note that the coalition Government introduced a levy on banking, which the previous Government did not. If the Opposition want to propose tax increases additional to those announced by the Chancellor, we should hear what they are and discuss them. That is a perfectly reasonable basis on which to debate.

The second main theme in the motion is fairness, which is a perfectly reasonable test. I would like to raise two issues. First, Labour Members have quoted figures, expressing the concern that the authorities most dependent on Government funding will face the most significant reductions in grant. Conservative Members have been concerned about some of the phraseology used, particularly about the implication that these decisions have all been made. They have not. There is certainly an issue that the Government need to look at, and I believe that the Secretary of State said that he was aware of it. If we just salami-slice the Government grant going to each council, that will have a differential impact on the spending power of local authorities around the country. In the interests of fairness, the Government need to address that problem. Labour Members, however, should not have given the impression that these things are all done and dusted; they are not. We have not yet had the statement, and the Minister is not in a position to give the assurances he has been asked to provide until that statement is made.

I would also like to look at the issue of fairness as it relates to the record of the previous Labour Government. I want to make a non-partisan point. People allege that money was shunted from the south to the north, or that under the Tory Government Westminster and Wandsworth were favoured. The reality is that the system is completely broke. If we look at the figures for unitary councils, the London boroughs and the metropolitan districts under the last five years of the Labour Government, we see that about 30 authorities—my authority was one of them—had a real-terms cut in funding of more than 2%. It is not all outer London boroughs, however; it is a completely random mix of authorities, including places such as Newcastle-upon-Tyne and Liverpool.

At the other end of the scale, we see that Blackpool received an increase of nearly 11%, Telford and the Wrekin 13.3%, Torbay 15.7%, Blackburn 16.7% and Rutland an incredible 25.8%. It is very difficult, I think, to discern a pattern between those authorities. I would like the shadow Minister to explain in her summing-up speech why Croydon gets a 3% real cut, but Rutland gets a 25% increase. [*Interruption.*] This happened under the Government of the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley), so, with respect, the explanation should come from those who were responsible for the changes.

In applying the reductions, it is important that the Government take account of the authorities that have already seen a real-terms reduction in their funding, as opposed to those that saw a period of largesse under the previous Government. I happily acknowledge that local government as a whole did see real-terms growth in

funding under the previous Government, but that did not apply to all individual local authorities. It seems wholly unreasonable to impose the same reductions on authorities that have already had to make cuts in comparison with those that have seen significant increases in funding.

I reiterate the point made in the Local Government Association briefing, which many Members will have received. The same point about fees and charges was made by the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Simon Hughes). For a number of local authority services, the charges that local authorities are allowed to levy by statute do not cover the costs. One way for the Government to help local authorities is by giving them the freedom to increase some of those charges. None of our constituents will welcome paying higher fees, but they might well prefer that option to reductions in the vital public services on which they depend.

Let me pick up another point made by the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark. He was very concerned about cuts in non-statutory services such as support for the voluntary sector and youth services. My local authority is having to consider those services. I hope the Minister will tell us that the Government will think again about what is statutory and what is non-statutory. Surely if we all now believe in localism and believe that local authorities are best placed to make choices, we should allow authorities much more flexibility in delivering services locally. If we do not, many of them will not be able to touch a large chunk of their spending because it is statutory, and the reductions will be concentrated in the voluntary sector.

In a report published before the general election, the Institute for Fiscal Studies spoke of measures to reduce the deficit. According to the IFS,

“most likely it will come from a combination of reductions in the quality and/or quantity of public services provided and families being made directly worse off financially through cuts to welfare benefits and increases in tax. Efficiency savings alone will not be enough to fill the deficit.”

Members on both sides of the House must stop pretending that all that can be done easily. Whoever is running the country—whichever party forms the Government—the job of deficit reduction will be painful. We should stop engaging in a feigned debate about whether it is ideologically based, because it would confront whoever was governing the country. We should focus on the changes that Government can make to support those in the front line who are having to make difficult decisions so that they can do the best job in protecting the vital public services on which all our constituents depend.

8.11 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): We have already heard from many of my hon. Friends about the impact of local government cuts on their constituents and local authority workers. Let me begin by paying tribute to those workers, who deliver services not in return for salaries of more than £100,000 or more than £25,000 a year, but in return for salaries of less than £15,000—and, in the case of the many who are women, less than £10,000 a year.

Let us be clear about the fact that, despite what the Government say, these cuts will affect care for the elderly and children. They will affect schools and education,

thus ensuring that our children do not have the best start in life. There will be safety reductions as funds for our fire brigades are devastated. There will be reductions in street cleaning, closures of swimming pools, art galleries and leisure centres. There will be cuts in the funds of voluntary organisations that support some of our most vulnerable people, cuts in the funds to support investment—including inward investment—in jobs, and cuts that will cause the gap in life expectancy between our most deprived and our most affluent areas to continue to widen, rather than continuing to close as it did under the Labour Government.

Let me say something about how the cuts will affect people in Teesside, and particularly in the borough of Stockton. Before becoming a Member of Parliament, I served as a councillor on Stockton borough council. I know from direct experience that Stockton has an excellent local authority that provides first-class services for local residents. I have seen the successes that it has achieved. I have seen improvements in education and care for the elderly and the young, improvements in housing, the development of Sure Start Centres supporting not just vulnerable families but working families throughout the borough, and the development of the arts with the international riverside festival and our celebrated ARC arts centre. The council has a “can do, will do” approach, and it is worthy of its “council of the year” title. I am confident that it will work hard to minimise cuts in front-line services and redundancies, but given cuts of this scale, even the best local authorities will struggle.

I am told that 50,000 people working for local authorities throughout the country have already been told that they could lose their jobs. That number will inevitably rise to the half million predicted by the Government, although I know that they are now trying to talk that number down. The Teesside *Evening Gazette* reports today that no fewer than 900 employees of Redcar and Cleveland borough council—a relatively small authority—have been given notice that their jobs are at risk, just 20 days before Christmas. Of course, the people who rely most on council services tend to be those on lower incomes. Why, then, are councils such as Hartlepool, in Teesside, and South Tyneside facing cuts of between 25% and 29% when South Cambridgeshire and West Oxfordshire councils are receiving increases of up to 37%?

In March this year, the Chancellor told the *News of the World* that he would not balance the budget on the backs of the poor. Now that his party is in government, he persists with the mantra “We are all in this together”. I do not think that many people, regardless of political persuasion, take that claim seriously.

It is not only the Conservatives who have back-tracked on their promises. The Liberal Democrat Manifesto said:

“Our core aim is to hard-wire fairness back into national life.”

I do not think that anyone working for a local authority who loses a job as a result of these cuts will think that there is anything fair about it, and the same applies to those who lose vital services.

Angie Bray (Ealing Central and Acton) (Con): Even some of the hon. Gentleman’s colleagues have told us during the debate that they accept the necessity for cuts. We have seen the figures in the Labour party’s “pre-manifesto”, which revealed their own plans for the non-protected Departments: cuts of about 25%. Why does the hon. Gentleman persist in claiming that it is only the Government parties who propose cuts?

Alex Cunningham: We accepted that there would be the cuts outlined by my right hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint). However, we believe that cuts must be fair, and that cuts as deep and as fast as those proposed by the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats must be questioned.

I hope to secure a Westminster Hall debate in the new year about the impact of cuts on the voluntary sector, 32% of which relies on local authority funding. I know that many excellent third-sector organisations fear that the cuts will severely limit their work. Stockton is trying hard to protect our third sector, but will face real challenges. I should be interested to know how cutting funds for those organisations will do anything to further the big society programme on which the Prime Minister is so keen. The third sector is the big society in action, and exposing those groups to possible cuts seems incoherent given the emphasis on big society and localism.

Of course, we must not consider local authority cuts in isolation. PricewaterhouseCoopers forecasts that for every job lost in the public sector, another will be lost in the private sector. That means 1 million lost jobs. One industry that we know relies heavily on the public sector is the building industry, which has already lost out in Teesside as a result of the cancellation of the Building Schools for the Future programme, as well as the scrapping of the new hospital to serve the North Tees and Hartlepool area. Spending by local authorities boosts the economy, and there is no doubt that the cuts will indirectly make life difficult for many local businesses.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Alex Cunningham: No, I will not.

Let me finally say something about the Cleveland fire service, which is critical to the safety of people in the area that I represent. I am told by the Fire Brigades Union that 68% of Cleveland’s funding comes from a central Government grant. Given that that grant is set to fall by 25%, the chief fire officer is seriously concerned about the possibility that lives will be put at risk by the cuts. The seriousness of the situation is exacerbated by the fact that our local area has large numbers of high-risk COMAH—control of major accident hazards—sites owing to chemical and other manufacturing in the area. The Minister responsible for the fire service has already refused my request for him to visit Teesside and see the problem for himself. I have written asking him to meet local MPs across the political spectrum, as well as representatives from Cleveland fire authority, to discuss the issue here in Westminster, and I hope that I shall receive a positive response.

These cuts place our communities at real risk, and I hope that the Government will think again.

8.18 pm

Brandon Lewis (Great Yarmouth) (Con): Our residents across this country have been losing interest in local government for years. Turnout in local elections, and particularly local government by-elections, shows that many people are not interested. From speaking to residents, I have learned that the biggest reason for that is that over the past 10 years and more councillors have often, rightly, said that they cannot deal with a given issue because it is under central Government control.

[Brandon Lewis]

It has already been said in our debate that the previous Government gave money but it always had strings attached. That was the problem. During the 11 years I spent as a councillor and council leader while a Labour Government were in office, my experience was never that we had plenty of money or that we could ever do things without strings attached. Every single time we looked at doing something for our residents, we had to go through some aspect of the tick-box culture. There had to be a consultation on a proposal, for instance, even if that proposal had been in the local election manifesto, or we had to do something differently to make sure that we kept one quango or another or the Audit Commission happy, because officers' views were often that if we did not do so, we would be punished somewhere else, with a different grant being cut or changed in a different area.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Heather Wheeler) that a key problem is the stranglehold that has been put on local government for years. I also agree that the fact that the previous Government held local government to ransom over their finances made it almost impossible for local councils to say that they were able to do very much directly for their local residents, even in areas where they were not struggling. That was because they were having to find money to cover bus passes, swimming pools or licensing. They were also then being handcuffed in respect of planning rules.

It has been a difficult time for local government and I understand why residents have started to switch off and disbelieve what they read in election manifestos. After all, under Government statutory requirements those in local government who were working to an election manifesto would probably still have to consult on any measures afterwards, so what was the point of the manifesto?

I hope that the ending of ring-fencing, the freeing up of local government and the localism Bill when it is introduced will result in councils being able to go back to concentrating on actually delivering for residents, instead of ticking these boxes, which are so often caught up with a financial string. If that happens, elections will actually matter again and people can believe that when they vote for a councillor and a party in a local election, that party can deliver on its manifesto. People will be able to expect to have local manifestos on which they can hold the party and council to account, rather than just always being fobbed off with, "We can't do that, we are restricted on this, or there's got to be consultation on that." That is a huge issue for local government. I sometimes think back to my time as a councillor and the amount of officer time that was spent on ticking these boxes and on putting bids together for money we may or may not get, depending on which box we tick.

Graham Jones: Is the hon. Gentleman talking about the regional growth fund?

Brandon Lewis: I am talking about a whole range of funds across the board. We would have officers spending a huge amount of time on every single matter. That was even the case in respect of initiatives like the comprehensive performance assessment. The sums involved would be up to £250,000 a year. If we added up the amount of

officer time spent in that way, we would find that local government could save a huge amount of money. I know that from speaking to my local authority in Great Yarmouth. I am proud to be able to say that, when the announcements were made earlier in the summer, our managing director and councillors said, "We can deal with this." We were one of the hardest hit local authorities, but they felt they could deal with it. They are now, rightly, looking at how they might share services.

One of the problems we had with the previous Government was their approach. They had to have estimates—even for unitary government. We debated that topic in the Chamber just a couple of weeks ago. The argument was that there could be a couple of million pounds a year in savings from having unitary authorities for Norfolk and Exeter, but one of the problems in respect of Norfolk was that we would still keep the county council and all the councils we had, and just convert one city council to a unitary. I would, therefore, still dispute whether there would have been any saving in officer money and time from moving to unitary status. However, the previous Government wanted to do that in the belief there might be savings down the line, when in fact what we are now seeing in Norfolk is authorities coming together to look at how they can share services, both county with borough and district councils and district councils across each other.

We are considering some of the savings that have to be made and—as other Members have commented—the salaries earned by some people in senior management in local authorities. We should also consider sharing services and focusing on local accountability, with members representing their residents. It should not be based on where a person's office might be or whether they work in one, two or three authorities. They are there to deliver a service, not tick a box for Government. If we were to do that, we could start seeing huge savings across the board.

The key is getting back to what local authorities are for. I fully support the Government's position and will be voting against the motion because it harks back to the bad days of the past 10 or 15 years when Government held local government at arm's length but were then able to blame it for being unable to deliver because, as Labour Members have already mentioned, there were strings attached. Instead, we should set councils free and give them power not to be ring-fenced and to make their own decisions. That will make them more accountable—transparency is a huge part of this. People will then understand that their local authority is the authority responsible for specific areas, that it has the power to deliver and that it is accountable at an election, which is really what democracy is about. That would be a big step forward for local government.

I know that other Members are keen to speak, so I am happy to conclude on that point.

8.24 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): May I say to the hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis) that if he thinks that councillors had a bad time under the Labour Government, he really has not seen anything yet? I say that as someone who was a councillor between 1982 and 1998. I spent eight of those years in opposition and eight controlling the

council, with only two of those years under a Labour Government. I watched the poll tax come in and I watched what we had to do during those times, so I suggest that he has lived through a pretty easy time in local government. If he thinks that by not having to tick boxes constituents are going to come out to vote in local elections, he underestimates the need for all politicians, national and local, to engage with our electorate. I suggest that engagement with our electorate is the thing that matters.

Brandon Lewis: The point that I was making was that by not being focused on ticking boxes for central Government and quangos, councils can go back to focusing on delivering services for residents, and that is what matters.

Siobhain McDonagh: Perhaps now I should take the opportunity to explain to the House and the hon. Gentleman just why I am not sure that my local residents will feel exactly the same way. Most Members will not have heard of my local council—Merton. It is a quiet, low-profile London borough. It is not the poorest or the most exciting. It generally gets on with it, whether it is Labour or Conservative-run. It is a council that likes to sweep the streets, collect the rubbish and look after people as best it can. Its services are not perfect and could improve, but most of the time it does its best. I suggest that the same applies to most of the councils represented by hon. Members.

Merton council needs time to change and to get about sharing services, but that time does not exist if those spending figures are to be released next week. Next week, we will learn the figures and by 5 March my council has to say what its budget is for next year. If I know anything about local government, it is that huge reforms are not brought about in three months.

Merton council will have to make cuts of £24 million this year—that is for the cuts it anticipates and those it will have to make because of an expanding need for services, such as school places and care for the elderly. That is £24 million out of a budget of £150 million. The people on that council are not people who squeal and they are at a meeting tonight just trying to get on with it, but how will they do this? They have already identified £10 million of cuts this year, which is the largest figure ever at this point in a financial year for the next. They hope to get to a figure of £14 million by January, but the following £10 million will be really hard to find.

Bill Esterson *rose*—

Siobhain McDonagh: I cannot give way, because I do not wish to take up too much time—I hope that is okay. The people on the council are finding that task hard, not because they do not want to do it and not because they do not want to bring about shared services, but because they cannot do it in the time available. As they seek to cut that last £10 million, the only opportunities left for them are to go for public services, for the voluntary sector, for the youth service—even though they do not want to do so—for personal care for elderly and disabled people and for the costs of special needs transport. That is because those areas are traditionally where councils have gone when they need to make cuts quickly. Those cuts will be devastating and what we are doing should not be about that.

I hope that the Minister will have taken that on board in any work he has been doing behind the scenes over the past few months with his fellow Ministers and will give councils such as mine time to bring about changes in their services. There is this idea that, somehow, boroughs all over the place will want to work with Merton council. I do not think it is Merton council's fault, but not too many want to come in for conversations about that. This year, the council will be combining with another council and one big department to save £2.5 million. We want to do more of that, rather than the terrible things that I have just suggested, but we do not have the time and the ability to do so. Councils simply do not have the capacity not only to run services but to do the sort of consultation and detailed legal work that is needed. Their only other recourse is to go out to private consultants and the cost of that is wrong and prohibitive at a time when every pound matters.

This year, Merton will share a head of legal and civic services with Richmond upon Thames council. I hope that that will be the stepping stone to more joint working over the coming years, but in an effort to make the cuts this year all our councillors will do things that we would rather they did not. Our constituents will ask us to defend them at the same time as our Labour groups and our Conservative groups will say to us, "Don't have a go at us. It's you lot who decided this."

We are going through a very difficult time and I plead with the Minister to give councils as much time as possible to reform their services, to consider how they can do things and to consider being ingenious. The idea that many of them have been doing nothing year in, year out and that they have not been making cuts already is completely not the case.

Let us consider adult social care. I do not know how other hon. Members feel, but I rage when I hear about the £2 billion fund because personal care is the biggest budget, outside the schools budget, that local authorities have to cut. That £2 billion is available because councils will be doing some pretty awful things, such as considering older people's eligibility for domiciliary care or to go into homes. That is what we are facing. If we have the opportunity, we need to stand back and give councils more time to reform and to do things differently. Otherwise, the choices are particularly painful—not for us, but for some of our most vulnerable constituents.

8.31 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is an honour to follow such a thoughtful speech as that made by the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh). Before I came to the House, I spent some 24 years in local government—20 years as leader of my group, 10 years setting budgets and 10 years proposing opposition budgets. Throughout that time, I gained a great insight into how local government finance works and has worked over many years under different Administrations.

We should remember that in that context, local authorities have, over the past three years, faced 3.5% reductions, or efficiency savings, forced on them by the then Labour Government. In London, some 23 of the 32 local authorities have been on the floor of the settlements. For the past three years, therefore, they have always had below-inflation increases. If education is stripped from

[Bob Blackman]

those budgets, they show a real-terms reduction in funding in London over the past three years. Pretensions that local government saw its halcyon days under the Labour Government are, I am afraid, completely false. We need to put them properly in their place.

We must also consider the proposals made by the Labour Government at the time and what local authorities anticipated if Labour had won the general election. We know that they would have halved capital expenditure, and this Government are preserving capital expenditure and ensuring that there is investment for our future. That is critical for the whole ambit of local authorities and all public sector authorities.

We also must consider what local authorities now have to administer. The budget for which I was responsible in the London borough of Brent was some £1 billion, but we only had discretion over £250,000 of it. The rest was passed from central Government to the local services without any interference or control by the local authority whatsoever. We need to recognise those changes.

Graham Jones: Is that not precisely what is happening when the Government announce that they are ring-fencing education funding? Is that not just a repeat of what the hon. Gentleman has just described?

Bob Blackman: Clearly, the Government are removing artificial ring-fencing from local government expenditures. Local authorities up and down the country rightly complain about having been given money in very tightly constricted salvos that could be spent only on particular services in particular ways. Often, they could not spend it within the given time frame and so would lose it. That is ridiculous.

We need to look at how money can be saved. There is multiple handling of cases in local authorities. I know of social services cases in which the application for disabled facilities grants has gone through 17 pairs of hands before being approved. What nonsense. We have to streamline systems to ensure that, at most, one person reviews a case and another checks that it is correct. Applications should not go through 17 people.

We should have computer systems that capture data once. People who apply to a local authority for particular services frequently have to fill out a multitude of forms and the relevant information then has to be entered many times by various people in different areas.

Tom Blenkinsop: Is the hon. Gentleman advocating identity cards?

Bob Blackman: No I am not. I am saying that when the weakest and most vulnerable people in society are asked to give information to local or national authorities, we can enter the data once, administer the benefits they are entitled to and make sure they get the proper benefits, rather than having the multiplicity of systems that grew up under the Labour Government.

We spend more than £1 billion on administering housing benefit, but why does every authority need a separate back-office organisation for that? Those contracts are administered by a small number of suppliers, so why not combine them, strip out some of the administrative overheads and remove duplication?

Heather Wheeler: We have done exactly that in South Derbyshire. We have got into a grouping with Northgate and we will be the east midlands hub, so if hon. Members want to save money and pay us to do their housing benefit, we will do it for them.

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend for taking this opportunity to advertise the hub that she is involved in.

Clearly, we need smarter procurement in local government. It almost makes me spit when tenders for local government services come back with visibly inflated prices because they are for public, rather than private, services. Many of the tenders for public services that come back would not be accepted by any private service. We need to examine that carefully.

We also need to create an environment in which there is greater opportunity for mutualisation. One thing I did in local government was to create a local authority mutual insurance operation for London. It would have saved my authority and every authority that joined it £1 million a year, but it was deemed to be illegal so we could not operate it. I ask Government Front Benchers to change the position so that local authorities can come together to save money for local residents and also provide much better services.

We should consider what unused assets local authorities have. An awful lot of land could be sold in appropriate ways and the money could be used for appropriate reinvestment in the local area. We also need to consider local authority balances. Some authorities have sums of money sitting totally unused instead of benefiting the public, whereas other authorities have very small balances and will find the reductions much more painful. Many authorities need to examine their conscience and use those resources to benefit local people.

Everyone knew that the cuts were coming. Everyone knew that there needed to be a plan. In the authority on which I served before I came to the House, we had a plan to reduce our expenditure by £100 million over four years—that is, £25 million or 10% a year. If we could do it without a huge impact on public services, I do not believe there is any authority in the country that could not do it.

Graham Jones: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Bob Blackman: No, I shall not give way as I do not have much time. [Interruption.] No. I have been given the extra time already.

The borough that I have the privilege of representing now also have a plan to save some 10% of its expenditure per year, and the plan is ready to go, depending on the settlement. Clearly, as my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Gavin Barwell) mentioned, there are wide disparities in the formula grant that authorities are given. That is the key issue that the Government must address to make the system fairer, more transparent and more open, so that we can all examine it and make sure that the right resources are going to the right authorities.

8.40 pm

Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab): This time last week, my constituency was the scene of violent protests about local government cuts. Town hall windows were smashed, four individuals were arrested and 15 police

officers were injured as Lewisham council met to consider budget cuts of £16 million. Although the violence was due to a small minority intent on making trouble, there is no doubt that my constituents are angry, and they are right to be.

Lewisham bore the brunt of public outrage about local government cuts last week. Sadly, the £16 million worth of savings agreed by the council is probably just the tip of the iceberg. In the next four years Lewisham expects to have to save somewhere in the region of £77 million, just under a third of its total revenue budget.

Joan Ruddock: Did my hon. Friend hear the Secretary of State suggest that Lewisham council should look to its £60 million worth of reserves to deal with the issue? She knows, as I do and as he does, that of those reserves, the majority is for capital spending. The general fund is simply 2.5% of total budget. Does she agree that it would be utterly irresponsible to spend emergency reserves and do nothing to deal with cuts of up to £70 million?

Heidi Alexander: Indeed. My experience on Lewisham council was that the only occasion on which reserves would be considered for use was when that would be a fiscally responsible thing to do.

Bill Esterson: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Heidi Alexander: I should like to make progress as I am conscious of the time.

The demonstrations at Lewisham council last week did not take place because that is a Labour council intent upon slashing services or haemorrhaging staff. The demonstrations at Lewisham last week were a direct result of a Tory-Liberal Government determined to cripple councils the length and breadth of the country. I first learned about the riots last Monday when I was on my way home from Westminster. As I sat on the train, I could not help but reflect upon how unfair it was that former colleagues of mine were being blamed for the Government's decision to inflict cuts that go well beyond anything that is sensible or necessary, and well beyond anything that my party would have done, had we been in power.

As I sat on the train, I also realised that at the exact time that council employees in Lewisham were trying to hold back an angry mob, hon. Members in this Chamber were debating reform of the banking system. For me, the two are not separate issues. Local democracy is rightly accountable for the decisions that it takes, but surely we have to ask: where are the protests outside the plush offices of the bankers whose excessive risk taking plunged us all into this crisis in the first place? For that matter, where are the protests outside the office of the Secretary of State, whose failure to stand up for his Department has forced Lewisham council into its present position?

I am not for one minute suggesting that the violent protests in Lewisham should be replicated anywhere, but surely those responsible for the current financial state of local government should be made aware of the effects that their actions are having on communities throughout the country.

There's the rub: for me, the Government do not get it. They do not seem to get the fact that by heaping cuts on local authorities, they run the risk of putting thousands upon thousands of people out of work. Ministers do not seem to understand that draconian cuts to local government will simply take work away from private firms—the very firms that they are desperately trying to grow. Nor do Ministers seem to understand that the scale of the cuts could decimate voluntary and community organisations at the precise moment when they want them to do more. Most worryingly for me, there seems to be no acknowledgement that the size and speed of the cuts could force councils to dismantle the services on which the most vulnerable members of our society depend.

Graham Jones: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Heidi Alexander: I would very much like to make some progress, and I am conscious that there is a time limit.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) spoke earlier about elderly care, on which I, too, would like to focus for a few minutes. I have been reprimanded by the Secretary of State in this Chamber before for daring to suggest that the supposedly extra money for adult social care announced in the comprehensive spending review would be wiped out by the cuts to local government. Well, let me tell the Minister today that there are many authorities that share my concern. In fact, a recent report by London Councils estimates that even with the "extra" £2 billion announced in the CSR, funding for adult social care will fall by £1.8 billion over the next four years. During my time as a councillor, the worst meetings that I had to attend were those at which we considered changing the eligibility criteria for care packages—the threshold of need that the elderly and those living with disabilities have to meet to get support. In the end, we did not raise the threshold in Lewisham, and I am pleased that we did not do so. It came down to a question of human dignity, and I was proud to be part of a Labour council that recognised that.

However, with the current scale of cuts facing local government and the demand for care increasing by the day, I cannot see how much longer councils will be able to maintain the level of support that they currently provide. If they do maintain current levels of care, other council services will have to take a big hit. They include libraries, leisure centres, recycling facilities and street sweeping—many of the things that people take for granted. Does the Minister realise that those are the sorts of impossible decisions that he is asking council leaders to take?

I accept that in many areas there may be ways of doing things differently—doing things more cheaply and doing them better—and that is precisely what good, forward-thinking councils have been doing over the past few years. My concern about the Government's approach to local government is that it seems to be based on a mistaken belief that councils are characterised by rampant profligacy, sky-high salaries, and hundreds and hundreds of non-jobs. Nothing could be further from the truth. My experience tells me that, year after year, many councils have been working hard to make themselves more efficient, the result being that there is

[Heidi Alexander]

now simply not much fat left to trim. The way in which cuts are being disproportionately squeezed into next year—although we hope we might get some good news on that—will also make it harder for councils to take the sensible, long-term strategic decisions that are needed.

My concern about the scale of the cuts to local government is that it will limit the ability of councils to address some of the big issues of our time, and restrict the innovative work that some modern, progressive councils are already undertaking. Let us take climate change. Although new forms of electricity generation and more energy-efficient homes may help to reduce our carbon emissions, some of the really big differences will come about only by people changing their behaviour. That does not happen by magic, and although Ministers might be concerned that this smacks of the nanny state, I cannot help but think that it is local government that is best placed to assist communities in reducing their carbon footprints. However, that type of work is resource-intensive, and with resources so much scarcer, councils will have to stop doing other things if they want to continue such work.

In conclusion, I believe that the scale and speed of cuts to local government is part of a deliberate strategy by Ministers to shift the really difficult decisions on to someone else. It is an attempt to deflect attention away from themselves and on to council leaders up and down the country. To give Ministers their due, as a political strategy you cannot knock it, Mr Deputy Speaker, but as a strategy to reduce the country's deficit fairly and sensibly, it is nothing short of a disgrace.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. As we can see, six Members are still trying to catch my eye and there are 40 minutes left of this debate, so I am sure that hon. Members can do the mathematics. Perhaps they will want to be generous in order to ensure that everybody gets in, because the numbers are equal on both sides of the House.

8.50 pm

Mr David Ward (Bradford East) (LD): I welcome in particular the speech by the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), one of the few people who seems to have read the motion. Many hon. Members have tried to support or, indeed, argue against the scale of the cuts, but the guts of the motion are really about front loading and authorities' ability or inability to deal with that in the short term.

Scaremongering has been mentioned, but back in Bradford the council has been working on the figures, and the numbers on front loading are scary. Those are the figures we have been given, so it is a question not of scaremongering but of what we have been given to work on and are working to.

Members have traded stories and histories of their time on local councils. I had 26 years on my local council, 13 under the Tories and 13 under Labour, and with all due respect to my coalition partners, I can tell hon. Members which were the worst by a long way. I remember, back in the '80s, we had to raise £2.40 to spend £1 in Bradford and send £1.40 back to the

Treasury, and it did not get much worse than that, so I am not worried about the Liberal Democrats having only 57—or, soon, 58—Members, because two of us Liberals managed to stop Councillor Pickles slashing the education budget in the '80s, although unfortunately a by-election and the lord mayor's casting vote enabled him to do so the following year.

During the 13 years under Labour, additional funding went to the local authority and it was very welcome. Unfortunately, it was accompanied by obsessive control, bureaucracy, targets and the ring-fencing of funds, which would enable Ministers to issue press releases telling us how good they were and what they were doing for the people of Bradford. Building Schools for the Future was a colossal waste of public funds, and if we had been given only half that money to spend in our area on our priorities for schools, it would have been much better.

The cynical use of local services to win Government popularity reached shameful proportions with the free school meals handout and free swimming. It would have cost us 8 million quid to keep free school meals going the year after, and, although the shadow Secretary of State says that we did not turn that money down, how could we? That is how much it would have cost us to keep the service going, and it was pure political cynicism to make that offer leading up to a local election.

Similarly, the area-based grant and the working neighbourhoods fund were time-limited, and, although we got as much as we possibly could because we had things to do with the money, local education authorities invariably required that that short-term funding be added to the base. The position we were in meant we could stop the funding or add it to the base, but if we did not continue with it we would have been the villains of the piece, so invariably we did.

Year by year, the base grew and grew, and all the time we faced the relentless pressures of an ageing population, and all that that meant for increased social care, and the fastest growing school population in the country. In turn, there was budget creep: unsustainable budgets that got bigger and bigger. Between 2000 and 2008, private sector jobs declined by 7.5% and public sector jobs went up by 14%, and that could not be sustained.

Despite all that, over those 26 years the local authority survived. It got through, and it will get through this recession, too. The Secretary of State was absolutely right: we cannot rely on a salami approach any more. The truth is this—it is a secret, so please do not tell anybody else—of the £1.3 billion gross budget that we were spending, we had a furious argument every single year at budget time about a couple of a million quid. That was what was really going on, rather than dealing with the structural changes that were required in the authority.

As someone said earlier, necessity is the mother of invention. We are responding positively in Bradford, including the leader of the Labour group who, after six years of self-imposed exile, is actively working as the leader of the council with all the other groups because he understands the severity of the problems that we face. I give him great credit for that. But—and this is the big “but”—we cannot turn the tanker around in a short time. When we are faced with reducing £60 million on a net budget of £450 million, it is not about a planned, structural, cultural local authority change contributing to the deficit reduction programme; it is simply reckless, economic vandalism. That is what we face.

I do not know about other hon. Members, but I have detected a shift tonight on the subject of the front loading. I get a feeling that something has been said and there is something in the air. People might ask, "So why on earth are you making all these comments and raising these concerns?" I would say to them that that is what we have been given to work on and what the directors of finance across the country have been told, and they are acting on it. That is the point I am trying to make. We knew this was coming and we have been told how severe it will be, so we are now making decisions and cutting our budgets. The decisions we are making are not long-term, rational, objective assessments; it is simply panic. We are saving £1 million a month on the vacancy freeze. That is very welcome in terms of helping us with the budget, but it is arbitrary and has not been planned. Such an approach is salami slicing of the worst possible kind and it cannot go on because people will be affected by it.

We need to give local authorities time. They are rising to the challenge, but they need time to achieve what we are asking them to achieve, and we need to work with them. Despite what will happen later, if there were a free vote in the Chamber tonight, I think that the majority of hon. Members would support the motion. What has emerged from the various speeches is a recognition that local authorities need time. I hope that in the winding-up speeches tonight from the coalition side, we are given a very strong positive indication about all the concerns raised on front loading and that we are told it will be abandoned.

8.58 pm

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bradford East (Mr Ward) who praised my great friend Councillor Ian Greenwood, the leader of Bradford city council, for rolling up his sleeves to get on with the job. I recognise the great honesty of the contribution he has made tonight. In recognising that, the figures look—in his own words—a bit scary.

The cuts in local government spending announced by this Conservative-led Government are of unprecedented severity—27% in four years is a massive amount. As leader of North Lincolnshire council for six years, I inherited a council with the fourth highest council tax in the country. Through systematic and planned savings, the council's budget had been cut by many millions by the end of my term of office. Council tax at band D was the average for England, and the Audit Commission identified North Lincolnshire as a beacon council, so I know it is possible to reduce spending while developing services.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside (Mrs Glindon), I recognise that innovation has been around for some time in local government. However, to do that creatively and effectively, budget reductions have to be systematic and planned. To cut budgets in a crisis is exactly the wrong thing to do. It leads to the wrong cuts, a lack of service continuity, and disastrous consequences for the organisation's finances and for the services it delivers. We need look no further than across the Irish sea to see how true that is.

The Education Committee recently interviewed two heads of children's services to see how it feels at the sharp end. In his opening question, the Chair asked

whether the funding reductions made sense. Matt Dunkley of East Sussex county council, the vice-president of the Association of Directors of Children's Services, answered thus:

"I think we all understand the imperative of the deficit reduction. I think our fears are, managerially, how it is being handled by the Department and how the settlement is being broken down, in terms of the different funding streams that affect us. We are fearful that a combination of front-loading of the reductions into year 1, and the way in which the different funding streams on which we are reliant are being cut at different rates over the four years...could lead to some local authorities having to make very large reductions in the first year of the four years of the settlement. That could have a knock-on effect in terms of the amount of redundancies they'd have to fund, which might produce some unintended consequences".

Debbie Jones, director of children's services for Lambeth, added:

"What I want to emphasise...is the front-loading issue. I think all of us have recognised the need to make significant reductions, but the important thing is that we essentially transform the way in which services are commissioned and delivered so you have a reasonable lead-in time. The impact of the front-loading, not just on our overall settlement but also on the grants that we have yet to know the detail of, means that we will have a very short time in which to make major decisions. That of immediate knee-jerk—obviously we'll do our best to avoid it—could result in those unintended consequences, which could undermine the work that we're doing in the future."

This is what the professional leaders on the front line are saying about how this Government are going about their business. They are not whingeing and whining—they are professionals. To use the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), they are getting on with the job. That is what professionals will always do, in my experience, when faced with some of the nonsense that we, the politicians, serve up from time to time. They will somehow make sense of the nonsense, and they will make it work, after a fashion. However, what they warn of we have a duty to listen to. They warn that these reckless cuts will lead to unintended consequences, which will impact on the lives and livelihoods of the most vulnerable. These reckless cuts will deliver the Prime Minister's broken society, not his big society.

As the Tory peer and LGA chair, Baroness Eaton, said:

"the unexpected severity of the cuts that will have to be made next year will put many councils in an unprecedented and difficult position."

We have heard how Conservative leaders and mayors in the north of England have echoed this in a chorus of concern. The chief executive of North Lincolnshire council agrees. Never before has the council in my area had to take an in-year cut in Government funding after it set its budget, as it had to do this year. The front loading of future cuts means a 10.4% reduction next year. Additional cuts to specific grants will exacerbate this further. It is small wonder that the council concludes thus:

"Revenue spending cuts in excess of £20 million over 4 years are on an unprecedented scale. There will be implications for all areas of council activity. While the council will try to manage as much of this as possible through efficiency measures, reductions in services and staffing levels are inevitable."

For all the Tory talk of localism and devolving power to local authorities, the Tories are cutting local budgets harder than national budgets. Town hall spending will

[*Nic Dakin*]

be cut almost three times more than that of Whitehall Departments—so much for localism. The cuts are front loaded so that the heaviest cuts fall in the first year, giving local councils almost no chance to plan where savings can be made. The cuts are too deep and too quick, putting front-line local services at risk. Many small businesses rely on contracts for local authorities. As my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Heidi Alexander) pointed out, cuts in local government funding will result in fewer contracts for the private sector, meaning loss of jobs and a knock-on effect for the wider local economy. It is little wonder that PricewaterhouseCoopers forecasts that for every job lost in the public sector, another will be lost in the private sector.

This timely motion gives all Members of the House the opportunity to listen to the people, to pause and to do the right thing. By voting for the motion, we are voting for localism, for small business and for local people. I commend the motion to the House.

9.5 pm

Angie Bray (Ealing Central and Acton) (Con): Hon. Members will be pleased to know that I will keep my remarks short.

Given where the country finds itself financially, it would have been strange if local government had been immune to the tough choices that the coalition Government have been forced to take to cut the deficit and to get the country back on track. Decisions on local government spending are indeed tough, with a 7.5% cut in spending each year between now and 2014. However, as many colleagues have said, the cut may well be lower due to other revenue streams.

Although the impact is painful, the coalition has taken decisions to make it as fair as possible. Councils up and down the land will be supported in freezing council tax in 2011-12 through additional funding equivalent to the revenue from a 2.5% rise in council tax. That honours a coalition agreement promise to freeze council tax, even in the face of the worst debt crisis since the second world war. It is also an essential ingredient of the coalition's policy on fairness, because it helps the lower-paid and pensioners in particular, who have seen their council tax double since 1997. The average band D council tax bill is now nearly £1,500, which frankly beggars belief.

As with so many issues, we still do not have a clue how the Labour party would approach this difficult funding issue. It has to get over its denial about the financial problems that face this country. It continues simply to complain and scaremonger, yet it never tells us how it would deal with the problem, except to imply that somehow it would be able to do so without having to take any difficult decisions. More likely, it is not coming clean with us about the plans that we know it had, because it does not want to talk about them any longer. We are where we are because of years of overspending without a care in the world by the Labour party. Now the pain starts as we rebuild our finances. At least Government Members know what we have to do.

The most important reform that the coalition is introducing in local government is more localism. One way in which the Government are trying to alleviate the

difficult measures is to free funding from being overly ring-fenced. That will allow local councils to use their revenue with much more flexibility, so that they can meet local needs in the way that they know best.

Neil Carmichael (Stroud) (Con): The debate has focused on two issues. Obviously, the cuts are the primary issue, but there is a secondary one. Does my hon. Friend agree that the opportunities that the coalition Government are giving local authorities to be imaginative and even radical in reforming their services and their approach to local government will pave the way for exciting, diversified and genuinely local authorities?

Angie Bray: I thank my hon. Friend for that contribution. Of course, I agree that it is a great thing to get local authorities back to doing what they do best, which is to work closely with their local residents to ensure that they give them what they need.

As hon. Members have said, many local authorities across the country are considering how they can take out costs in their back rooms by working together to run services. My hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (James Morris) mentioned Kensington and Chelsea borough council getting together with Westminster city council and Hammersmith and Fulham council to do just that. Those boroughs happen to make up my previous London assembly seat and they are all, I should add, Conservative-run. They are doing what local councils should be doing—making efficiency savings in bureaucracy where possible, rather than hitting front-line services.

My local, Labour-led council, Ealing, has been quick to announce plans for a range of cuts, including cutting day care centres, a child protection officer and more than 50% of park rangers. Enviro-crime officers are also to be cut, from 23 to 12, yet it is happy to find £3 million for new computers at the town hall and, quite disgracefully, it is to continue funding full-time trade union officials to the tune of £250,000 a year.

Tom Blenkinsop: Regarding non-statutory duties and youth services, about which we have heard from the hon. Members for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Simon Hughes) and for Croydon Central (Gavin Barwell), would the hon. Lady like to condemn the Prime Minister, who is funding pilot schemes for big society youth projects in the summer with people who are not qualified in youth training?

Angie Bray: I am happy to take that point on board, but I am going to make progress.

The spending decisions that I mentioned are clearly not the priorities in which the people of Ealing are interested, and they really ought to be reconsidered. Unfortunately, I suspect that politics has played a large part in them. They were entirely avoidable, but the council hoped to make the coalition Government take the blame. I expect the public to be a little cleverer than that. They know, as we all know, that we are in a black financial hole because of the previous Labour Government, and my constituents will not be impressed by poor spending decisions that allow day care centres to be closed or park rangers to lose their jobs while full-time

trade union officials are kept in cushy jobs in which they do nothing to support the local community. I will oppose the motion.

9.11 pm

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): I am very grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate, which is important because the subject affects my constituents particularly badly. I have enjoyed contributions from both sides of the House, and I particularly welcomed that of the hon. Member for Bradford East (Mr Ward). It reminded me of something that he said at the very beginning of the Parliament in a media interview: "It's not about who you do the deal with, but about the deal you do". I suspect that he is rather wondering what sort of a deal has been done now.

I also welcomed the contribution of the hon. Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) about waste in local government, particularly when he referred to bureaucracy and the rule book on appropriate language to be used by councillors to council officers. He failed to mention that the other half of the Tory group on his council was accused recently of referring to a council officer as a "wonk" and a "foreigner". Perhaps it would have been useful for him to have read that very rule book.

Andrew Percy: As my friend, colleague and near neighbour knows full well, the guide I referred to was for councillors in their dealings with the public. The corporate governance inspection recorded that it was Labour councillors who were bullying members of staff back in 2000.

Karl Turner: Of course, I disagree entirely. It was very recently that the leader of the Tory group was accused of the serious things I mentioned, and it would have been better had he read the rulebook.

As axes have fallen, local government has emerged as the indisputable loser from the Government's austerity measures. Town halls across the country will feel the squeeze tighter than Whitehall Departments as the Government cynically try to devolve responsibility for the choices they have made and the mess they are creating. On average, local authorities will experience a loss of funding to the tune of 27% over four years, compared with 11% for Whitehall Departments.

Before I move on to specific objections, I should first like to discredit the myth that that situation was inevitable. It was not. There was an alternative, which, coincidentally, was the opinion of the junior partner in the coalition Government. It had the support of numerous Liberal Democrats who are now members of the Cabinet, and the Deputy Prime Minister deemed it simple enough for his 8-year-old child to understand. Slower deficit reductions—half the level over four years—as supported by the Labour party, would have mitigated the effect of local government cuts and protected the most vulnerable in our constituencies.

Cuts this size and this fast cannot be absorbed through recruitment freezes, removing natural wastage or service-sharing. Make no mistake: these cuts will impact on services and jobs. Across the country, local councils have already begun shedding staff and pulling vital front-line services. Council leaders, whatever their political

persuasions, are trying to mitigate their political misfortunes, explaining that services will be hit and jobs lost, and even the Secretary of State admitted that by itself sharing services will not balance the books. Money allotted for highway improvement is being hit in Somerset, north Yorkshire and London, and support for battered women has been slashed in Buckinghamshire. Eligibility for social care is being tightened, £311 million of grants from the Department for Education have gone, and youth services are being put at severe risk.

In my constituency, residents have been hit particularly hard by cuts to the housing market renewal programme, affecting Hull's gateway housing regeneration scheme. The speed at which Government funding has been withdrawn has left many living in derelict houses, experiencing damp, flooding and an increase in theft. I have written to the Secretary of State to invite him to see the result of his policies, but not surprisingly he has yet to reply. It is perhaps no wonder that he has not afforded me the courtesy of replying to my invite. My constituents are left in real desperation. Cuts to these areas do not just end with a fall in service provision. They begin a vicious cycle of their own: as jobs are lost and unemployment increases, dole queues get longer and longer. The Local Government Association has already revised up its estimates of job losses to 140,000 this year and predicts costs associated with these redundancies could be as much as £2 billion. However, money provided by central Government to help with the cost of job cutting amounts to only £200 million.

I come to the crux of the motion. It is not just the depth of the cuts that is damaging, but the speed. The Government's desire to rush local authorities into making cuts now to make sure the damage is done well before the next election is a worrying and short-term decision based entirely on political objectives. The Secretary of State can scream from the rafters that the accusation of front-loading is fiction, but the evidence is firmly against him. The Local Government Association has estimated that the cuts will fall heaviest in the first year, with an 11% loss in 2011-12.

The Government may talk a good game, but they certainly do not play one. Let us consider, for example, the Secretary of State's vision for local authorities. He claimed that they should use cuts as an

"opportunity to completely rethink everything they are doing, creating a modern, flexible and innovative council."

That is certainly a laudable sentiment, but in practice he is forcing local government to make cuts almost immediately, allowing no time for planning or strategy. The opportunity that he speaks of will last for the blink of an eye.

As well as going too far, too fast, the cuts are unfair. Despite claims from Government Members that they would aim for fairness and that we are all in this together, the effect of these cuts is highly disproportionate, hitting the worse-off hardest. Even the Minister admitted:

"Those in greatest need ultimately bear the burden of paying off the debt".—[*Official Report*, 10 June 2010; Vol. 511, c. 450.]

Unfortunately, figures from the Department for Communities and Local Government bear that out. The councils worst hit over the four-year settlement, including my constituency, are among the 10% most deprived areas in the country.

[Karl Turner]

This Government say one thing and do another. Measures involving jobs, services, front-loading and unfairness are all being undertaken using the language of localism. The Government are front-loading cuts in local services to ensure that, come the general election, the massacre will be over. They are making councils take responsibility for the cuts locally so that they do not have to account for their irresponsibility nationally. They are feathering their own nests while pillaging constituencies such as my own. This Government claim that we are “all in this together”, so I ask the Secretary of State if he will please visit my constituency, along with housing Ministers, to see the carnage for themselves.

9.20 pm

Andrew Bingham (High Peak) (Con): I will be brief as I believe that one more Member wishes to speak in the next 10 minutes. I have had the privilege of being a High Peak borough councillor for 11 years, and I remember the first four years, when the council was under Labour control. Labour Members tend to wax lyrical about the past, but during those four years, when we were led to believe that money was plentiful, the Labour-controlled council managed to put the council tax up by 19% in a single year. The increase averaged more than 9% a year over four years.

In 2003, we had a strangely prescient situation in which a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition ran High Peak borough council, but even then we were squeezed by the Labour Government, with small settlements and extra duties. We were told to take on licensing, for example, but given no money to do it. We had to find that money ourselves. The hon. Member for Lewisham East (Heidi Alexander), who is no longer in the Chamber, made an accusation about us shifting the blame for taxation on to local authorities. All I will say to that is: they should know, shouldn't they?

The council was then faced with comprehensive performance assessments, and I remember officers focusing on that week after week, month after month, and carrying out mock CPAs to get the necessary excellent rating in order to free us a little more from Government interference. That took their minds off delivering the services that we were there to deliver. It was ridiculous, and we need less of that. We still managed to set a low council tax, however, and in 2007 the Conservatives took control of the council.

Members who have been in the Chamber for most of the debate will have heard me describe our strategic alliance with Staffordshire Moorlands. We have achieved more than £2 million of savings, which can go to our residents, although many of those measures were opposed by the Labour group. The two councils now share environmental health, ground maintenance, property management, communications, human resources and finance—the list goes on. We have all heard of other councils sharing in this way, but we were one of the first to do it. I urge Members to come to High Peak borough council and learn from us how it was done. We might make a small charge, but they would be very welcome if they would like their councillors to learn about this.

In future, we need less Government control. We have seen the regional spatial strategies going, although there are some difficulties involving legal challenges and we

need to move that along faster. We have heard the Opposition say that they did not know what cuts were coming, despite their having announced them in their own pre-Budget report. Last year, however, the opposition councillors in High Peak questioned our medium-term financial strategy because we were not budgeting for deep enough cuts. So, on the one hand, the Opposition say that they do not know about the cuts but, on the other hand, they behave in completely the opposite manner.

The money that we are giving to local authorities now will be a lot freer, because there will be less ring-fencing, and freer money goes further. Ring-fenced money is harder to use, and it is not put into the right areas. Labour Members are in denial; they have been since May. Perhaps it was the sun that got to them, I do not know, but they would have been forced to make cuts and savings, had they won the election. Thankfully, they did not win it, and they have now resorted to nothing more than scaremongering.

9.23 pm

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): Given the short amount of time left, I shall raise just a few brief points. I want to mention the new homes bonus, a suggestion that could save money, the big society, and residualisation in east Lancashire, which is an important issue in my constituency. I also want briefly to touch on police community support officers.

My constituency is suffering some of the biggest cuts. We are facing 27% cuts across the board, but we are waiting for the actual figures. I am surprised that the Minister will not confirm those figures today. My hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North (Mr Watts), who is no longer in his place, mentioned a report produced by the all-party parliamentary group on the special interest group of municipal authorities—SIGOMA. It stated that Hyndburn was ranked as the 40th most seriously hit area, facing between 30% and 38% cuts. These can have a cumulative effect, and similar examples have been raised by other Members today.

The new homes bonus is frequently used by Ministers as a method by which councils can run for financial sanctuary, but it will have no impact on constituencies such as mine, where there are some 2,500 empty properties. Netting off demolitions will hit hard any areas where there is an over-supply of housing. This policy is a bit like throwing a drowning man a medicine ball.

Let me make some suggestions. Conservative Members say that we have no suggestions, but my right hon. Friend the Member for Salford and Eccles (Hazel Blears), who is not in her place, suggested more flexible use of the business rates, which the Secretary of State touched on earlier. Let me give him another suggestion. If he stopped scratching his head and listened to me, he might learn a thing or two. Hyndburn council calculated that removing the 50% council tax discount on empty properties will raise £660,000—an enormous sum for a district authority. At the moment, this money is clawed back through the revenue support grant deduction. It needs to be looked at. It is interesting to note that *The Independent on Sunday* reported that the Liberal Democrats were looking at similar initiatives—discounts and removal—for second homes.

Turning to the big society, it concerns me that the Government believe that we are moving towards such a society. I cannot see it. Let me provide an example. My

local authority provides £57,000 for citizens advice bureaux. If we face cuts of between 30% and 38%, I cannot see how that is likely to continue, yet this is a time when citizens advice bureaux will see an increase in the number of people coming to see them. This will mean an increase in the work load at a time when Citizens Advice will be laying off staff. It is also affected by many other streams of direct Government funding, which are also being cut. It is obvious that there are going to be real problems. I do not think that the Conservative council of Hyndburn and Rossendale has an appetite for maintaining such funding. It is going to set a 0% council tax—a big issue, as that is going to hit the big society even harder. Many voluntary groups rely on this funding, and I cannot see how they are going to survive. Thanks to the cuts, we have already lost one dial-a-ride minibus, and I imagine that the disabled service will be removed altogether unless we see some sort of public support.

These huge cuts have a cumulative impact, so there is a growing concern in Pennine Lancashire about what I would describe as the residualisation of poorer communities. Ministers need to be aware of that. Indeed, evidence is now emerging that while populations in these areas remain relatively stable, the number of those in higher-income brackets is declining, along with those who have better education and better employment prospects. This is countered by a growth in the number of poorer, lower-income households and those with lower levels of educational achievement. These populations are, by their nature, often more dependent on public services. We therefore see self-reinforcing patterns starting to build up as a result of these cuts.

This is a crucial issue. The latest rankings for the index of multiple deprivation show that right across Pennine Lancashire, with the exception of Ribbles Valley—I notice our Deputy Speaker has left—there has been a marked fall as the effects of residualisation take hold. There are real fears that the outcome will be a “ghettoisation” of parts of east Lancashire and other parts of Britain, thanks to a Government focusing solely on areas that can prosper economically rather than getting to grips with the needs of all communities.

Finally, let me touch on policing. On top of all the other cuts I have mentioned, policing is going to be cut. Police officers in my area believe that, without the extra staff, crime will rise. The police cuts are ill considered. Police community support officers are part-funded by local authorities; they tackle in partnership a wide range of social problems. No assessment seems to have been made of the wider impact of cutting PCSOs in areas where local authorities work in partnerships. I will stop there and allow the Front-Bench teams to conclude the debate.

Joan Ruddock: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I think you will know that I have been in the House long enough to take the rough and tumble of parliamentary debates, but earlier today, in response to my intervention, the Secretary of State made a remark about an hon. Lady’s “champagne lifestyle”, which appeared to be directed at me. I found that really offensive and rude. Will you advise me, Mr Speaker, on whether I could expect that remark to be withdrawn?

Mr Speaker: Let me say three things to the right hon. Lady. First, good temper and moderation in the use of parliamentary language are always to be encouraged.

That principle is set out clearly and explicitly in “Erskine May”, which is our guide. Secondly, I had the privilege of serving on the International Development Committee with the right hon. Lady and travelled to a number of places around the world with her and other colleagues, and I cannot recall her consuming champagne at any stage. Thirdly, let me simply say that my distinct recollection is that the right hon. Lady is a modest person, with very little to be modest about. I hope that that is helpful to her and to the House.

9.30 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): I hope that the words that you have just uttered, Mr Speaker, will have an impact on Government Members, because there has been quite a lot of rowdiness today. I also think it worth saying that some of the ways in which Members are addressing female Members does them no credit at all.

We have had a good debate, featuring 25 Back-Bench speakers. It was polarised—as well as being, as I have said, a little rumbustious at times—but then the Government’s cuts are polarised in terms of their impact on different parts of the country.

The Secretary of State talked earlier of “Life on Mars”, and of returning to the 1980s. That is not the best theme when we are discussing cuts that will restrict and reduce services, damage communities, and put more than 100,000 local government staff out of work. The Secretary of State missed the contribution of the hon. Member for Bradford East (Mr Ward), who did not seem to feel that the 1980s were a great period. As for Government Members who thought that those were halcyon days in some respects, let me remind them of what was said by my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh): they ain’t seen nothing yet. That was the most difficult and damaging decade for communities. I became involved in politics, and stood for election as a councillor in Trafford, because of the 1980s and Thatcherite policies, and I am sure that many of my right hon. and hon. Friends did the same.

The Government have made choices about the severity and timing of cuts in local government budgets, but they are the wrong choices. The cuts are unfair, unreasonable and unmanageable. They are unfair because they hit the most deprived areas hardest, and will have an impact on the most vulnerable people. Affluent areas will not be hit by such deep cuts. Wokingham borough council, the least deprived unitary authority in England, will undergo cuts estimated at just 2.3% next year. The most deprived unitary authority in the country, Liverpool city council, is the hardest hit, facing estimated budget cuts of 12.3% next year alone.

Many of the excellent speeches that we heard, particularly those of Labour Members, were on that theme of unfairness. My hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) found it difficult to see any fairness in the cuts. He spoke of the 800 staff cuts with which his local authority is threatened, and of his concern about the impact on the voluntary sector. My hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside (Mrs Glindon), who was a councillor for 15 years, told us that the Conservative mayor had urged Treasury and other Ministers to think again about the speed of their cuts. She said that she had asked officials to spread the reductions more evenly over the four years of the spending review.

[Barbara Keeley]

My hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Mr Marsden) talked about the help that his Conservative-controlled council had been given over issues of transience and deprivation, and his concern about the cuts in area-based grants. He spoke of the impact of cuts of £32 million, and said that the Conservative council leader had urged the Government to reconsider their approach—particularly their approach to front-loading, which would produce cuts of between 11% and 16%.

My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram) also talked about unfairness, focusing on the polarised nature of the Government's approach. Estimates show that the most deprived areas will be hit hardest by the cuts, and that the least deprived will be least affected. My hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) said that the Government should not adopt an approach that would render the funding of local areas blind to the needs of those areas, because that was neither fair nor progressive. My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) talked about the speed of the cuts and the front-loading. She was rightly concerned about the impact on Liverpool city council, which, as I said earlier, is the most deprived unitary authority in the country. She was also concerned about the impact on jobs and, in particular, on small business.

The fear has been expressed that local authorities may be forced into damaging crisis measures. The Secretary of State set out what he expected from councils when he said that further financial freedoms announced for councils would mean that they could better protect front-line services such as care for the elderly, but last week Birmingham city council proposed restricting funds for social care to those who had been assessed as “critical”, the highest possible level at which to set eligibility. People with substantial or moderate needs would be “signposted” to private and third sector providers.

Cuts like those being suggested by Birmingham council will undoubtedly lead either to a greater reliance on unpaid family carers or significant care needs simply being unmet. My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Heidi Alexander) talked eloquently about how difficult she found it as a councillor to consider raising eligibility criteria, and in the end she and her colleagues did not do it. They are to be commended for that.

Birmingham council, which is run by the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, has claimed that its strategy on adult social care is part of its version of the big society. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) said, the third sector is the big society; forcing unpaid family carers into a much heavier caring work load is not the big society.

The Government's cuts are unreasonable with a lot of changes being made in a very short time scale, and there is insufficient support for councils to pay inevitable redundancy costs. A number of Members have raised that issue. The Local Government Association estimates that next year councils will be facing 11% cuts in their formula grant and many councils will also lose area-based grants, which were designed to tackle poverty and deprivation. Many Labour Members have talked about the impact of those changes on their communities as specific grants that had their own targeting based on need have now been rolled into the main formula grant.

London Councils says the way this works will cause London's share of these grants targeted at need to evaporate. It has said that the distribution mechanism used by the Government is flawed and generates perverse and unfair outcomes. The Government could mitigate the impact of the changes by setting funding floors at the highest possible level, and we urge them to do so.

The hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Simon Hughes), who is not in his place, supported setting funding floors at the highest possible level. [HON. MEMBERS: “Here he is.”] He is here now; welcome. The hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark, who is now in his place, also put forward the LGA's five recommendations: to smooth out the front-loading so as to lessen the impact on deprived areas; to increase capitalisation to what councils need; to account for missing grants; to review councils' ability to recover costs through fees and charges, which several Members have talked about particularly in respect of burial charges; and to avoid any unfair distribution of grant. I must say, however, that although the hon. Gentleman put those points forward, they were also all put forward by the shadow Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint), in her excellent opening speech.

Many Labour Members have talked about the fear of job cuts, which, to their credit, some Members on the Government Benches said they regretted. It is time to think not only of the job losses in local government, but the knock-on effect in other sectors. Today we have heard that recovery in the construction sector is stalled until at least 2013, given that construction work from the public sector is set to fall by 17%. My hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North talked about the loss of construction through the cancellation of Building Schools for the Future and the planned local hospital. The chairman of the UK Contractors Group confirmed this point when he said:

“About 40% of our business comes from the public sector and so construction will not be immune from these decisions”

in local government.

My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton undoubtedly remembers a similar impact on the construction industry in the 1980s—the torrid decade of Tory rule as he calls it, which he said were devastating for Liverpool.

Losing a job is devastating, and the cuts will clearly lead to substantial reductions in staffing across the local authorities affected. The LGA estimates that 140,000 local authority jobs will be cut next year, but as we have heard from a number of Members, councils will not be able to meet the capital costs of those redundancies because the £200 million currently set out by the Government to pay the costs of redundancy is simply not sufficient: if 140,000 jobs are indeed lost, it amounts to less than £1,500 per redundancy. As we have heard, councils may need up to £2 billion next year, 10 times more than the provision made by the Government. We say councils should be given the flexibility to fund those redundancy costs from capital, as they need.

The Government's cuts are not only unreasonable; they are also unmanageable. A number of councils believe that they will not be able to set a balanced budget given the front-loading of cuts next year. My hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin)

spoke very well about that and possible unintended consequences. The Association of North East Councils, a cross-party group, has called the Government's proposed cuts to local government "undeliverable for some" councils.

The Secretary of State has not been willing to admit that the cuts are front-loaded, despite a number of attempts to draw him to do so today, but the reality is that many councils will face budgets cut by 14, 18 or even 20% next year. Many Labour Members have discussed that issue and, as my right hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State said, the president of the Society of District Council Treasurers has called the front-loading disastrous. The leaders of the Local Government Association called on the Secretary of State to mitigate the front-loading of cuts, as it would

"bear disproportionately on local communities and vital frontline local authority services".

Indeed, the Conservative leader of Bury council said that

"it is almost impossible to absorb such vast figures in the time that we have available".

Councillors not having any time available to them has been a key theme of our debate.

Many Government Members, including the hon. Members for South East Cornwall (Sheryll Murray), and for Meon Valley (George Hollingbery), have talked about introducing more innovative ways of dealing with the cuts, but Labour Members say that the severe and unexpected front-loading of the cuts will mean that councils do not have the time to do that. Shifting to shared service models, renegotiating long-term contracts and working with other sectors as providers are major changes. They take time and money to implement and that time is just not there. My hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) made that point most eloquently. It was also made by the hon. Member for Bradford East, who said that the front-loaded cuts were "reckless economic vandalism" and that cutting required time.

In dealing with these unfair, unreasonable and unmanageable cuts, councils are not assisted by the mixed messages coming from Ministers. The Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) told the *Hackney Gazette*:

"Local authorities have been aware for some time that funding reductions were imminent and should have been looking at...reducing budgets next year".

Many Government Members pursued that same theme today.

At the same time, other Ministers are calling on councils not to make redundancies or to plan cuts to services. The Deputy Prime Minister has criticised councils for acting now, saying that

"they shouldn't immediately start issuing redundancy notices for savings that they can phase in over four years".

On adult care, the Minister responsible for care services has said:

"There is no justification for local authorities to slash and burn or...to tighten eligibility".

When asked about the impact of cuts on voluntary organisation funding, the Minister responsible for decentralisation said:

"I expect local government not to draw up the drawbridge, but to treat voluntary organisations fairly and...to allow them greater access".—[*Official Report*, 25 November 2010; Vol. 519, c. 446.]

When asked about the effect of the spending review on libraries, the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport, the hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey), said:

"Local authorities have a statutory duty to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service. I shall be writing to all local authorities this week to remind them of that."—[*Official Report*, 29 November 2010; Vol. 519, c. 514.]

Today, the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark said that councils must not pick on the voluntary sector.

It appears that Ministers and some hon. Members do not want councils to cut areas for which they have responsibility or just feel that they can avoid doing so. As we have heard in this debate, Conservative council leaders and Lib Dem councillors up and down the country feel the same way, and they have been pressing their case to the Government. But up and down the country there are reports of councils having to do the opposite of what they are told by this Government. For example, Conservative-run North Yorkshire county council, which plans to close more than half its 42 libraries and two thirds of its residential care homes, cut £10 million from the highway maintenance, road safety, countryside and arts budgets. It also cut bus subsidies, even to rural areas. Ministers are being totally unrealistic about the problems that many councils now face. It is clear to us that the Government are not listening to them. Labour Members are listening, and I urge Members on both sides of the House to support the motion, including the hon. Member for Bradford East and his colleagues.

9.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Robert Neill): This has been a robust debate and is none the worse for that perhaps. The subject is important and there are rightly strong views on it. Many Members have spoken and I shall start by apologising in advance if I do not manage to mention individually the speech of every one of the 25 Members who spoke. I hope, however, that I can pick up on certain themes.

There have been some considered and thoughtful speeches from hon. Members on both sides of the House. Issues of genuine concern have been raised by Members on both sides and I shall come back to those in a moment. I regret to say that, in some cases, however, the seriousness of the debate has not been served by the simplicity and shroud-waving and by some of the clichés that have been used as Members have injected more and more purple passages. That does not help in dealing with this serious matter, because the Government have never made any secret of the fact that the circumstances facing local authorities are difficult. We have been honest about that and it is to the credit of my hon. Friends from the Liberal Democrats that, when they came into government, they had the courage to recognise that the circumstances facing the country were grave. They deserve better service than the carping from Opposition Members who have not yet had the decency to admit their responsibility for the mess that the country is in or to come up with a constructive alternative.

[Robert Neill]

Let me say to the hon. Member for St Helens North (Mr Watts) that he need have no fears about my health. I would fear, however, for the health of the nation's economy if he were to be let loose, on the basis of what he and his right hon. and hon. Friends have done already.

It is against that background that it is necessary for us to take difficult and regrettable measures. I spent 16 years in local government, initially during the time when Denis Healey was going to the IMF and Jim Callaghan was telling local government that the party was over. I shall not brook any lessons from Opposition Members about the effects of Labour economic mismanagement on local authorities. Yet again, my hon. Friends and I find that we have to pick up the pieces. I accept that there are tough decisions, but they have come about because of the wreck and the train crash that the previous Government made of the economy.

Let me consider some of the propositions in the motion. There is a criticism of the percentages, but it starts from a basic error. It complains that

“councils will lose, on average, 27 per cent. ... compared to 11 per cent., on average, for Whitehall departments”

There is a sleight of hand in that, because the average figure includes the protected Departments. Unless Labour is going to tell us that it was not going to protect those Departments, the second line of its motion does not compare like with like. Frankly, it is intellectually questionable on that basis. The motion

“regrets the frontloading of reductions”,

but sadly, because of the extent of our economic inheritance, there should be a swift move to deal with deficit reduction. All people have to work together in that.

Ironically, we see from the Treasury proposals left behind by the previous Government that they intended to make cuts of 14% in the first year and 11% in the second year. That might be a type of front loading. I do not think we will take any lectures on that from Opposition Members either.

Let me turn to the question of the unexpected severity. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State pointed out that the previous Chancellor and the previous Prime Minister already made it clear that should Labour—unfortunately for the country—have been returned at the election, there would have been significant cuts. We have simply been honest about it and shouldered the burden that they neglected to take on board. We do not need to take any lessons there.

Karl Turner: Will the Minister give way?

Robert Neill: I shall, because the hon. Gentleman has been very vocal all night.

Karl Turner: It seems rather contradictory for the Minister to say on the one hand that we did not have a plan to reduce the deficit and on the other hand that we seemingly did. Which is it? Come on, Minister.

Robert Neill: The hon. Gentleman gets it right. Seemingly none of us knows what Labour's plan was and the Leader of the Opposition does not know either. I assume that the hon. Gentleman will progress rapidly to

the Front Bench, as he is as vague on policy as the leader of his party. If that is the best the hon. Gentleman can do by way of intervention, I suggest he saves his knees the trouble in future.

May I just—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Will the hon. Gentleman resume his seat for a moment? It is always a pleasure to listen to him, but he is swivelling and perambulating. I want to hang upon his every word; he must address the House.

Robert Neill: I shall do my best, despite the noise.

What we have seen today is an exhibition in wriggling by the Opposition. They have failed to take on board serious concerns raised by hon. Members. Reference was made to my hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Simon Hughes)—[*Interruption.*] I was actually looking at you, Mr Speaker; I think that is courteous too. Reference was also made to my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East (Mr Ward). Hon. Members have made serious points. The need for deficit reduction does not brook significant delay, but fair points have been made about it being appropriate to look not just at formula grant but at other spending powers available to local authorities. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has indicated that we are continuing to do that. We have taken steps to roll more grant into the formula grant, so the arguments that were made on that issue do not sensibly contrast like with like.

We have sought to give more flexibility in these undoubtedly difficult times by ending the ring-fencing of all revenue grants from 2011-12—something that the Labour Government never got around to doing. We are including single, non-ring-fenced, early-intervention grant worth about £2 billion. We are significantly simplifying and streamlining grant funding by rolling about £4 billion of grants in 2010-11 into the unhypothecated formula grant and reducing the total number of grants from 90 to 10. All those measures are designed to bring much greater transparency, as hon. Members on the Government side have pointed out. Despite their 13 years in office, the previous Government neglected to do that, so we need not take lessons from them on fairness or transparency.

As the Secretary of State has indicated, we are continuing the system of floor protection, which will help the most vulnerable authorities. That degree of ring-fencing, plus the other, greater freedoms that will be given in the decentralisation Bill that will be introduced shortly, will significantly assist local authorities in directing their resources to the most vulnerable. The fact that resources are limited is entirely the responsibility of Opposition Members rather than Members on the Government side, and the Opposition should never seek to wriggle out of that.

Let me congratulate one or two hon. Members in particular. My hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley (George Hollingbery) made a particularly thoughtful and considered speech. He talked about the inevitability of floors and ceilings in the current system and the fact that there are real concerns in shire areas as well as urban areas. Any Government have to carry out a balancing act and that is what we seek to do. He and other hon. Members rightly referred to the need to move away from a formula that is past its sell-by date. Unlike our predecessors, this Government have grasped

that nettle and committed to a swift review of local government resource in the first six months of next year.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark made fair points on behalf of London councils and the Local Government Association. The Secretary of State has met LGA representatives, and let me tell the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) that I am happy to meet his fire authority; I have met a number of others already. We are protecting fire services, which are getting a lesser degree of reduction, and the profile is different, so steps are being taken in that regard. I will happily meet any authority that seeks to discuss these issues with me.

My hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (James Morris) made an exceedingly well informed and powerful speech. He talked about the need, at times such as these, to move to greater transparency. It was pretty telling that certain Opposition Members rather jeered at the mention of the £500 in relation to transparency. That shows a patronising attitude towards putting ordinary people in the driving seat. Perhaps that is the difference between the Government and the Opposition on this issue.

My hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Gavin Barwell) carried out a comprehensive demolition job on the speech by the shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint), and the entire proposition behind the Opposition's motion. The previous Government were going to cut, and they would have cut as deeply. They were going to eliminate the deficit; the argument was over timing. The state that we discovered when we came into government meant that swift measures were necessary. To pretend otherwise is to behave like the people who set fire to the house and then blame the fire brigade when it comes in to put the fire out. The intellectual bankruptcy of the Opposition is shown by the approach that they have adopted to these matters.

I say to the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh)—whom I have known in London government for a long time—yes, I accept that there are councils of all political complexions trying hard in difficult times. My own council is doing so, as is hers. Equally, she will understand that, despite the sympathy that we have for those difficulties, as anyone in the business world will tell her, it is often best and most sensible to take steps towards restructuring at an early stage. That is particularly appropriate in the case of local authorities with a full range of functions. There are good examples not only in London, but across the country of local authorities making real structural and operational change. That needs to be done quickly.

I appreciate the point made by a number of hon. Members about capitalisation. I understand what is said, but it should be remembered that we are making £200 million available for non-equal pay capitalisation. Capitalisation is an exception to the normal accounting processes. Because capitalisation is permission to borrow, that ultimately has impacts upon revenue spend because it has to be paid back. It must therefore be strictly controlled. Although I understand that councils will inevitably say they want more, Government must be realistic and set limits to an exception to the normal process.

That we are not being dogmatic is reflected in the fact that we have adopted a different profile in relation to fire authorities, because experience shows that it takes single-purpose authorities longer to reconfigure their working arrangements than those that have a range of purposes which can be more effectively shared. We have been sensible and proportionate in our approach.

The Secretary of State stressed—I hope Members from all sides will take this on board, as there seemed to be a degree of consensus on the matter—that it is important that local authorities do not resort to the old-fashioned way of salami slicing and, in particular, cutting grant to the voluntary sector. That is usually important. We will fail if local authorities go back to the tried old ways of doing things. We want to encourage them to do otherwise.

That is why, in the localism Bill, we will establish new rights for voluntary and community groups to deliver local services. That is why the Government have created a transition fund of £100 million to be spent in 2010-11. It will support the voluntary and community sector during the first year of the spending round. Through the localism Bill we will also give voluntary and community groups the right to challenge local authorities where they believe that they can run services differently or better. There is a raft of measures to support the voluntary sector, none of which was adopted by the previous Government in their 13 years in office—another example to demonstrate why we need take no lessons.

Hazel Blears: Will the Minister give way?

Robert Neill: To the right hon. Lady I will always give way.

Hazel Blears: I thank the right hon. Gentleman. Does he acknowledge that the gap in voluntary sector funding is likely to be in the region of £3 billion as a result of local government cuts, and his £100 million transitional fund is a drop in the ocean?

Robert Neill rose—

Mr Alan Campbell (Tynemouth) (Lab) *claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).*

Question put forthwith, That the Question be now put.

Question agreed to.

Main Question accordingly put.

The House divided: Ayes 197, Noes 316.

Division No. 144]

[9.59 pm

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainsworth, rh Mr Bob
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bain, Mr William
Balls, rh Ed
Barron, rh Mr Kevin
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Sir Stuart
Benn, rh Hilary

Benton, Mr Joe
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Blackman-Woods, Roberta
Blears, rh Hazel
Blenkinsop, Tom
Blomfield, Paul
Blunkett, rh Mr David
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Brown, Mr Russell

Bryant, Chris
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burden, Richard
 Burnham, rh Andy
 Byrne, rh Mr Liam
 Campbell, Mr Alan
 Campbell, Mr Ronnie
 Caton, Martin
 Clwyd, rh Ann
 Coaker, Vernon
 Connarty, Michael
 Cooper, Rosie
 Corbyn, Jeremy
 Crausby, Mr David
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Stella
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cryer, John
 Cunningham, Alex
 Cunningham, Mr Jim
 Cunningham, Tony
 Dakin, Nic
 Danczuk, Simon
 David, Mr Wayne
 Davies, Geraint
 De Piero, Gloria
 Dobbin, Jim
 Dobson, rh Frank
 Docherty, Thomas
 Dodds, rh Mr Nigel
 Doran, Mr Frank
 Dowd, Jim
 Doyle, Gemma
 Dugher, Michael
 Eagle, Ms Angela
 Eagle, Maria
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Efford, Clive
 Elliott, Julie
 Ellman, Mrs Louise
 Engel, Natascha
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Farrelly, Paul
 Field, rh Mr Frank
 Fitzpatrick, Jim
 Flello, Robert
 Flint, rh Caroline
 Flynn, Paul
 Fovargue, Yvonne
 Francis, Dr Hywel
 Gapes, Mike
 Gilmore, Sheila
 Glass, Pat
 Glindon, Mrs Mary
 Godsiff, Mr Roger
 Goggins, rh Paul
 Goodman, Helen
 Green, Kate
 Griffith, Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Hain, rh Mr Peter
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hanson, rh Mr David
 Harris, Mr Tom
 Havad, Mr Dai
 Healey, rh John
 Hendrick, Mark
 Hepburn, Mr Stephen
 Heyes, David
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hoey, Kate

Hopkins, Kelvin
 Howarth, rh Mr George
 Hunt, Tristram
 Irranca-Davies, Huw
 Jamieson, Cathy
 Johnson, rh Alan
 Johnson, Diana
 Jones, Mr Kevan
 Jones, Susan Elan
 Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz
 Khan, rh Sadiq
 Lavery, Ian
 Lazarowicz, Mark
 Leslie, Chris
 Lloyd, Tony
 Long, Naomi
 Love, Mr Andrew
 Lucas, Ian
 Mactaggart, Fiona
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Marsden, Mr Gordon
 McCabe, Steve
 McCann, Mr Michael
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McClymont, Gregg
 McDonagh, Siobhain
 McDonnell, John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGovern, Jim
 McKinnell, Catherine
 Meacher, rh Mr Michael
 Mearns, Ian
 Michael, rh Alun
 Miliband, rh David
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Mitchell, Austin
 Moon, Mrs Madeleine
 Morden, Jessica
 Morrice, Graeme (*Livingston*)
 Morris, Grahame M.
 (*Easington*)
 Mudie, Mr George
 Murphy, rh Paul
 Murray, Ian
 Nandy, Lisa
 O'Donnell, Fiona
 Onwurah, Chi
 Osborne, Sandra
 Owen, Albert
 Pearce, Teresa
 Perkins, Toby
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Pound, Stephen
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Raynsford, rh Mr Nick
 Reeves, Rachel
 Reynolds, Emma
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Riordan, Mrs Linda
 Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
 Rotheram, Steve
 Ruane, Chris
 Ruddock, rh Joan
 Sarwar, Anas
 Seabeck, Alison
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Shuker, Gavin
 Skinner, Mr Dennis
 Slaughter, Mr Andy

Smith, rh Mr Andrew
 Smith, Angela
 Smith, Nick
 Soulsby, Sir Peter
 Straw, rh Mr Jack
 Stringer, Graham
 Stuart, Ms Gisela
 Sutcliffe, Mr Gerry
 Thomas, Mr Gareth
 Thornberry, Emily
 Timms, rh Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Twigg, Stephen
 Umunna, Mr Chuka

Vaz, Valerie
 Ward, Mr David
 Watts, Mr Dave
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Wicks, rh Malcolm
 Williams, Hywel
 Williamson, Chris
 Wilson, Phil
 Winnick, Mr David
 Winterton, rh Ms Rosie
 Woodcock, John
 Wright, David

Tellers for the Ayes:
Graham Jones and
Lilian Greenwood

NOES

Adams, Nigel
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aldous, Peter
 Alexander, rh Danny
 Amess, Mr David
 Andrew, Stuart
 Arbuthnot, rh Mr James
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Bagshawe, Ms Louise
 Baker, Norman
 Baker, Steve
 Baldry, Tony
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, Stephen
 Baron, Mr John
 Barwell, Gavin
 Bebb, Guto
 Beith, rh Sir Alan
 Benyon, Richard
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Berry, Jake
 Bingham, Andrew
 Binley, Mr Brian
 Birtwistle, Gordon
 Blackman, Bob
 Blackwood, Nicola
 Blunt, Mr Crispin
 Boles, Nick
 Bottomley, Peter
 Bradley, Karen
 Brady, Mr Graham
 Brake, Tom
 Bray, Angie
 Brazier, Mr Julian
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Mr Steve
 Brooke, Annette
 Browne, Mr Jeremy
 Bruce, Fiona
 Bruce, rh Malcolm
 Buckland, Mr Robert
 Burley, Mr Aidan
 Burns, Conor
 Burns, Mr Simon
 Burrowes, Mr David
 Burstow, Paul
 Burt, Alistair
 Burt, Lorely
 Byles, Dan
 Cairns, Alun
 Carmichael, Mr Alistair
 Carmichael, Neil
 Carswell, Mr Douglas
 Cash, Mr William
 Chishti, Rehman
 Clappison, Mr James
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
 Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
 Coffey, Dr Thérèse
 Collins, Damian
 Colville, Oliver
 Cox, Mr Geoffrey
 Crabb, Stephen
 Crouch, Tracey
 Davies, Glyn
 Davies, Philip
 de Bois, Nick
 Dinenage, Caroline
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Dorrell, rh Mr Stephen
 Dorries, Nadine
 Drax, Richard
 Duddridge, James
 Duncan, rh Mr Alan
 Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
 Dunne, Mr Philip
 Ellis, Michael
 Ellison, Jane
 Ellwood, Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Charlie
 Eustice, George
 Evans, Graham
 Evans, Jonathan
 Evnnett, Mr David
 Fabricant, Michael
 Fallon, Michael
 Farron, Tim
 Featherstone, Lynne
 Field, Mr Mark
 Foster, Mr Don
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 Fullbrook, Lorraine
 Fuller, Richard
 Gale, Mr Roger
 Garnier, Mr Edward
 Garnier, Mark
 Gauke, Mr David
 George, Andrew
 Gibb, Mr Nick
 Gilbert, Stephen
 Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
 Glen, John
 Goldsmith, Zac

Goodwill, Mr Robert
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Gray, Mr James
 Green, Damian
 Greening, Justine
 Gummer, Ben
 Gyimah, Mr Sam
 Hague, rh Mr William
 Halfon, Robert
 Hames, Duncan
 Hammond, rh Mr Philip
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hancock, Matthew
 Hancock, Mr Mike
 Hands, Greg
 Harper, Mr Mark
 Harrington, Richard
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hart, Simon
 Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
 Heald, Mr Oliver
 Heath, Mr David
 Heaton-Harris, Chris
 Hemming, John
 Henderson, Gordon
 Hendry, Charles
 Herbert, rh Nick
 Hinds, Damian
 Hoban, Mr Mark
 Hollingbery, George
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Mr Adam
 Hopkins, Kris
 Howell, John
 Hughes, Simon
 Huppert, Dr Julian
 Hurd, Mr Nick
 Jackson, Mr Stewart
 James, Margot
 Javid, Sajid
 Jenkin, Mr Bernard
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnson, Joseph
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, Mr David
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kelly, Chris
 Kennedy, rh Mr Charles
 Kirby, Simon
 Kwarteng, Kwasi
 Laing, Mrs Eleanor
 Lamb, Norman
 Lancaster, Mark
 Lansley, rh Mr Andrew
 Latham, Pauline
 Laws, rh Mr David
 Leadsom, Andrea
 Lee, Jessica
 Lee, Dr Phillip
 Leech, Mr John
 Lefroy, Jeremy
 Leigh, Mr Edward
 Leslie, Charlotte
 Letwin, rh Mr Oliver
 Lewis, Brandon
 Lewis, Dr Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Lidington, Mr David
 Lilley, rh Mr Peter
 Lloyd, Stephen

Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Lumley, Karen
 Macleod, Mary
 Main, Mrs Anne
 Maude, rh Mr Francis
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 McIntosh, Miss Anne
 McLoughlin, rh Mr Patrick
 McPartland, Stephen
 McVey, Esther
 Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, Patrick
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Miller, Maria
 Mills, Nigel
 Mordaunt, Penny
 Morgan, Nicky
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Mosley, Stephen
 Mowat, David
 Mulholland, Greg
 Mundell, rh David
 Munt, Tessa
 Murray, Sheryll
 Murrison, Dr Andrew
 Neill, Robert
 Newmark, Mr Brooks
 Newton, Sarah
 Nokes, Caroline
 Norman, Jesse
 Nuttall, Mr David
 O'Brien, Mr Stephen
 Offord, Mr Matthew
 Ollerenshaw, Eric
 Opperman, Guy
 Ottaway, Richard
 Paice, Mr James
 Parish, Neil
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Perry, Claire
 Phillips, Stephen
 Pickles, rh Mr Eric
 Pincher, Christopher
 Poulter, Dr Daniel
 Prisk, Mr Mark
 Pritchard, Mark
 Pugh, Dr John
 Raab, Mr Dominic
 Reckless, Mark
 Redwood, rh Mr John
 Rees-Mogg, Jacob
 Reeve, Simon
 Rifkind, rh Sir Malcolm
 Robathan, Mr Andrew
 Robertson, Hugh
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Rogerson, Dan
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Rudd, Amber
 Ruffley, Mr David
 Russell, Bob
 Rutley, David

Sanders, Mr Adrian
 Sandys, Laura
 Scott, Mr Lee
 Selous, Andrew
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, Alok
 Shelbrooke, Alec
 Simmonds, Mark
 Simpson, Mr Keith
 Skidmore, Chris
 Smith, Miss Chloe
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, Julian
 Soames, Nicholas
 Soubry, Anna
 Spelman, rh Mrs Caroline
 Spencer, Mr Mark
 Stanley, rh Sir John
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Stewart, Rory
 Streeter, Mr Gary
 Stride, Mel
 Stuart, Mr Graham
 Stunell, Andrew
 Sturdy, Julian
 Swales, Ian
 Swayne, Mr Desmond
 Swinson, Jo
 Syms, Mr Robert
 Teather, Sarah
 Timpson, Mr Edward
 Tomlinson, Justin

Tredinnick, David
 Truss, Elizabeth
 Turner, Mr Andrew
 Tyrie, Mr Andrew
 Uppal, Paul
 Vaizey, Mr Edward
 Vara, Mr Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa
 Walker, Mr Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallace, Mr Ben
 Walter, Mr Robert
 Watkinson, Angela
 Weatherley, Mike
 Webb, Steve
 Wharton, James
 Wheeler, Heather
 White, Chris
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, Mr John
 Willets, rh Mr David
 Williams, Mr Mark
 Williams, Roger
 Williams, Stephen
 Williamson, Gavin
 Wilson, Mr Rob
 Wollaston, Dr Sarah
 Wright, Simon
 Young, rh Sir George
 Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:

Bill Wiggan and
 Mark Hunter

Question accordingly negated.

Paul Farrelly (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker, the next motion on the Order Paper is about the time the House will have to debate university tuition fees, which is a huge issue for students and their families in this country. In 2003, the White Paper was published a full year before the vote, and in 2005, whether some of us liked the policy or not, the Government put their proposals to the general public at an election. In contrast, this year nobody voted for these plans and we have been told that we have only three hours for debate and no time for discussion of whether that is a proper amount of time for the House. Mr Speaker, could you advise us how the House can place on record its unease about how the vote is, frankly, being rushed through, and how coalition Ministers are running scared of proper debate and examination of their plans?

Mr Speaker: The short answer to the hon. Gentleman's inquiry about how best he can register his concern is that, as I think he knows, he has just done so. It is very clearly on the record. As a very experienced Member of this House, he will also be aware that the form of such a motion and the question of whether it is debatable is not a matter for the Chair. However, the hon. Gentleman has registered the point and I hope that he feels pleased to have done so.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. May I ask the Chair how much time Back-Bench MPs will get to speak in the three-hour debate on Thursday? That is an issue of

[Greg Mulholland]

huge concern to many hon. Members, who feel that there is insufficient time to debate a matter of such huge importance to ourselves and our constituents all round the country.

Mr Speaker: The short answer to the hon. Gentleman is that he can ask me how long there will be for Back Benchers to speak—proof of that is that he has done so—but I am afraid that I am unable to give him an answer to that question. What I can say to him is twofold: first, as he knows, I am always keen that Back Benchers in this place should get the maximum opportunity to put their case; and secondly, the Leader of the House and the Deputy Leader of the House are both present, fortuitously or otherwise, and they have heard the hon. Gentleman's point of order.

Business without Debate

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Motion made,

That, at the sitting on Thursday 9 December, the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on the Motion in the name of Secretary Vince Cable relating to Higher Education Higher Amounts not later than three hours after the start of proceedings on the Motion; such Questions shall include the Questions on any Amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved; proceedings may continue after the moment of interruption; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—(Sir George Young.)

Hon. Members: Object.

Mr Speaker: I was about to say that the Question is as on the Order Paper, as many as are of that opinion say Aye.

Hon. Members: Aye.

Hon. Members: Object.

Mr Speaker: Objection taken. [Interruption.] Order. The Government Chief Whip has absolutely no business whatsoever shouting from a sedentary position. He—[Interruption.] Order. The right hon. Gentleman will remain in the Chamber. He has absolutely no business scurrying out of the Chamber. [Interruption.] Order. The Chief Whip has absolutely no business—

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury (Mr Patrick McLoughlin): We all saw you.

Mr Speaker: Order. The right hon. Gentleman has no business behaving in that way. The objection has been registered, and it has been registered in a perfectly proper way. I thought it proper to put the Question. The objection had been registered, and it was registered clearly. The right hon. Gentleman has nothing about which to complain.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS

That the draft Wireless Telegraphy Act 2006 (Directions to OFCOM) Order 2010, which was laid before this House on 27 July, be approved.—(James Duddridge.)

Question agreed to.

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

ANIMALS

That the draft Welfare of Farmed Animals (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2010, which were laid before this House on 8 November, be approved.—(James Duddridge.)

Question agreed to.

EUROPEAN UNION DOCUMENTS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 119(11)),

RIGHT OF INFORMATION IN CRIMINAL PROCEEDINGS

That this House takes note of European Union Document No. 12564/10 and Addenda 1 and 2, Draft Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on the right to information in criminal proceedings; and endorses the Government's support of the proposal to ensure that individuals subject to criminal proceedings across the EU are given timely information about their rights, information on the accusation against them and access to evidence.—(James Duddridge.)

Question agreed to.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON CONSOLIDATION, &C., BILLS

Ordered,

That Mr Robert Buckland, Martin Caton, Mrs Jenny Chapman, Damian Collins, Jim Dobbin, Mr Stephen Dorrell, Charlie Elphicke, Paul Farrelly, Yvonne Fovargue, Jesse Norman, Sir Robert Smith and Justin Tomlinson be members of the Select Committee appointed to join with a Committee of the Lords as the Joint Committee on Consolidation, &c., Bills.—(Geoffrey Clifton-Brown, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.)

Royal Fleet Auxiliary

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

10.18 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as the convenor of the RMT parliamentary—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I apologise to the hon. Gentleman. May I appeal—*[Interruption.]* Order. May I simply appeal to Members who are leaving the Chamber to do so quickly and quietly? It is quite simply a matter of courtesy—nothing more, nothing less.

John McDonnell: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

I refer to my interest as the convenor of the RMT group of MPs. I requested this debate to draw attention to and applaud the work of the Royal Fleet Auxiliary, and to raise concerns about its future in the face of looming cuts to ships and crew, and the threat of privatisation.

In the statement to the House on the strategic defence and security review, the Secretary of State for Defence made no reference to the Royal Fleet Auxiliary, nor is there a reference to it in the document. However, in the supporting documents, the future of the RFA is explained more specifically. It is clear from the policy briefing that there will be a range of cuts to ships:

“We plan to withdraw from service one Landing Ship Dock Auxiliary, one Auxiliary Oiler and one Auxiliary Oiler replenishment.”

It goes on to state that there will be personnel cuts:

“The Department has announced that there will be sizeable reductions in the number of civilians employed by MOD. The RFA will bear its share of these. The future manpower strength of the RFA will reflect its reduced size. Details will be announced in due course.”

More specific details were announced in a memorandum from Commodore Bill Walworth:

“SDSR for the RFA means we will lose a tanker, probably Bayleaf, an LSD(A)—

landing ship auxiliary—

“probably Largs Bay, and an AOR”—

auxiliary oiler replenisher—

“probably Fort George.”

He stated that that would probably happen by April 2011. At the same time, we heard about the regeneration of Fort Austin, which is certainly welcome.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I am extremely surprised and alarmed at the suggestion that one of the Bay class ships might be disposed of. Those ships are brand new and have enormous military value, so much so that the Royal Navy has cast covetous eyes on them in the past, thinking that they ought to be fully RN-manned. Is the hon. Gentleman absolutely certain that there is a suggestion that Largs Bay might be disposed of so early in its service life?

John McDonnell: I can only refer the hon. Gentleman to the memorandum from Commodore Bill Walworth, who is responsible for the RFA, which specifically names those ships. I think that it is now in the public domain

as a result of reports in *Lloyd's List*. We will know the situation more clearly by April 2011, but those ships have been identified. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that it is worrying that a relatively new craft is concerned.

Further reviews are taking place, in particular the value for money review. The value for money review undertaken by the previous Government came to conclusions about the future of the RFA and its retention in the public sector. A further value for money review is linked to the SDSR and the comprehensive spending review. It looks as though the proposals, again according to a memorandum from Commodore Walworth, identify a target figure of 10% savings, which includes a significant number of personnel. If 10% is translated across, 220-odd seafarers could be faced with redundancy.

Anxieties have been raised in the various memorandums and documents that have entered the public domain about the potential privatisation of the service. A letter from Commodore Bill Walworth that I believe went to all personnel, including the unions, refers to a benchmarking exercise that has taken place with the shipping industry that was

“intended to demonstrate the value for money of the operational outputs that we all deliver.”

Benchmarking is perfectly appropriate if we are trying to ensure that there is value for money, but I have anxieties because of a further e-mail that is quoted in *Lloyd's List*—I am not sure whether it has leaked or is in the public domain. It is from the RFA's value for money review group:

“To date there has been work carried out to establish baseline costings of the RFA to inform the review and establish a set of requirements for the RFA that is understandable to”

the shipping industry. It continues:

“Two members of the Review Group will approach”

the shipping industry

“shortly to gauge their appetite to conduct the range of operations carried out by the RFA... This will probably start next week and we can anticipate some press interest.

RFA management has been involved in this work, to ensure that the private sector understands what is required to replicate current activity.

We will continue to work to ensure that when commercial offers are considered by the Review Group they take into account all that the RFA offers alongside that of the commercial options.”

Mr Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): The hon. Gentleman should be congratulated on securing the debate, which gives us an opportunity to say that the Government must be aware that the Royal Fleet Auxiliary, with its unique place in our maritime history, is held in very warm regard on the Conservative Benches. Any attempt to privatise it, or to deal with it through death by a thousand cuts, will be fiercely resisted.

John McDonnell: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's comments. My reason for seeking the debate was to get some clarity from the Government about what their intentions are, because at the moment we rely on e-mails circulated within the service itself appearing in *Lloyd's List*.

The information that has been put into the public domain has left the RFA in an extremely worrying climate of uncertainty, which is not good for the service, certainly not good for the RFA personnel and their families, and not good, I believe, for the defence of the country.

[John McDonnell]

It is worth reminding ourselves of the long and proud history of the RFA, which the hon. Gentleman has just touched upon. It celebrated its centenary in 2005, having started life in 1905 to give the Royal Navy capability and support at sea, food, fuel, ammunition and supplies. Its motto is "Ready for Anything". It has always been crewed by civilians, who act as reservists, and has played a major role in every engagement of the past century. RFA officers and ratings delivered distinguished and professional support in every naval theatre of operations in the second world war, from the Arctic to the Pacific. Since then, the RFA has served to support the Royal Navy and Army in Korea, Suez, Cyprus, Kuwait, Borneo, Belize, Aden and even the Icelandic cod wars.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): My hon. Friend reads out that roll of very considerable honour, so I am sure he needs no reminding that the RFA vessel *Sir Galahad* suffered fatalities in the Falklands. Those who crewed that ship died for our country at that time.

John McDonnell: I can only say that it reflects the professionalism, commitment, courage and determination of the officers who served on the *Sir Galahad* that they held to their task throughout the period of being blitzed.

More recently, the RFA played a crucial role in the Gulf war and was cited by the Select Committee on Defence for its vital contribution through the effective delivery of logistics and support. Its crews are civilian and follow the merchant navy training qualification pathways, but over the years it has developed specialist training in helicopters, firefighting, the use of defence systems, specialist navigations, naval communication systems and command systems. It now provides amphibious support and strategic sealift facilities, and provides casualty reception and forward repair functions.

Interestingly, an element of the RFA's work that has not been sufficiently highlighted in the past is its role following natural disasters. It has provided aid and support, playing a key role in a number of African countries, in Sri Lanka and in the Caribbean. It is now working heavily alongside the US coastguard to tackle drug smuggling operations, and some may have read in the past month that RFA *Fort Victoria*, in a patrol between Somalia and the coast of the Seychelles, intercepted Somali pirates. That is an incredible record of professionalism, service, courage and determination, and the service is a world leader in its field.

There are 2,300 seafarers in the RFA, and they are employed under RFA conditions of service, which reflect their need to serve in war zones and face war hazards at times. The cost is £100 million. It is cost effective and highly efficient, but stretched to meet existing demands.

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate, and I would like to associate myself with his comments on the excellent service that the RFA provides. Does he agree that there is real innovation in how it works with industry? In particular, I am thinking of A&P, the ship repairer at my port of Falmouth, which in the Minister's own words has delivered excellent value for money.

John McDonnell: I have the Minister's response to the hon. Lady's parliamentary questions demonstrating the RFA's broader contribution to what is described as the maritime cluster and the excellent role the service provides beyond the narrow remit of logistics.

If there are to be cutbacks to ships and crew, many of us will be extremely concerned. There is already pressure on this severely stretched service, and further cuts will undermine the service's potential. It is an ever-changing world. We cannot judge what the challenges will be in the future, so we need to retain the capacity to respond to threats and disasters that might occur. However, it is extremely doubtful whether, with the planned cuts, the threat of privatisation and the cutbacks in personnel, the service would be able to respond to those challenges. The whole edifice of the RFA will be put at risk if the cuts go ahead.

There are wider ramifications for the maritime industry. The RFA is now the major employer of UK officers and ratings. It has gone down from 30,000 UK officers and ratings in 1980 to fewer than 9,000 today, and the RFA is the largest single employer. Cuts on this scale would significantly reduce our national pool of merchant seafarers, deny opportunities to the next generation and damage what we describe now as the maritime cluster and our ability to rise to future challenges in terms of both the Merchant Navy and the Royal Navy. It would also be a devastating blow to the morale of the existing personnel.

If job cuts are to happen, may I suggest to the Minister that, given the age profile of current serving personnel, they could be achieved through natural wastage rather than redundancies? However, my intention is to persuade the Government not to pursue any further jobs cuts or closures of ship or craft at all.

On the threat of privatisation, there is a concern that the service could, if privatised, be subject to commercial pressures of the market that would not maintain the long-term commitment to the service required. The search for short-term profits by sweating the assets, as we have seen in other privatisations, could undermine the service. It is a risky enterprise. Also, if it is privatised, it is highly likely that it would be taken over by a foreign-owned company, with the potential for a foreign crew. Again, Maersk, the Danish conglomerate, has already expressed an interest. However, there are strategic and political sensitivities, if not risks, if such a key strategic service is no longer in the ownership and control of the state it serves. This is not a back-room function; it is a front-line service operating in war zones.

Before the Minister responds, my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) would like to say a few words, because he played a role in the last Government on this issue. May I quickly say, therefore, that if the cuts, or the threat of privatisation, go ahead, there will be a sense of grievance and anger at the thought that this service and its personnel, with a history of courageous and effective service, could be sold off to the highest bidder from wherever.

I warn the Government that there would be a backlash. Yes, it would be led first by the unions, but there would be a much wider sense of betrayal in the wider community. I therefore urge the Government to make clear their intentions for the future of the RFA and reject the cutbacks and privatisation. On behalf of the RMT—*Nautilus* will feel the same—I would welcome a meeting

with the Minister to talk through the issues facing the RFA and to look to plan its long-term future. The service is too important to allow considerations of short-term savings to put it at long-term risk. I urge the Minister to think carefully before any further decisions are made.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. Before I call the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), I emphasise that I would like the Minister to have 10 minutes in which to reply to the debate, so the hon. Gentleman needs to finish by 10.38 pm.

10.34 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) on securing this important debate. I know from my time as a Minister at the Ministry of Defence that he has always been a strong advocate for the Royal Fleet Auxiliary. I would like to join him in paying tribute to the bravery of the men and women of the RFA who put themselves in harm's way to support the Royal Navy and who have, as my hon. Friend eloquently pointed out, won numerous honours in the century of the RFA's history. I should also like to put on record my tribute to the important work of the Royal Fleet Auxiliary Association, which works tirelessly to support members of the RFA, as well as former members and their families.

Anyone who has spoken to individuals who have served in the Royal Navy will know of the value that the Royal Navy places on the work of the RFA. It has an important resupply role, and, as a Minister, I was humbled to see the technical expertise that it employs for refuelling at sea, for example. Its role is not only logistical, however. It is currently engaged in supporting the training of the Iraqi army; mine-sweeping around the Gulf; contributing to anti-piracy protection; working in the Caribbean; assisting with training exercises; and carrying out anti-smuggling work. That explains that its role is not just a logistical one; it also plays a role in supporting the Royal Navy. It is also important to highlight the work that it does in its own right.

My hon. Friend has already pointed out that the RFA is now the largest single employer of British seafarers and officers, including some 2,300 seafarers who live all over the UK. I am honoured to have a number of them living in my constituency. The strategic defence and security review did not provide them with the clarity about their future that they need.

When I was at the Ministry of Defence, I commissioned a value-for-money review—under pressure from the Treasury, I hasten to add—into the Royal Fleet Auxiliary. I know that the report was completed by the time of the last election. I would be interested to hear from the Minister what role the report has played in the decisions that were taken in the strategic defence and security review. What my hon. Friend has described tonight is the kind of salami-slicing that the Defence Secretary said he did not want. I fear that we might be seeing a return to the cost-driven, ill-informed logic from the Treasury that I faced when I was a Minister. Such logic says that those individuals in the RFA can be replaced by civilian contractors, not recognising the fact that

they put themselves in harm's way and do a valuable job on our behalf. I would like to know the status of that review and its conclusions, and whether they are to be published.

It is important to get some clarity for our brave servicemen and women of the Royal Fleet Auxiliary. It is a strategic resource with a proud history, and it is important to end the uncertainty hanging over it, which I was conscious needed to be brought to a conclusion very quickly, away from the pressure from the Treasury. We need some clarity very soon, so that those brave servicemen and women can know that they have a future and can continue to play their vital role in the defence of this country.

10.38 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Andrew Robathan): I congratulate the hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) on securing this Adjournment debate on the very important issue of the future of the Royal Fleet Auxiliary, and on providing me with an opportunity to speak on the issue, albeit rather more briefly than I had expected. I understand his relationship with the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers, and I applaud him for speaking up for the work force. I absolutely accept that that is right and proper. I will put a plug in for myself and mention that, when I first came into the House—in 1983, I think—I served on the Employment Select Committee, as it then was, and instigated and chaired an inquiry into employment in the merchant navy, which was then under serious pressure—as indeed it has been since.

I shall deal in a few moments with the review mentioned by the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones). I say to everyone in the Chamber—there is a surprisingly large number of Members present for an Adjournment debate—that this is not the place from which we would have wished to start. I do not want to get into party political point scoring, but everyone understands that we are in a difficult financial and economic situation and that the Government cannot go on spending money that they do not have.

Dr Lewis: I fully appreciate the financial hole in which the Government find themselves, but surely it is a false economy when money has been spent on brand-new vessels such as the Bay class even to think of disposing of them at such an early stage of their lives.

Mr Robathan: As I said a moment ago, no one would have wished to start from here, but we have to look at all options. Some programmes in the defence budget have already been cancelled—they have been announced—even though we have spent a lot of money on them. We did not wish to do so, but we had no further money to pour into them.

Let me speak briefly about the Royal Fleet Auxiliary. It was established in 1905, providing coaling ships to supply the Royal Navy's network of bases around the world. It has continued to evolve into what we see today in the global reach that the RFA delivers for defence and the Royal Navy. Although its origins are the merchant navy, the RFA has developed in a specialised way to meet the Royal Navy's requirements. It is linked to the Royal Navy by heritage, which has been mentioned, tasks, management, chain of command and ethos.

[Mr Robathan]

The commercial merchant navy has had a long history of working with the Royal Navy over many centuries and has had to fight and defend itself to develop commerce around the world. Defending itself against piracy, for instance, is not a new challenge. More recently, developments in warfare and warships, specialisation of commercial ships and their design limit the utility of commercial shipping to providing core support to military operations. While commercial shipping has little knowledge of warfare, over the past 30 years the RFA has developed to meet the specialised needs of 21st century warfare.

The RFA is the modern example of merchant shipping working and prepared to fight alongside the Royal Navy. It is the means by which the Navy operates globally. Equally exposed to the risk, it is a key enabler for worldwide reach of the UK's armed forces. The RFA has essential qualities that make it different, as the hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington said, and that enable it to deliver operational quality effectively to the Ministry of Defence and the Navy, blending the commercial manning and ship management models into military operations. As a result of the versatility of the ships and the knowledge that the work force has accumulated over many years, the RFA has become a deliverer of operational capability as well as an enabler.

Oliver Colville (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) on securing this debate. May I ask the Minister whether he would be willing to consider Plymouth as one of the homes of the port basing when he has to decide the location of the port basing?

Mr Robathan: My parents-in-law live just outside Plymouth, which might make this a bit personal. We will consider and review everything, but I make no promises one way or the other to my hon. Friend.

The responsibilities of today's RFA are far from commercial in nature, but wholly integral to the Royal Navy's continued deployments and presence around the world. For instance, RFA ships currently operating east of Suez are part of the wider maritime security effort for stability in the region. RFA Cardigan Bay is in the northern Gulf and is the logistics hub supporting the training base for the Iraqi navy, defending its oil platforms. RFA Lyme Bay is the headquarters ship for allied mine counter-measure ships. Fort Victoria has a large team of Royal Marines, a number of boats and a Merlin helicopter and is working with HMS Northumberland on counter-piracy operations off the Somali coast. I suppose I cannot use visual aids, but there is a very good one on the front of the magazine, *Navy News*. I cannot show it, but it says "Busted" and it is about an RFA ship.

Without describing the RFA in too much detail, I turn to deal with the review, as I believe that it is the review and the strategic defence and security review that really concern the hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington. The RFA's novel approach to delivering maritime operational support is not bought at the expense of its professionalism. I pay tribute, as did the hon. Gentleman, to the work of the RFA and the dedication of its staff.

The review of the RFA was initiated by the previous Administration. Some have suggested that it was driven by a decision to commercialise the RFA. It says here that I cannot speak for the intention of the last

Administration, but I was glad to hear the hon. Member for North Durham explain that it was indeed driven by the Treasury.

Mr Jones: It was.

Mr Robathan: I believe that candour is important in politics.

The Government are anxious to ensure that we deliver the capability that is required, and do so as efficiently as possible. To that end, we undertook an informal market exercise over the summer to test the assertion by some that industry could deliver the tasks currently conducted by the RFA more efficiently. I should emphasise that that was not a formal process, but was undertaken to ascertain the extent to which the question was worth addressing—as some, including my hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Mr Brazier), who questioned General Richards a few days ago, have suggested it is.

While there was strong commercial interest in contractorisation of the RFA and the industry would be prepared to operate the service at all threat levels, and although the study concluded that there might be scope for some market efficiency savings, no enthusiasm was expressed for either acquiring the existing RFA flotilla—in whole or in part—or assuming both the capital and operating risks. On that basis, therefore, there is insufficient evidence in favour of changing the current RFA business model, which has served us well for a number of years. However, we are keen to ensure that it delivers the required responsibilities as efficiently as possible.

The strategic defence and security review has involved some very difficult but unavoidable decisions for the armed forces, none of which has been made lightly. They will lead to changes in the size of the RFA that will reflect the changing size and shape of the Royal Navy. Final decisions have not yet been made, beyond the decommissioning of one Bay class amphibious support ship that was part of the SDSR announcement in October. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State hopes to be in a position to announce the detailed force structure changes shortly, but the House will understand that some reductions in the size of the RFA will be involved. They will include personnel reductions, but, like the hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington, we hope that they can be made as much as possible throughout natural wastage. The hon. Gentleman made a good point about the age profile of the work force.

The Department is currently discussing with the departmental trades unions the need for early release activity to manage what will, I fear, be surplus RFA manpower. Until those consultations end, I cannot give the details of how members of the RFA might be affected, or the terms on which reductions will be managed.

My speech has been rather curtailed, but let me end by saying that although the challenges to be faced by the RFA after the SDSR and the value for money study are not insignificant, they are challenges that we believe the organisation has accepted head on, and they reflect an element of the difficult decisions that we have had to make throughout the SDSR. What I understand is known, in nautical terms, as the headmark for the Government remains Future Force 2020. We need to manage expectations and uncertainty—which we do not like—for both uniformed and civilian personnel, and that will be a key leadership challenge at all levels.

Let me again commend the Royal Fleet Auxiliary for the work that it does, and for the capabilities it brings to the naval service and defence now and into the foreseeable future. I am always happy to have a talk with the hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington, and look forward to doing so again.

Question put and agreed to.

10.48 pm

House adjourned.

Written Ministerial Statements

Monday 6 December 2010

TREASURY

Anti-Avoidance (Tax Policy)

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke): The Government are fully committed to tackling tax avoidance and will take necessary steps to protect the Exchequer and maintain fairness in the tax system.

At the June Budget the Government set out their commitment to improving predictability and stability in the tax system in “Tax policy-making: a new approach”. In that discussion document, the Government announced that they will adopt a more strategic approach to the risk of avoidance. By building in sustainable defences to avoidance we will reduce the need for frequent legislative changes and limit the cases when the changes are introduced with immediate effect.

However, there will still be occasions where the Government need to introduce immediate changes to legislation in order to address significant avoidance risks. The Government’s response to these risks will be balanced with their commitment to improving predictability and stability in the tax system. The Government will shortly publish a draft protocol that will set out the circumstances in which they will consider changing legislation with immediate effect. This will be published alongside the Government’s response to the consultation on improving tax policy making on 9 December.

It is within this context that the Government are announcing today a number of changes to legislation to tackle tax avoidance. Some of these have immediate effect.

Group Mismatches

The Government are introducing legislation taking effect from 6 December to counter tax avoidance schemes that aim to reduce a group’s liability to corporation tax through asymmetrical tax treatment of intra-group loans or derivatives (group mismatch schemes).

The legislation amends section 418 of the Corporation Tax Act 2009. Section 418 was introduced to block schemes that involve the provision of intra-group finance through the use of convertible securities. In the schemes the debtor company claims tax deductions for larger amounts than the credits on which the creditor company is chargeable. The amendments ensure that section 418 will apply where:

- a company connected with the creditor company is or may become entitled or required to acquire shares in a company; or
- amounts are taken into account under the loan relationship rules in determining the chargeable profits of a controlled foreign company.

Because of repeated avoidance in this area, and following the issue of a discussion document in March, HMRC has today published a technical note containing draft legislation to tackle group mismatch schemes using a

principles-based or generic approach. This legislation will come into force from the date of Royal Assent to Finance Bill 2011, following further consultation on the detail.

Derecognition

The Government are introducing legislation taking effect from 6 December to counter tax avoidance schemes involving accounting derecognition. This follows consultation on a technical paper published by HMRC on 6 July.

The proposed legislation amends sections 311 and 312, and sections 599A and 599B, of the Corporation Tax Act 2009. This legislation addresses avoidance schemes under which, in accordance with generally accepted accounting practice (GAAP), amounts that are taxable under the rules on loan relationships and derivative contracts are not fully recognised in a company’s accounts. In such cases, a company’s corporation tax computations must be prepared on the assumption that all such amounts were fully recognised. The legislation currently applies only where a number of specific conditions are met, and has been amended on a number of occasions since its introduction in 2006, in response to new avoidance schemes that purport to circumvent the conditions.

As a result of persistent avoidance using derecognition schemes, the Government are announcing that the legislation will now apply as a general rule, without reference to specific conditions, wherever a company is a party to tax avoidance arrangements and, in accordance with GAAP, amounts are not fully recognised in its accounts. In addition, a company will be denied a debit for a loss arising on derecognition of a loan relationship or derivative contract, again where the company is party to tax avoidance arrangements.

Further details are contained in a draft explanatory note published on HMRC’s website today, together with the proposed draft legislation.

Disguised Remuneration

As confirmed at the June Budget, the Government will introduce legislation to tackle arrangements involving trusts or other vehicles used to reward employees, which seek to avoid or defer the payment of income tax or national insurance contributions (NICs), including to provide a tax-advantaged alternative to saving beyond the annual and lifetime allowances available in a registered pension scheme.

A further announcement will be made shortly.

Functional Currency—Investment Companies

Draft legislation will be published on 9 December 2010, alongside other draft clauses for Finance Bill 2011, to counter avoidance involving changes in the functional currency of an investment company. The legislation will take effect for accounting periods beginning on or after 1 April 2011. This will ensure that when a UK resident investment company changes its functional currency no foreign exchange gains or losses arising from loan relationships or derivative contracts will be brought into account for tax purposes in the first period of account using the new functional currency.

At the same time, investment companies will be able to elect, prospectively, for a different functional currency for tax purposes than the currency used in the accounts.

VAT Supply Splitting

Draft legislation will be published on 9 December 2010, alongside other draft clauses for Finance Bill 2011, to counter avoidance relating to the supply of services where arrangements have been made for the supply of printed matter that is ancillary to those services to be made by a different supplier.

The VAT Act will be amended to withdraw zero-rating from printed matter where it is ancillary to a differently rated service, and where, if the service and printed matter had been supplied by a single company, the printed matter would not have been zero-rated.

The legislation will come into force from the date of Royal Assent to Finance Bill 2011, following consultation on the detail.

General Anti-Avoidance Rule

As announced in the June 22 discussion document "Tax policy making: a new approach", HMRC engaged informally over the summer with a range of interested parties to consider whether there was a case for a general anti-avoidance rule (GAAR) in the UK. Those discussions showed that there was some support for such a rule, but it was clear that there were also concerns that a rule would generate uncertainty about the tax treatment of business transactions and about how that uncertainty could be managed in practice.

I am setting in train a study programme to establish whether a GAAR could be framed to meet the objectives of deterring and countering tax avoidance in a fair way, while providing certainty, retaining a tax regime that is attractive to business and minimising compliance costs for businesses and HMRC and, if so, how the provisions of the GAAR might be framed.

This study will be led by Graham Aaronson QC, supported by a small group of experts. The membership of the group is being finalised, and details will be announced in January. The group will complete its study by 31 October 2011, informing Ministers of its conclusions and, if applicable, providing model provisions and explanatory notes. The Government will consider the outcome of this work as part of the Budget decision-making process, taking account of the impact on certainty for taxpayers as to the tax treatment of transactions and the implications for HMRC in terms of costs and other priorities. The Government would not introduce a GAAR without further formal public consultation.

I will place a copy of the terms of reference for the group in the Library of the House.

Disclosure of Inheritance Tax Avoidance

HMRC are today publishing a document in response to the consultation on bringing IHT on transfers of property into trust within the disclosure regime (DOTAS). The Government will, as planned, bring such transfers within DOTAS, but will make some changes to its implementation as a result of the consultation. The necessary regulations, taking into account those changes, will come into effect on 6 April 2011.

E-Communications (Mutual Sector)

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr Mark Hoban): The Government are committed to fostering diversity in financial services, promoting mutuals and

creating a more competitive banking industry. Much of the legislation applying to mutuals has existed for a long time and an up-to-date legislative framework is a pre-requisite to a successful mutual sector.

Mutual societies are under a number of statutory obligations to communicate with their members or the public in the conduct of their business. Today the Government published a consultation document that proposes to amend legislation that will facilitate the use of electronic communications, such as e-mail, by the mutual sector to discharge these statutory obligations and allow mutuals to reduce their administrative costs.

The deadline for responses to the consultation is Friday 28 January 2011 and electronic copies of the consultation document, which includes the draft statutory instruments, will be deposited to the Libraries of both Houses of Parliament.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT**National Broadband Strategy**

The Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport (Mr Jeremy Hunt): I am pleased to announce that I will be publishing a national broadband strategy today. The strategy sets out how the Government plan to deliver their ambition to have the best superfast broadband network in Europe by 2015 and build on the commitments I made in my statement to the House on 8 June 2010.

A first class broadband infrastructure is essential for creating jobs, opportunities and economic growth in the digital age. Our country needs a reliable and secure broadband capability that encourages innovation and creativity, supports the year-on-year growth of our digital industries—now worth £130 billion or 10% of gross added value, and meets the growing demands of its 40 million users.

To that end, I was delighted to secure an unprecedented £830 million of public investment for broadband as part of the recent TV licence fee agreement.

The strategy published today will outline how Broadband Delivery UK (BDUK) will use the £530 million available in this spending review period to support broadband and stimulate further private sector investment. It sets out the goal of delivering a fibre point in every community in the UK by the end of this Parliament, bringing superfast broadband within reach of communities urban and rural, and commits to ensuring that homes and businesses right across the UK are able to access a decent level of connectivity, even in the most remote areas.

The strategy includes:

a mixed-technology approach with fixed, wireless and satellite all having a role. It is recognised that one technology is not suitable for all circumstances, although high capacity fibre optic is likely to be a key feature of the UK's network;

ensuring access to existing infrastructure, including BT's network of ducts and poles and encouraging owners of other networks to develop new revenue streams through selling access to their infrastructure;

new guidance prepared in conjunction with the British Standards Institution and Building Research Establishment to builders and contractors on how to ensure new buildings are broadband-ready in the form of a publicly available specification (PAS 2016);

a commitment to the liberalisation of the 800MHz and 2.6GHz spectrum, to allow the development of next generation mobile services; and

working with local authorities to clarify existing guidance on streetworks and micro-trenching with the aim of reducing the cost of broadband roll-out.

I will also be announcing my proposal to use £50 million of the £530 million allocated in the spending review to support a further wave of rural projects in addition to the projects already announced in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, Cumbria, Herefordshire and North Yorkshire.

A copy of the strategy and a full copy of my speech will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

EDUCATION

Children's Commissioner Review

The Minister of State, Department for Education (Sarah Teather): This Government are a proud signatory of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), are committed to its implementation, and believe it is vital that children and young people have a strong, independent advocate to champion their interests and views and promote their rights. That is why on 12 July this year the Secretary of State for Education invited Dr John Dunford to undertake an independent review of the Children's Commissioner for England. Today the Government publish his report and recommendations, which I welcome. I know this is an issue of great interest to many parliamentarians, and I have placed a copy of the report in the House Library.

In summary, Dr Dunford has concluded that there is a need for a Children's Commissioner if Government are to meet their commitment to implement the UNCRC. He recommends a strengthened remit to promote and protect children's rights, with the role incorporating the responsibilities of the children's rights director at the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) and also being able to assess the impact of new Government policies on children's rights. Dr Dunford recommends greater independence, with the commissioner submitting an annual report, and any other reports, direct to Parliament as well as to Government, rather than reports being submitted to Parliament through the Secretary of State for Education, as at present. It will be for Parliament to determine how else it would like to engage with the new Children's Commissioner. The full implications of Dr Dunford's recommendations will take some months to work through, but the Secretary of State and I are pleased to accept them now in principle and will consult in due course on legislative changes.

Dr Dunford was asked to consider the commissioner's powers, remit and functions, the relationship with other Government funded organisations carrying out related functions and value for money. He has carried out a thorough review of the evidence, for which I am grateful. His call for evidence attracted over 200 responses from adult organisations and individuals and over 700 responses from children and young people. He has held extensive discussions with organisations that work with and for children and young people, MPs and peers, and the children's rights director's office. He has also visited

the Children's Commissioners in all four countries of the UK and Ireland, and commissioned an academic review of the international evidence.

The conclusions that Dr Dunford has drawn are powerful. His review makes a convincing argument for the need for a Children's Commissioner, and I accept that without one there would be significant implications for children's lives and for the UK's international standing. Dr Dunford has assessed whether the role of the Children's Commissioner meets the Cabinet Office tests against which all arm's length bodies have been reviewed, and I accept his view that it does so.

I have noted that despite some achievements on specific issues, the impact of the Office of the Children's Commissioner to date shows a clear need to reform its remit and operating model. I accept Dr Dunford's proposals that the role should be in accordance with the United Nations Paris Principles for Human Rights organisations, with responsibility for promoting and protecting children's rights on the basis of the UNCRC, and reporting directly to Parliament as well as to the Department for Education. I also agree with Dr Dunford that within these rights lies the responsibility for children to respect the rights of others, and that this should better enable children to act as young citizens and reinforces the proper exercise of authority by parents and other adults such as teachers.

The Secretary of State is clear that the Children's Commissioner must represent value for money in exercising its powers and functions, and Dr Dunford has identified opportunities in this regard. While accepting that the commissioner needs to be adequately resourced to fulfil the role, I believe that all public funding should be used in accordance with the Cabinet Office's efficiency guidelines for arm's length bodies, and that this need not compromise independence or statutory powers and duties. Dr Dunford recommends merging the functions of the Office of the Children's Commissioner with the children's rights director in Ofsted, providing the opportunity for greater coherence and impact, and scope for savings. I believe that this is a sensible way forward, and will be discussing next steps with Her Majesty's chief inspector. Dr Dunford has also identified that the salary of the Children's Commissioner is excessive in comparison to others in similar roles and I will address this in setting up the new arrangements.

Dr Dunford's recommendations mean that the statutory basis and form of the Office of the Children's Commissioner must change. I will consult in due course on legislative changes. In the interim, the current role and functions of the Children's Commissioner will continue. This includes the commissioner's remit over non-devolved matters impacting on children and young people in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. I do understand the difficulties that the current position presents for the Children's Commissioners in the devolved Administrations. I will want to work with them to achieve a situation, within the devolution settlements, where the interests of children in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland can be fully represented by the commissioner for that jurisdiction.

While it will take some time for any legislative changes to take effect, I am determined to act in the spirit of Dr Dunford's recommendations as soon as possible. The Secretary of State does not intend to use his current power to direct the Children's Commissioner to undertake an inquiry, and while the current legislation

will still mean that the commissioner needs to consult him prior to undertaking an inquiry, the Secretary of State will be happy to offer his views but will not expect to have any role in how the commissioner then decides to proceed.

Dr Dunford recommends that a reshaped Children's Commissioner for England holds Government to account against the UNCRC. I agree with Dr Dunford that for this to deliver benefits to children, Government and policy makers must be receptive to that approach and advice. I can therefore make a clear commitment that the Government will give due consideration to the UNCRC articles when making new policy and legislation. In doing so, we will always consider the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's recommendations but recognise that, like other state signatories, the UK Government and the UN committee may at times disagree on what compliance with certain articles entails.

In conclusion, Dr Dunford's recommendations should result in a Children's Commissioner that has greater profile and credibility, and can better impact on children's lives. At the centre of this coalition Government's thinking is a determination to see children and young people achieve to their full potential, and the desire to empower individuals to shape their own future. I believe that reinforcing our commitment to children's rights, and creating a stronger independent advocate for those rights, is an important part of delivering on that ambition.

Childhood (Commercialisation and Sexualisation)

The Minister of State, Department for Education (Sarah Teather): I am announcing today an independent review of the commercialisation and sexualisation of childhood.

Parents express real concern about children being pressured into growing up too quickly, to become consumers or sexualised adults earlier than is appropriate. The Government have therefore made a commitment to take action to protect children from excessive commercialisation and premature sexualisation.

I have asked Mr Reg Bailey, chief executive of the Mothers' Union, to conduct an independent review of the issue and to make a full report with recommendations in May 2011. I should like the review to take a wide-ranging and independent examination of the evidence and provide recommendations that identify measures that will result in businesses collectively and individually changing their behaviour and which empower consumers to voice their concerns more effectively. To that end, I have asked Mr Bailey to consider the views of both consumers, particularly parents but also children themselves, and the business community; as well as drawing on the expertise of existing regulators and other experts in the field.

In undertaking his review, I have also asked Mr Bailey to build on the previous reviews conducted by Professor David Buckingham on the impact of the commercial world on children's wellbeing, by Dr Linda Papadopoulos on the sexualisation of young people, and by Professor Tanya Byron on child safety in a digital world. I have asked Mr Bailey to examine the evidence in these reviews and more recent research and to produce robust and challenging recommendations for Government to consider in the following areas:

Risks of harm of commercialisation and sexualisation and barriers to parenting;

Principles (what is acceptable in this area and what is not);
Consumer voice; and
Corporate social responsibility relating to children.

Copies of the Minister of State for Children and Families' letter asking Mr Bailey to carry out the review will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

TRANSPORT

Ship-to-Ship Transfer Regulations

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mike Penning): I wish to inform the House of the outcome of the review of the Merchant Shipping (Ship-to-Ship Transfers) Regulations 2010.

On 8 July, I announced the review of the regulations and I asked all interested parties to make representations to me by 30 September. On the same day, I also laid a statutory instrument—the Merchant Shipping (Ship-to-Ship Transfer) (Amendment) Regulations 2010—before the House, in order to defer the coming into force date of the regulations from 1 October 2010 until 1 April 2011.

During the period of the review, from 8 July to 30 September inclusive, I received 32 written representations and held three meetings with interested parties at their request.

In considering these representations, I have been left in no doubt that this is an important issue—not only for the shipping companies who benefit from these practices, but equally for local residents who have concerns about the potential impact of any accident on their coastline. In deciding how best to proceed, it has been necessary to strike a balance between ensuring that these operations are properly regulated, while recognising the benefits of ship-to-ship transfer.

On the basis of the written representations and the points made to me in meetings conducted in the context of the review, I have drawn the following conclusions:

I intend to change the policy on ship-to-ship transfers outside harbour authority areas. Instead of a general prohibition, there will be a regime which will:

restrict ship-to-ship transfers outside harbour authority areas to a single designated area within the UK territorial sea;
establish a system of permits issued by the MCA; and
give effect at the same time to the new chapter 8 of annex I to the MARPOL convention.

I intend to maintain, without change, the policy of requiring oil transfer licences for harbour authorities. Harbour authorities which already have a history of hosting ship-to-ship transfers will, of course, continue to benefit from transitional arrangements.

I shall also take account, in reshaping the policy, of some specific instances where a type of ship or a type of activity needs to be treated in a way which departs from the general rules, or where the application of the rules needs to be adjusted to allow normal harbour activities to continue unhindered.

The Department's officials will now proceed to draft the necessary amending legislation, on the basis which I have described. I shall be taking a keen interest in the progress which they make.

I will be placing an analytical table, which summarises the points of substance made in the written representations and the meetings held with interested parties, on the Department's website and in the Libraries of both Houses.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Disability Living Allowance Reform

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Maria Miller): I am publishing today “Disability Living Allowance reform”, a formal public consultation on our proposed reforms to disability living allowance (DLA).

We are already undertaking large-scale reform of the welfare system, for example the universal credit and our flagship Work programme. Our welfare reforms are designed to protect people in the most vulnerable situations, including disabled people. We remain steadfast in our support for the principles of DLA, as a non-means-tested cash benefit contributing to the extra costs incurred by disabled people.

However, DLA has not been fundamentally reformed since it was introduced in 1992. We now have a disability benefit which is confusing for individuals to understand, based on unclear criteria and often results in inconsistent awards, and since 1992, both the case load and the cost of DLA have grown to a level that is unsustainable. Changes to DLA are long overdue and must address questions of fairness and value, while supporting disabled people to lead independent lives. We must ensure DLA better reflects the needs of disabled people today, rather than in the 1990s, and that it enables support to be targeted to those with the greatest need.

This is why I want to bring disability benefits into the 21st century by replacing DLA with a new benefit—personal independence payment. This is an opportunity to improve the support for disabled people and enable them to lead full, active and independent lives. Personal independence payment will maintain the key principles of DLA, but it will be delivered in a fairer, more consistent and sustainable manner. It is only right that support should be targeted at those disabled people who face the greatest challenges to leading independent lives and this reform is required to enable that, along with a clearer assessment process.

The consultation document sets out our proposals and seeks responses from disabled people and disability organisations. The document covers:

The need for reform, including the rising case load and expenditure and what we believe is wrong with the current benefit;

Our proposals for reform including the new objective assessment, taking into account aids and adaptations, eligibility criteria, the treatment of children and over 65s, and signposting claimants to support to help them manage their condition; and

How we envisage the benefit being delivered, including the benefit's role as a passport to other support and integration with other support, such as adult social care.

We welcome views from across Great Britain on the DLA proposals, conceived within the framework of a 21st century welfare system that is efficient, effective and above all fair.

Copies of the consultation paper are available in the Vote Office, and will be available shortly at <http://www.official-documents.gov.uk/menu/cmd2010.htm>.

The consultation period will be from 6 December to 14 February 2011. I will make a further statement regarding the response shortly after the consultation period ends.

Social Fund Budgeting Loans

The Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions (Steve Webb): The social fund helps people to meet additional costs they may find it difficult to budget for. This is especially true when people on the lowest incomes are facing difficult and expensive times in their lives such as having a child or paying for a relative's funeral.

This is why, in the forthcoming Welfare Reform Bill, we will introduce legislation to make social fund budgeting loans available to help families to buy maternity items or items for a new baby or to help them towards meeting some of the costs of a relative's funeral. This help will be available in addition to the Sure Start maternity grant and the social fund funeral payment from late next year.

Written Answers to Questions

Monday 6 December 2010

WALES

Departmental Conferences

Robert Halfon: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what steps she has taken since her appointment to reduce expenditure on conferences from budgets within her responsibility. [28365]

Mr David Jones: We have no plans for any expenditure on conferences.

Departmental Overtime

Andrew Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how much her Department spent on overtime for staff working within her private office in each of the last five years. [28558]

Mr David Jones: The following amounts were spent on overtime for staff in the Secretary of State's private office in the last five years:

	£
2005-06	3,910
2006-07	4,062
2007-08	4,385
2008-09	14,567
2009-10	14,577

The Wales Office has instigated a freeze on overtime claims across all teams, encouraging staff to instead take time off in lieu for additional hours worked to improve the work life balance of members of staff.

Departmental Press: Subscriptions

Robert Halfon: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how much her Department spent on press cuttings services in each year since 1997. [28148]

Mr David Jones: The Wales Office spent the following amounts on press cuttings:

	£
2008-09	3,910

Financial year	Corps	Regiment
2001-02	No fatalities	No fatalities
2002-03	Royal Logistics Corps	Allied Command Europe Mobile Force Combat Service Support Battalion
2003-04	Infantry	Rifle Volunteers ¹
2004-05	No fatalities	No fatalities

	£
2009-10	11,794
2010-11	6,991

The costs in 2008-09 cover payments from December 2008, when the contract started, until March 2009. The costs of press cuttings before December 2008 could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Departmental Publications

Robert Halfon: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what estimate she has made of her Department's expenditure on printing (a) Command Papers, (b) papers laid before Parliament by Act, (c) consultation documents and (d) other papers in each of the last 10 years. [28372]

Mr David Jones: This information is not held in a way that allows the costs of such expenditure to be separated out from other office expenditure.

Departmental Travel

Paul Maynard: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how much her Department spent on grey fleet in (a) 2008-09 and (b) 2009-10. [28857]

Mr David Jones: My Department spent the following amounts on grey fleet:

2008-09: £2,045

2009-10: £2,174.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Departmental Press: Subscriptions

Robert Halfon: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how much his Department spent on press cuttings services in each year since 1997. [28146]

Mr Paterson: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given on 22 November 2010, *Official Report*, column 2W.

DEFENCE

Afghanistan and Iraq: Peacekeeping Operations

Jonathan Edwards: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which (a) corps and (b) regiment had the highest (i) fatality and (ii) casualty rate in (A) Iraq and (B) Afghanistan in each year since 2001-02. [27326]

Mr Robathan: The following table shows the corps and regiment which had the highest number of fatalities in Afghanistan in each financial year since 2001-02. Where multiple corps or regiments are listed they are joint equal for the highest number of fatalities in a year.

<i>Financial year</i>	<i>Corps</i>	<i>Regiment</i>
2005-06	Infantry	Royal Gloucestershire, Berkshire and Wiltshire Light Infantry ¹
2006-07	Royal Air Force	120 Squadron RAF
2007-08	Infantry	Royal Anglian Regiment Mercian Regiment ²
2008-09	Infantry	Parachute Regiment
2009-10	Infantry	The Rifles

The following table shows the corps and regiment which suffered the highest number of serious injuries in

Afghanistan in each financial year since 2007. Information is not available prior to 2007.

<i>Financial year</i>	<i>Corps</i>	<i>Regiment</i>
2007-08	Infantry	40 Commando Royal Marines
2008-09	Infantry	45 Commando Royal Marines
2009-10	Infantry	The Rifles

The following table shows the corps and regiment which had the highest number of fatalities in Iraq in each financial year since 2002-03.

<i>Financial year</i>	<i>Corps</i>	<i>Regiment</i>
2002-03	3 Commando Brigade	849 Naval Air Squadron UK Landing Force Command Support Group
2003-04	Infantry	156 Provost Company, RMP ³
2004-05	Infantry	The Black Watch ⁴
2005-06	Infantry	Staffordshire Regiment ⁵ Royal Regiment of Fusiliers
2006-07	Infantry	12 Regiment Royal Artillery Duke of Lancaster's Regiment The Rifles ⁶
2007-08	Infantry	The Rifles
2008-09	Army Air Corps Infantry Royal Engineers	9 Regiment Army Air Corps HQ 20 Armoured Brigade Princess of Wales Royal Regiment
2009-10	No fatalities	No fatalities

The following table shows the corps and regiment which suffered the most serious injuries in Iraq in each financial year since 2007. Information is not available prior to 2007.

<i>Financial Year</i>	<i>Corps</i>	<i>Regiment</i>
2007-08	Infantry	The Rifles
2008-09	No serious injuries	No serious injuries
2009-10	Infantry	Princess of Wales Royal Regiment

¹ Now part of The Rifles.

² The Worcestershire and Sherwood Foresters Regiment became 1st Battalion the Mercian Regiment during their deployment to Afghanistan in 2007.

³ 156 Provost Company RMP is an independent Provost Company.

⁴ Now part of the Royal Regiment of Scotland.

⁵ Now part of the Mercian Regiment.

⁶ The Devonshire and Dorset Light Infantry and the Light Infantry became part of the Rifles while deployed to Iraq in 2006-07.

Mrs Moon: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment has been made of the role of Afghan forces in protecting supply convoys to UK forces; and if he will make a statement. [26834]

Mr Robathan: Supplies are delivered to UK forces in Afghanistan through a number of means, including military and contractor convoys. Following President Karzai's decree on 16 August 2010 to disband private military security companies, the UN Assistance Mission to Afghanistan and the International Security Assistance Force have been working with the Government of Afghanistan on behalf of the international community to implement the decree. Work is ongoing to develop an Afghan-led solution, including for convoy protection where required, which will include the use of elements of the Afghan National Security Forces.

Mr Andrew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence pursuant to the answer of 26 October 2010, *Official Report*, column 173W, on Afghanistan: peacekeeping operations, how many of the 84 Hellfire missiles launched from Reaper unmanned aerial vehicles in Afghanistan since May 2008 were Hellfire AGM 114N missiles. [28177]

Mr Robathan: I am withholding the information as its disclosure would, or would be likely to, prejudice the capability, effectiveness or security of our armed forces.

Air Force: Military Bases

Sir Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many (a) civilian and (b) military staff were employed at each RAF base in the UK in each year since 2007. [27580]

Nick Harvey: The available figures for the number of civilian and military staff employed at major RAF bases in the UK in each year since 2007 is shown in the following table. To provide the answer incorporating every RAF base in the UK would incur disproportionate cost.

RAF base	April 2007		April 2008		April 2009		April 2010	
	Military	MOD civilian						
RAF Benson	1,500	170	1,530	160	1,500	160	1,840	150
RAF Brize Norton	3,420	640	3,200	620	2,680	600	2,900	610
RAF College Cranwell	1,380	480	1,460	470	1,660	480	1,540	490
RAF Coningsby	2,000	280	1,800	290	1,790	300	2,070	290
RAF Cosford	1,040	580	1,400	540	1,740	560	2,260	610
RAF Cottesmore	1,540	210	1,690	200	1,870	200	1,920	210
RAF Halton	880	200	1,220	200	1,880	230	1,380	220
RAF High Wycombe	1,530	570	1,560	600	1,540	600	1,610	640
RAF Honington	1,070	290	1,310	290	1,670	270	1,620	280
RAF Kinloss	1,540	310	1,460	310	1,420	310	1,380	310
RAF Leeming	1,460	260	1,370	240	1,600	260	1,620	290
RAF Leuchars	1,640	290	1,480	290	1,340	290	1,010	270
RAF Linton On Ouse	280	180	270	180	280	180	290	180
RAF Lossiemouth	2,080	380	1,750	370	1,720	370	1,830	370
RAF Lyneham	2,390	260	2,280	250	2,250	240	2,250	240
RAF Marham	2,590	360	2,520	380	2,490	370	2,570	390
RAF Northolt	450	110	420	340	490	360	620	400
RAF Odiham	1,840	90	1,750	90	1,710	100	1,860	110
RAF Shawbury	460	120	480	120	550	110	580	120
RAF Valley	350	60	340	60	360	60	380	80
RAF Waddington	2,430	540	2,370	560	2,320	560	2,310	540
RAF Wittering	1,650	250	1,640	240	1,570	240	1,650	240

Notes:

1. The military figure includes all trained and un-trained personnel. Full time reserve personnel and mobilised reservists are excluded.
2. Figures are rounded to the nearest 10, numbers ending in five have been rounded to the nearest 20 to prevent systematic bias.
3. The figures represent the number of UK service and civilian personnel that are stationed at that postcode.

Aircraft Carriers

Mr Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what estimate he made of the cost to the public purse under each budget heading of the cancellation of the order for the second aircraft carrier HMS Prince of Wales. [28534]

Peter Luff [holding answer 3 December 2010]: The implications of a number of options for the carrier programme were assessed during the Strategic Defence and Security Review, including our liabilities under relevant contracts and industrial agreements such as the so-called "Yellow Book". I do not propose to release the advice provided to Ministers on these liabilities.

Armed Forces: Blood Transfusions

Simon Kirby: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans his Department has for the use of blood safety technologies in the treatment of wounded soldiers in combat zones. [26936]

Mr Robathan: The Advisory Committee on the Safety of Blood, Tissues and Organs (SaBTO, a UK independent non-departmental public body run by the Department of Health), performed a risk assessment of strategies

for the reduction of risk of bacterial contamination of platelets in 2009. The committee concluded at its meeting on 27 January 2010 that pathogen inactivation (PI) of platelets should not be implemented at this particular time, due to uncertainties around patient safety, increased donor exposure and efficacy of PI platelets.

We will continue to monitor developments in this area.

There are currently no plans for the use of blood safety technologies in the treatment of wounded soldiers in combat zones.

Armed Forces: Drugs

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many compulsory drugs tests (CDTs) were performed on Army personnel in each of the first three quarters of 2010; and how many had positive results for (a) cocaine and (b) ecstasy in each such quarter. [27721]

Mr Robathan: The number of compulsory drug tests (CDTs) undertaken by the Army in each quarter since January 2010 and the positive results for cocaine and ecstasy are shown in the following table:

<i>Period</i>	<i>Number of CDTs provided</i>	<i>Cocaine positive</i>	<i>Ecstasy positive</i>
1 January-31 March 2010	20,782	55	2
1 April-30 June 2010	27,140	81	0
1 July-30 September 2010	19,612	63	1

Defence: Employment

Mr Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence whether his Department has estimated the number of jobs in the UK to be supported by defence expenditure in each year to 2014-15. [26860]

Peter Luff: The Ministry of Defence no longer compiles historical estimates of UK employment relating to equipment and non-equipment expenditure in UK industry and commerce. The last estimates, for 2007-08, were published in UK Defence Statistics in September 2009. The Department has never produced forecast estimates of UK employment.

Departmental Art Works

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what his most recent estimate is of the monetary value of the (a) fine art, (b) antique furniture, (c) clocks, (d) photographs and (e) other categories of antiques held on his Department's estates; [27828]

(2) how many individual works of art and antiques owned by his Department have been valued at over £15,168. [27836]

Mr Robathan: In line with the policy accepted by the Department for Culture Media and Sport for the Government Art Collection, no estimate is maintained for the value of artwork and antiques in the Ministry of Defence Art Collection. There would be a high cost associated with valuing the collection that outweighs the value of holding the information.

European Fighter Aircraft

Sir Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what timetable he has set for the implementation of the proposed increase in the number of Typhoon Eurofighters in operation at RAF Leuchars. [27576]

Mr Robathan: Number 6 Squadron, operating at RAF Leuchars, is planned to receive its full complement of Typhoon aircraft by September 2011. Decisions on the future planned build-up of Typhoon squadrons at RAF Leuchars will be announced following completion of the work announced in the Strategic Defence and Security Review to examine future RAF basing requirements.

Ex-servicemen: Radiation Exposure

Mr Wallace: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what data relating to nuclear test veterans the Atomic Weapons Establishment has supplied to his Department. [26985]

Mr Robathan: The Atomic Weapons Establishment has provided over 12,000 documents to the Ministry of Defence in relation to the Atomic Veterans Group

litigation and the war pensions appeals' cases. These documents cover a wide range of information relating to the nuclear tests.

France: Aircraft Carriers

Mr Davidson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what information his Department holds on the number of days the French aircraft carrier Charles De Gaulle was at sea in each of the last 10 years; whether he has made a comparative assessment of the number of days spent at sea by French and British aircraft carriers; and if he will make a statement. [27912]

Peter Luff: The UK and France have agreed to develop the capability to deploy a UK-French integrated carrier strike group incorporating assets owned by both countries by the early 2020s. Work to achieve this is at an early stage and will take account, among other things, of the availability of each nation's naval assets. The Ministry of Defence has not conducted a comparative assessment of the number of days spent at sea by French and British aircraft carriers.

Future Large Aircraft

Mr Scott: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence by what date he expects the A400M transport aircraft to enter service with the Royal Air Force. [27189]

Peter Luff: The forecast in service date for the A400M aircraft is March 2015, as published in the Major Projects Report 2010.

Joint Strike Fighter Aircraft

Bridget Phillipson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the correspondence address is of each supplier of (a) equipment, (b) personnel, (c) parts and (d) assembly facilities for the Joint Strike Fighter Project in each (i) Government office region, (ii) local authority area and (iii) Parliamentary constituency. [28023]

Peter Luff: Under the terms of the Production, Sustainment and Follow-on Development (PFSD) Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) signed by all nine Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) partner nations in 2006, all requirements for JSF articles are co-ordinated centrally by the US Department of Defence to ensure economies of scale. This includes placing contracts with Lockheed Martin as the Prime Contractor for JSF who are required by the PFSD MOU to select sub contractors and suppliers on a best value basis. While UK industry has an exceptionally good position as suppliers to JSF, we do not routinely collect or maintain the details requested.

Military Bases

Sir Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what criteria he plans to use to determine which RAF bases will be closed as a result of the implementation of the recommendation of the Strategic Defence and Security Review; [27717]

(2) what (a) other Government Departments and agencies and (b) other organisations his Department (i) has consulted and (ii) plans to consult in relation to the closure of RAF bases in Scotland as a result of the implementation of the recommendations of the Strategic Defence and Security Review. [27718]

Mr Robathan: The Ministry of Defence is now addressing the full range of issues affecting the defence estate following the Strategic Defence and Security Review. This will, in some cases, involve change of use for individual sites, and potentially some closures, but no decisions have yet been made. The work under way is aimed at delivering a long-term, cost effective solution that enables the delivery of operational capability and provides value for money for the taxpayer. We do not anticipate bringing this work to a conclusion before spring 2011. We plan to be as open as we can be and will consult with other Government Departments, the Devolved Administrations and local communities and relevant agencies as appropriate.

Military Decorations

Stephen Barclay: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence whether his Department plans to consult the National Defence Medal Campaign as part of its forthcoming review of the rules governing the awarding of medals. [27946]

Mr Robathan [*holding answer 2 December 2010*]: I can confirm that the review of the rules governing the award of medals will report to me and that work is now under way.

The background and arguments on the case for a National Defence Medal are well known and understood by the Ministry of Defence. Indeed we have received many representations from campaigners. Their views will be considered as part of the review.

Nimrod Aircraft

Mrs Moon: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the capabilities are of the (a) Hercules C130 and (b) Nimrod MRA4 in respect of (i) maritime radar capability and (ii) carrying sonobuoys; and if he will make a statement. [27002]

Peter Luff: The radars fitted to the Nimrod MRA4 and the Hercules C-130 aircraft have different capabilities because they were designed for different roles. The MRA4 was designed to operate a maritime surveillance radar capable of detecting, tracking and identifying surface ships and to deploy and monitor a variety of sonobuoys.

Hercules C-130 aircraft are fitted with radar systems that provide a basic maritime search capability, in addition to weather and collision avoidance. The Hercules C130 is not equipped to deploy or operate sonobuoys.

Mrs Moon: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will estimate the cost to the public purse of airborne intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition and reconnaissance support for counter-terrorism purposes in respect of (a) offshore oil rigs, (b) the UK fishing fleet and (c) wind farms of the use of (i) Nimrod MRA4 aircraft and (ii) alternative methods; what

assessment he has made of the capacity to provide such support following the cancellation of the Nimrod MRA4; and if he will make a statement. [28410]

Peter Luff: I have nothing to add to the answer I gave to the hon. Member on 30 November 2010, *Official Report*, columns 748-49W.

Rescue Services

Mrs Moon: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what arrangements he has made to provide search and rescue cover for (a) Typhoons and (b) F-35 Joint Strike Fighters refuelling over the ocean from the new Future Strategic Tanker Aircraft following the cancellation of the Nimrod MRA4; and if he will make a statement. [28411]

Peter Luff: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave on 28 October 2010, *Official Report*, columns 450-51W, to the right hon. Member for Coventry North East (Mr Ainsworth) and the hon. Members for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Mr McCann) and North Durham (Mr Jones).

Unmanned Air Vehicles

Bridget Phillipson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the correspondence address is of each supplier of (a) equipment, (b) personnel, (c) parts and (d) assembly facilities for the production of unmanned aerial vehicles of each (i) type, (ii) range, (iii) capital and maintenance cost and (iv) lifespan in each (A) Government office region, (B) local authority area and (C) Parliamentary constituency. [28166]

Peter Luff: I will write to the hon. Member in due course.

ENERGY AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Carbon Emissions

Philip Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change how much the Government have spent on research on a direct relationship between carbon dioxide emissions attributable to human activity and the average global temperature level in the last three years. [28441]

Gregory Barker: In the last three years (i.e. financial years 2008-09 to 2010-11), DECC and DEFRA have spent an estimated £1.8 million on researching the relationship between carbon dioxide emissions attributable to human activity and the average global temperature level. This has been done through DECC and DEFRA support to the Met Office Hadley Centre Climate Programme and the AVOID (Avoiding Dangerous Climate Change) Programme.

Ms Harman: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change what financial contributions his Department plans to make to Reducing Emission from Deforestation and Forest Degradation plus in each financial year from 2010-11 to 2014-15. [28484]

Gregory Barker: The UK has committed £300 million for forests for the fast start period (2010-12). This is 20% of our £1.5 billion fast start commitment.

For the next four years (i.e. the spending review period), the UK has allocated £2.9 billion for international climate finance. This includes full funding our remaining fast start commitment. Further decisions on programming this finance will be taken next year.

Energy

Zac Goldsmith: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change what agreements were made on energy subsidy reform at the G20 Seoul Summit. [28471]

Gregory Barker: At the Seoul Summit, G20 leaders reaffirmed their commitment to rationalise and phase out over the medium term inefficient fossil fuel subsidies which promote wasteful consumption. G20 Finance and Energy Ministers were directed to report to the 2011 Summit in France on progress in implementing country-specific strategies for reducing subsidy. The International Energy Agency, World Bank, OPEC and OECD were asked to review progress towards reducing levels of subsidy and report to the 2011 summit.

Energy Supply

Jim Fitzpatrick: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change what assessment he has made of the merits of the introduction of a regular obligation on owners of private electricity and gas networks to tender energy supply through an open and competitive process; and if he will make a statement. [26986]

Charles Hendry: The approach owners of private electricity and gas networks take to sourcing the electricity and gas provided to their customers is a commercial matter for the owners of those networks and will depend on the characteristics of each network. We are not seeking to introduce any obligations to regularly tender for energy supply, although EU procurement directives and regulations do impose certain obligations on public sector organisations.

Jim Fitzpatrick: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change on which dates officials of his Department met to consider the European Court of Justice's Citiworks ruling and the consultation on the provision of third party access to license exempt electricity and gas networks with (a) representatives of the ports sector, (b) other transport operators, (c) representatives of utility providers and (d) representatives of other commercial landlords. [27009]

Charles Hendry: Before publication of the consultation on the provision of third party access to licence exempt electricity and gas networks my officials sought meetings with stakeholders across a wide range of sectors. Meetings that took place were as follows:

30 November 2009: Fontenergy

1 December 2009: Thameswey Energy

1 February 2010: Workshop attended by: Competitive Networks Association, Combined Heat and Power Association, Fontenergy, Utilicom (now Cofely District Energy), Energy Networks Association, Ramboll UK Limited, Thameswey Energy, Galliford Try, Sembcorp,

National Caravans Association, London borough of Camden; Network Rail, Consumer Focus, Energy Retail Association.

10 February 2010: Utilicom (now Cofely District Energy)

16 February 2010: Energy Retailers' Association

22 February 2010: Ports Authority and Bristol Port Company

1 March 2010: British Property Federation

10 March 2010: Airport Owners Association

14 April 2010: British Land

14 April 2010: More Land

24 August 2010: GTC

24 August 2010: Combined Heat and Power Association

31 August 2010: Network Rail

1 September: Fontenergy

2 September 2010: EON

9 September 2010: Bristol Port Company and UK Major Ports Group

14 September 2010: Cofely District Energy

15 September: British Property Federation

15 September: Thameswey Energy

26 October 2010: UKMPG, Forth Ports, ABP, Port of Belfast, Bristol Port Company, DP World, PD Teesport, Hutchinson Ports UL, Port of Tilbury.

Fossil Fuels

Zac Goldsmith: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change if he will take steps to include the issue of global fossil fuel subsidy reform in the EU position for the Cancun climate change conference. [28475]

Gregory Barker: Fossil fuel subsidies are not within the scope of the agenda of the UNFCCC Conference of Parties in Cancun. International fossil fuel subsidy reform has the potential to lead to significant reductions in global carbon emissions and support the UK's energy security. The UK has strongly supported the G20 initiative to rationalise and phase out inefficient fossil fuel subsidies that promote wasteful consumption and will continue to work through the G20 to seek progress on these issues.

Geothermal Power

Zac Goldsmith: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change whether his Department plans to introduce exploration licensing legislation to facilitate geothermal heat and power projects. [28470]

Charles Hendry: The practical and legal aspects of an exploration licensing scheme covering geothermal heat and power projects are currently under examination by DECC officials.

Zac Goldsmith: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change what recent request his Department has received for meetings with representatives of the deep geothermal energy industry; and what response was made. [28473]

Charles Hendry: DECC Ministers have received a meeting request from the Deep Geothermal Group within the Renewable Energy Association, and a meeting is planned for the new year. DECC officials also met representatives of the deep geothermal industry in October,

to discuss deep geothermal power and the renewables obligation, and in September to discuss deep geothermal heat and the proposed renewable heat incentive.

Stephen Gilbert: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change what assessment his Department has made of the barriers to the development of deep geothermal energy in the UK; and what steps his Department is taking to remove such barriers to deployment. [28861]

Charles Hendry: We have assessed deep geothermal energy alongside other innovative renewable technologies. A particular barrier is the sector's ability to secure upfront capital support, which we have addressed through the two rounds of the Deep Geothermal Challenge Fund. The first round awarded £4 million in capital grants to three projects in financial year 2009-10, while the second round is currently under way with several bids under consideration. Another potential barrier is establishing investor confidence in ongoing returns at a commercial rate. This is provided by deep geothermal power's eligibility for 2 ROCs under the Renewables Obligation, as for other innovative renewable power technologies. Deep geothermal energy has also been considered during the development of the Renewable Heat Incentive. In addition, some in the industry have commented that the lack of a licensing regime creates a barrier to the sector's development. My officials are looking into this as set out in my answer today to my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) to question 28470.

Stephen Gilbert: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (1) what assessment his Department has made of the requirements for support of deep geothermal power in respect of the Renewables Obligation; [28862]

(2) whether support for deep geothermal power will be included under the forthcoming Renewables Obligation. [28864]

Charles Hendry: Deep geothermal power is supported under the Renewables Obligation (RO) and receives 2 ROCs/MWh. A banding review of Renewables Obligation support for all technologies, including deep geothermal, began in October this year. This review will consider whether any changes are needed to the banding.

Geothermal Power: Ofgem

Stephen Gilbert: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change what recent discussions his Department has had with Ofgem on deep geothermal power. [28859]

Charles Hendry: DECC has not had any recent discussions with Ofgem on deep geothermal power, which is an eligible technology under the RO. In continuing to encourage deep geothermal power the Department will raise issues with Ofgem as and when it becomes necessary.

Geothermal Power: Regulation

Stephen Gilbert: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change whether his Department has plans to introduce a regulatory regime for the development of deep geothermal power technology. [28860]

Charles Hendry: The practical and legal aspects of an exploration licensing scheme covering geothermal heat and power projects are currently under examination by DECC officials.

Natural Gas

Graham Stringer: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change what recent estimate he has made of the potential contribution of shale gas to the UK's energy needs. [27751]

Charles Hendry [holding answer 1 December 2010]: The security of supply of gas is a top Government priority in the UK. Gas is fungible and DECC does not distinguish between types of gas consumed in the UK but instead aims to create an environment where there are incentives for investing in all viable forms of gas production. The energy security and green economy bill contains measures to strengthen the market incentive mechanism for ensuring sufficient gas is available.

The UK is already benefiting from the technological breakthroughs in unconventional gas production methods. Recent increases in shale gas production in the United States has reduced the US's demand for imports of LNG, freeing up this LNG to be imported by other countries such as the UK and helping to put downward pressure on wholesale gas prices.

Further increases in the global production of shale gas are expected. This may help the UK to meet its demand for gas either directly (i.e. by being consumed in the UK) or indirectly (i.e. by freeing up other gas resources for consumption by the UK).

The British Geological Survey estimates that there could be worthwhile shale gas resources in the UK. However it is not possible to make an estimate of reserves without drilling and production testing, and it is not yet clear that the success elsewhere can be replicated in the UK.

Near Zero Emissions Coal

Zac Goldsmith: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change what (a) funding and (b) other support his Department has provided to the EU-China Near Zero Emissions Coal project. [28474]

Charles Hendry: The EU-China Near Zero Emissions Coal project (NZECC) has been planned as a three phase project. The UK led Phase I and provided £2.8 million to support workstreams that examined the potential for CO2 capture, transport and geological storage in China and the relative merits of a range of carbon capture and storage technologies. Phase I was delivered by 19 Chinese and nine UK partners representing academia, industry and research institutes and was completed in October 2009. Further information on can be found at:

<http://www.nzcec.info/en/>

We are currently in discussion with European partners and the Chinese Ministry of Science and Technology over the terms of Phase IIa, which is being led by the European Commission, with the aim of enabling China to determine the type of demonstration that they would like to see and identify where that facility should be located. The UK has yet to make a financial contribution toward this phase of the project.

Radioactive Waste

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change how many meetings the Geological Disposal Implementation Board for Radioactive Waste has held; what the current membership is of the board; and if he will post on his Department's website a copy of each paper presented to the board. [28635]

Charles Hendry: Government are committed to geological disposal of higher activity radioactive waste, coupled with safe and secure interim storage and a geological disposal facility siting process based on voluntarism and partnership.

The Geological Disposal Implementation Board (GDIB) that I chair, was set up to provide direct ministerial oversight of the implementation programme as well as enabling stakeholders to provide input to, or to have observation of, the programme. The Board will meet two to three times per year and will provide increased visibility of the programme and make clear programme responsibilities and accountabilities.

The first meeting of this board took place on 30 November 2010 and a high-level timeline for the Managing Radioactive Waste Safely programme was presented to members. This describes the progress to date, as well as setting out indicative timescales and milestones in implementing geological disposal. Government will keep the timeline and milestones under review and update them whenever required.

The GDIB terms of reference and a list of attending organisations is available on the Department's website at:

<http://www.decc.gov.uk>

Agendas, minutes and papers will also be published following each meeting.

Renewables Obligation: Biofuels

Vernon Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change when he expects to make a decision on whether to grandfather bioliquids made from waste under the Renewables Obligation; and if he will make a statement. [28512]

Charles Hendry [holding answer 3 December 2010]: The timing of decisions is now being considered. My officials will write shortly to the industry representatives contributing to this work to let them know the timescale.

Vernon Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change what recent representations he has received on the potential effect on the number of green jobs in the economy of any decision not to grandfather bioliquids made from waste under the Renewables Obligation. [28513]

Charles Hendry [holding answer 3 December 2010]: The Government have not yet made a decision on whether to grandfather bioliquids under the Renewables Obligation (RO). In our response to the consultation on grandfathering biomass in the Renewables Obligation we committed to do further work on bioliquids derived from wastes. This work is currently being undertaken in discussion with the industry.

12 companies have made representations to the Government that jobs in this sector are dependent on investor certainty, which is in turn dependent on grandfathering RO support rates. These representations indicate that although some projects and companies may be significantly affected, the overall impact on green jobs is likely to be small. Nevertheless the Government are keen to promote both green jobs and energy from waste and is therefore considering the issue very carefully.

Wind Power

Mark Lancaster: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change how many wind turbines are in operation at each location in each local authority area. [28464]

Charles Hendry: The following table lists the number of wind turbines by region and district in England, and by county in Wales and Scotland. This is drawn from a database commissioned by DECC (which is regularly updated but may not be fully comprehensive, particularly over the last month). We do not have a breakdown according to local authority area and it would be disproportionately expensive to provide this.

Region	District/ county	Number	
		Wind farms	Wind turbines
East midlands	Boston	1	13
	East Lindsey	6	38
	Kettering	1	10
	South Holland	2	12
	South Kesteven	1	1
	Unspecified	4	5
	Total	15	79
Eastern	Breckland	3	10
	Fenland	7	39
	Great Yarmouth	2	11
	Peterborough	1	3
	Uttlesford	1	1
	Waveney	2	2
	Unspecified	2	13
Total	18	79	
London	Unspecified	2	2
	Total	2	5
North-east	Castle Morpeth	1	3
	Derwentside	6	28
	Easington	2	3
	Hartlepool	1	3
	Sedgefield	1	7
	South Tyneside	1	1
	Stockton-on-Tees	2	4
	Wansbeck	2	16
	Wear Valley	1	4
	Unspecified	6	21

Region	District/ county	Number		Region	District/ county	Number	
		Wind farms	Wind turbines			Wind farms	Wind turbines
	Total	23	90		Unspecified	1	1
					Total	20	104
North-west	Allerdale	9	66	Scotland	Aberdeenshire	17	70
	Barrow-in-Furness	1	7		Clackmannanshire	1	20
	Blackpool	1	3		Dundee City	1	2
	Burnley	2	27		East Ayrshire	2	160
	Copeland	3	19		East Lothian	2	18
	Rosendale	1	26		East Renfrewshire	2	4
	Sefton	2	10		Highland	17	238
	South Lakeland	3	22		Midlothian	1	24
	Unspecified	2	14		Moray	4	55
	Total	24	194		North Ayrshire	2	18
South-east	Dover	1	1	North Lanarkshire	1	2	
	Milton Keynes	2	8	Orkney Islands	12	27	
	Reading	1	1	Scottish Borders	10	235	
	Shepway	1	26	Shetland Islands	1	5	
	Vale of White Horse	1	5	South Ayrshire	1	52	
	Total	6	41	South Lanarkshire	7	132	
South-west	Carrick	2	30	Stirling	3	58	
	East Devon	1	1	West Lothian	1	7	
	Kerrier	7	13	Unspecified	25	335	
	Mendip	1	1	Total	110	1,462	
	North Cornwall	2	32	Wales	Conwy	4	14
	North Wiltshire	1	1		Pembrokeshire	1	14
	Restormel	1	16		Powys	13	277
	South Somerset	1	1		Unspecified	19	188
	Stroud	1	1		Total	37	493
	Torridge	2	6				
	Unspecified	2	4				
	Total	21	106				
	West midlands	Malvern Hills	1	1			
Wychavon		1	1				
Unspecified		1	1				
Total		3	3				
Yorkshire and Humber	Barnsley	1	13				
	Calderdale	2	22				
	Craven	2	8				
	Doncaster	1	2				
	East Riding of Yorkshire	5	22				
	Harrogate	2	9				
	Kirklees	3	5				
	North Lincolnshire	1	8				
	Rotherham	1	2				
	Selby	1	12				

Wind Power: Planning Permission

Mark Lancaster: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change how many wind farms are (a) in operation and (b) in construction; and how many applications for wind farms are awaiting planning permission. [28463]

Charles Hendry: Currently, there are 331 operational wind farms in the UK, of which 15 are offshore. There are a further 49 under construction, of which six are offshore. 168 wind farms are currently awaiting construction, of which three are offshore. And 257 are awaiting planning permission, of which six are offshore.

These figures are taken from the Renewable Energy Planning Database, which is available on the DECC website, and contains data on UK wind farm projects of 10 kW and above (including single turbine installations). The database is updated regularly though the figures provided may not reflect changes to project status that have occurred in the last month.

Wind Power: Research

Ms Bagshawe: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change how much his Department has allocated to research which aims to improve the efficiency of wind turbines in the latest period for which figures are available; and how much funding he plans to allocate in each of the next three years. [28126]

Charles Hendry: The Department has allocated funding to research in two areas:

1. The Environmental Transformation Fund Offshore Wind Demonstration Call has allocated up to £27.08 million over three years (2009-12) into the demonstration of new technology for large multi-megawatt offshore turbines. (£8 million of this was from the DECC/BIS Dual Key Funding).

2. DECC has provided up to £4.8 million over two years (2009-11) to The Carbon Trust to support the Offshore Wind Accelerator, a programme funding various cost reduction technologies.

DECC has not decided on budget allocations in innovation for the next three year period as we need to undertake our normal business planning and Budget Committee process and that process won't be fully resolved until January/February 2011.

SCOTLAND

Alternative Vote: Scottish Parliament

Tom Greatrex: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland whether he has assessed the effects of holding a joint ballot for a referendum on the alternative vote and elections to the Scottish Parliament on those (a) with learning difficulties and (b) for whom English is not their first language. [28307]

David Mundell: Article 90 of the Scottish Parliament (Elections etc.) Order 2010 allows returning officers to provide documents in different languages, in graphical representations, or in such ways as to make them more accessible to people who might otherwise not have reasonable access to information. The Parliamentary Voting Systems and Constituencies Bill includes a similar provision. In addition, the Electoral Commission will be sending an information booklet to all households explaining how to vote at both the Scottish Parliament election and the referendum. The Commission are working with the Central Office of Information to ensure that the public information they provide will be accessible. As part of that process they are considering the needs of people with learning disabilities and English as a second language.

Cancer: Drugs

Eric Joyce: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland whether the Scottish Government will receive a budgetary uplift as a consequence of the allocation of £50 million by the Government to the interim cancer drugs fund. [28803]

Michael Moore: In July 2010, the Secretary of State for Health, the right hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr Lansley), announced that from October patients will have greater access to cancer drugs that their doctors recommend for them due to an

extra £50 million in funding being made available by the Department of Health. There are no new Barnett consequential for the Scottish budget as a consequence of this policy.

Departmental Conferences

Robert Halfon: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what steps he has taken since his appointment to reduce expenditure on conferences from budgets within his responsibility. [28363]

David Mundell: Since the formation of the coalition Government, all Scotland Office expenditure, including expenditure on conferences, has been subject to the most rigorous scrutiny.

Departmental Press: Subscriptions

Robert Halfon: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how much his Department spent on press cuttings services in each year since 1997. [28147]

David Mundell: The Scotland Office came into existence on 1 July 1999. We do not hold centrally figures for 1999-2000. The figures for 2000-01 onwards are shown in the following table:

	£
2000-01	9,600.87
2001-02	7,073.67
2002-03	8,895.00
2003-04	18,215.25
2004-05	18,114.50
2005-06	16,500.00
2006-07	17,072.37
2007-08	12,150.59
2008-09	12,025
2009-10	10,245

Departmental Publications

Robert Halfon: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what estimate he has made of his Department's expenditure on printing (a) Command Papers, (b) papers laid before Parliament by Act, (c) consultation documents and (d) other papers in each of the last 10 years. [28374]

David Mundell: The Scotland Office does not separately record its expenditure on printing Command Papers, papers presented to Parliament by Act, consultation documents or any other papers. However, Scotland Office's total expenditure on printing for the last 10 years is shown in the following table:

	Expenditure (£)
2000-01 ¹	10,482
2001-02 ¹	12,012
2002-03	13,675
2003-04	8,655
2004-05	14,370
2005-06	8,847
2006-07	41,400
2007-08	17,596
2008-09	15,348

	<i>Expenditure (£)</i>
2009-10	20,467

¹ In our earlier years, the costs of the Scotland Office were not discernable from those of the Office of the Advocate-General. Therefore, the costs shown for the first two years include the costs of both Offices.

Departmental Written Questions

Sir Paul Beresford: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many and what proportion of questions tabled to the Secretary of State for written answer on a named day were answered substantively before or on the day named for answer (a) in Session 2009-10 and (b) since May 2010; how many such questions tabled between May 2010 and 12 November 2010 had not received a substantive answer by 18 November 2010; and what estimate he has made of the average cost to his Department of answering a question for written answer on a named day on the day named for answer in the latest period for which figures are available. [25973]

David Mundell: Between May 2010 and 12 November 2010, 88 named day parliamentary questions were tabled to the Secretary of State for Scotland, my right hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (Michael Moore). Of these, 79 (90%) were answered substantively on the day named for answer. All received a substantive answer by 18 November 2010.

The Government have committed to providing the Procedure Committee with sessional statistics in a standard format on the time taken to respond to written parliamentary questions for the 2009-10 Session. This information will be submitted to the Procedure Committee shortly.

HM Treasury conducts an annual indexation exercise of the cost of written and oral parliamentary questions so as to ensure that these average costs are increased in line with increases in underlying costs. The estimated cost of written questions that has applied from 20 January 2010 is £154.

Elections: Scotland

Tom Greatrex: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland for what reasons he considers that there should be two separate electoral management boards for Scotland. [28306]

David Mundell: We do not consider that there should be two separate electoral management boards in Scotland.

Tom Greatrex: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland for what reasons the laying of the draft Scottish Parliament (Elections etc.) Order 2010 took place after the presentation of the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill. [28308]

David Mundell: This Government assumed responsibility for the Scottish Parliament (Elections etc.) Order 2010 from the previous Administration and we made every effort to lay it as soon as practicable.

Tom Greatrex: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what assessment he has made of the nature of the operational relationship between the Government and Interim Electoral Management Board Scotland following its establishment as a statutory body. [28309]

David Mundell: The Interim Electoral Management Board for Scotland has not yet been established as a statutory body. Scotland Office officials attend meetings of the Board and we will continue to work closely with the Board on the forthcoming Scottish Parliament elections and reserved elections.

Local Government Ballots: Scottish Parliament

Tom Greatrex: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland under what circumstances he expects a combination of Scottish Parliament and local government ballots to occur. [28310]

David Mundell: Under Article 13 of the Scottish Parliament (Elections etc.) Order 2010, a local government by-election which takes place on the same date as a Scottish Parliament general election must be combined. If a Scottish Parliament by-election falls on the same date as a local government election, the returning officer, or returning officers if there are different returning officers for both elections, may combine them if they think fit.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Bees

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how much her Department has spent on research concerning bees in each of the last three years; and if she will make a statement. [26945]

Mr Paice: There are a number of funding routes for bee research in the UK and EU. Within these, DEFRA has spent the following on research concerning honey bees in each of the last three years:

<i>Financial year</i>	<i>£</i>
2008-09	360,000
2009-10	498,000
2010-11 ¹	632,000

¹ The figure for 2010-11 includes the £500,000 per year that DEFRA is contributing to the Insect Pollinators Initiative over the next five years which includes research on both honey and bumble bees. The Insect Pollinators Initiative is a £10 million programme established in 2009 to support research to better understand the importance of, threats to and management needs for insect pollinators in the UK. Although much of the funding is directed to honey bee research, there are some research projects on bumblebee ecology or on insect pollinators in general.

The amounts in the table cover a number of different projects, some of which have been completed. Final reports for the completed projects are available on the DEFRA website. Details of the projects funded under the Insect Pollinators Initiative are available on the Living with Environmental Change website.

DEFRA and Natural England have provided additional research funding, amounting to between £6,000 and £22,000 in each of the last three years, on understanding the status and ecology of rare and declining wild bee species.

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the bee population in England was on 1 March (a) 2000 and (b) 2010. [26946]

Mr Paice: Specific data on the honey bee population on 1 March 2000 and 2010 is not available. The population varies during the year from around 20,000 per colony in the winter to 60,000 per colony in the summer. A study carried out by ADAS Consulting Ltd. in 2001 estimated that there were 230,000 managed honey bee colonies in England. No subsequent estimates have been made. However, the National Bee Unit, part of the Food and Environment Research Agency (Fera), has a voluntary database on which 18,878 beekeepers managing 102,172 colonies in England are currently registered.

In addition to the honey bee, there are many species of wild bee in our countryside, a number of which have been the focus of UK conservation action. Information on the distribution and status of wild bees is available through the websites of voluntary groups such as the Bumblebee Conservation Trust or the Bees, Wasps and Ants Recording Society or from the Government-supported National Biodiversity Network Gateway which is an on-line database of information on the distribution of wildlife in the UK.

Dairy Farming

Mr Bain: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (1) what recent discussions she has had with (a) supermarket retailers and (b) the farming industry on the sustainability of the dairy farming industry; [27428]

(2) what recent discussions she has had with (a) supermarket retailers and (b) the farming industry on the pricing of milk, cheese and yoghurt; [27429]

(3) what her policy is on changes in the (a) level of imports and (b) share of the domestic market of domestic suppliers of milk, cheese and yoghurt. [27430]

Mr Paice: On 6 July, I chaired the Dairy Supply Chain Forum which brought together representatives from throughout the supply chain and included discussions on the impacts of price volatility and the sustainability of the dairy industry.

On 16 December, I will be chairing the next meeting of the Dairy Supply Chain Forum to discuss current issues and concerns.

I am determined to help the UK dairy industry increase its share of the domestic milk and milk products markets accounted for by domestic suppliers.

Departmental Contracts

Nicola Blackwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what steps her Department plans to take to encourage and support small and medium-sized enterprises and third sector organisations to compete for departmental contracts in line with value-for-money policy, UK regulations and EU procurement directives. [28113]

Richard Benyon: The Department complies with the UK and EU procurement directives and publishes requirements on websites such as CompeteFour and Supply-to-Gov in the expectation that small and medium-sized enterprises and third sector organisations will see and respond to the procurement need.

All procurement processes allow for the minimum of effort by the potential supplier to ensure that there are no obstacles that prevent small and medium-sized enterprises and third sector organisations from responding.

In line with Government policy we cannot show favour to any type of supplier in the final procurement selection processes. If the requirements could be met by a third sector organisation, the Department will include this point at the pre-procurement stage when details are published.

Environment Agency

Tony Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what factors she plans to take into account in determining whether the Environment Agency's navigations will transfer to the charitable body proposed to be established by April 2012 to operate the British Waterways inland waterways network; and if she will make a statement. [28645]

Richard Benyon [*holding answer 3 December 2010*]: In considering whether or not to transfer the Environment Agency's navigations into the new waterways charity, we are taking into account: the contribution this could make to our vision of a national trust for the waterways in civil society; the views of stakeholders; operational management practicalities, and; affordability in relation to the need for the charity to have cover for future liabilities.

We are looking at a number of different options and will consult on our proposals as part of our planned consultation on the new waterways charity early next year.

Farming Futures

Mr Bain: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (1) what representations she received prior to making her decision to terminate funding for Farming Futures in the next financial year; and if she will make a statement; [27420]

(2) what recent representations she has received on her decision to end funding for Farming Futures. [27422]

Mr Paice: Farming Futures is a communications project that aims to raise awareness and inform farmers of the impacts of climate change and the actions that can be adopted. Funded by DEFRA, it is a partnership of key agricultural organisations; comprising the National Farmers Union, Country Land and Business Association, Agricultural Industries Confederation, Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board, Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group, and Linking Environment and Farming.

In December 2009, Farming Futures and the industry partners were informed that DEFRA could no longer provide the financial support after four years of core funding. It had always been envisaged that the funding would be time-limited, allowing Farming Futures enough time with which to seek alternative long-term financial support. Informal representations were received from project partners following the decision to end funding for Farming Futures.

Mr Bain: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will publish her impact assessment in respect of the rural (a) economy and (b) environment of her Department's decision to terminate funding for Farming Futures in the next financial year; and if she will make a statement. [27424]

Mr Paice: Since the launch of the Farming Futures communications project in 2007, DEFRA has provided significant core funding. This contribution has allowed Farming Futures to establish themselves in playing a central role in supporting the farming industry organisations to take action on climate change. This includes raising awareness and informing farmers of the actions that can be taken to both reduce greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to the changing climate.

It has always been envisaged that funding from Government would be time-limited, allowing Farming Futures enough time with which to seek alternative long-term financial support. To effect behaviour change within the sector, the farming industry organisations need to play a bigger role to ensure that key messages are delivered to farmers and that action is taken to tackle the effects of climate change. Therefore, no formal impact assessment has been undertaken.

Mr Bain: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will publish her Department's assessments of the value for money delivered by Farming Futures in each of the last four financial years; and if she will make a statement. [27427]

Mr Paice: In 2007 Farming Futures was launched to raise awareness of the impacts of climate change on farming. Overall, in that year, a good network of media contacts and direct links with farmers and farming organisations was developed; achieving a £157,000 advertising value equivalent.

Since 2008, the focus of Farming Futures expanded further to include effecting behaviour change, and information was provided (through fact sheets, case studies, workshops etc.) to enable farmers to take the necessary action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to the changing climate. As part of the evaluation of the each phase of the project, a survey was undertaken to assess the level of success achieved. We will ensure that the results of these surveys are made readily available on the Farming Futures website:

<http://www.farmingfutures.org.uk>

Farming: Climate Change

Mr Bain: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how much funding her Department plans to provide to the farming industry for the purposes of tackling climate change in each of the next four financial years; and what mechanism she plans to use to (a) disburse and (b) monitor the effectiveness of such funding. [27423]

Mr Paice: Climate change is a key priority for this Government, and as with all sectors of the economy, the agriculture sector will need to play its role in tackling greenhouse gas emissions and adapting to the changing climate.

In England, the farming industry has taken responsibility for reducing emissions from agriculture through the development of a Greenhouse Gas Action Plan, for which a Framework for Action was published in February. This approach was supported by the previous administration and this Government continue to encourage the industry to work in partnership to achieve significant greenhouse gas emissions reductions. We look forward to the publication of a delivery plan in the near future.

The Government have made a significant investment of £12.6 million over four and half years, in partnership with the devolved Administrations, in a series of projects that aim to strengthen our collective understanding of on-farm emissions, allowing for better targeting of actions and capturing improvements made in livestock and crop management practices. We will also ensure Carbon Trust interest-free loans are available to farm businesses to invest in energy-saving equipment.

Farmers and land managers are also vulnerable to the effects of climate change and will need to take action to adapt sustainably. The Government are looking at enhancing existing advice and guidance arrangements to support voluntary adaptation action. DEFRA also undertakes research on the impact on climate change in the farming sector; future funding will depend on the specific projects undertaken.

We will support the sector through the development of training packages to deliver integrated advice, which will cover both mitigation and adaptation objectives.

Funding is currently available for farmers under Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE) to address challenges including climate change. For example, Environmental Stewardship provides farmers with a range of management options that are able to deliver multiple objectives, including climate change mitigation and adaptation benefits. Climate change was embedded as an over-arching theme into Environmental Stewardship following the 2008 Review of Progress. An evaluation of the RDPE is currently under way and we look forward to its findings on the effectiveness of the programme which will be available early in 2011.

Flood Control

Mary Creagh: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs which flood defence projects in each constituency are awaiting financial approval by the Environment Agency. [26191]

Richard Benyon [*holding answer 24 November 2010*]: All flood defence projects already under construction will be completed. It is too early to identify individual new flood defence projects that will be funded during the coming spending period. This is partly because annual budgets are still being finalised. It is also because the way in which Government funding is allocated to projects, and who decides which projects go ahead, may be changing.

DEFRA launched a public consultation on 24 November seeking views on how capital funding should be allocated to individual projects in the future. Subject to final decisions in the spring, the new approach could apply to all projects seeking funds to begin construction from April 2012 onwards.

The proposed approach would mark a departure from the existing system in that the Environment Agency would no longer decide the list of projects that go ahead, and which others need to be deferred as a result of annual limits in Government funding. Instead such decisions in most cases would be devolved to local authorities acting collectively as part of Regional Flood Defence Committees (to become Regional Flood and Coastal Committees under the Flood and Water Management Act). The approach also rewards public bodies and communities if they find ways of keeping project costs down, as well as if they can find additional local funding to come forward. In doing so, each community at risk could have a bigger say in which projects go ahead over time.

Whichever means of capital allocation is adopted, DEFRA expects that improved standards of protection will be delivered to 145,000 households by March 2015.

	<i>Total</i>	<i>Funding to Environment Agency</i>	<i>Other expenditure, including to local authorities</i>	<i>£ million</i>
2010-11 ¹	664	629		35
2009-10	627.9	607.4		20.5
2008-09	572.4	568.4		4
2007-08	499.8	499.8		0
2006-07	505.2	² 497.3		7.9

¹ The figures for 2010-11 are estimates of expenditure.

² £497.3 million for 2006-07 includes funding allocated by DEFRA which in later years was administered by the Environment Agency.

DEFRA expects to spend at least £2.1 billion on flooding and coastal erosion over the next four years. Annual budgets are yet to be finalised. It is not possible to speculate about funding in 2015-16 because this is outside the current spending review period.

The Department for Communities and Local Government also provides funding to local authorities using formula grant; this is not included in these figures.

Forestry Commission: Land

Tristram Hunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when she plans to launch the public consultation on the sale of Forestry Commission land. [28476]

Mr Paice: We currently anticipate that the consultation on options for different models of ownership and management arrangements for the public forest estate will begin early next year.

Timber: EC Law

Mr Bain: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what progress her Department has made towards the 2013 deadline for implementation of EU regulations on the importation of illegally-sourced timber; and if she will make a statement. [27731]

Mr Paice: We are implementing the Illegal Timber (Due Diligence) Regulation to meet our goal of eliminating illegal timber from the EU market; this will prohibit the import of illegally-harvested timber. When these additional implementing regulations have been finalised, a robust and proportionate domestic enforcement regime, including criminal penalties, will be put in place.

Flood Control: Finance

Mr Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how much her Department (*a*) allocated for expenditure on flood defences in each of the last five years and (*b*) plans to allocate to expenditure on flood defences in each of the next five years. [27986]

Richard Benyon: The following table sets out the amounts allocated for expenditure on flood and coastal erosion risk management for the last five years, including how much is provided to the Environment Agency as grant.

INDEPENDENT PARLIAMENTARY STANDARDS AUTHORITY COMMITTEE

Managers: Pay

Mr Winnick: To ask the hon. Member for Broxbourne, representing the Speaker's Committee for the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority, when the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA) plans to provide a substantive answer to question 25196 on the responsibilities and salaries of members of the IPSA's senior management team. [27943]

Mr Charles Walker: A substantive answer to the hon. Member's question was provided on 3 December 2010, *Official Report*, column 1076W.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

Churches: Rural Areas

Miss McIntosh: To ask the hon. Member for Banbury, representing the Church Commissioners, what recent representations he has received on the work of the Church of England in rural parishes; and if he will make a statement. [28453]

Tony Baldry: The Commissioners have received no direct representations, however, the Church of England has a presence in almost every rural settlement and village in England and plays an important and intricate role in rural community life. The Church of England manages 9,639 buildings in rural areas which are often the only space left open for the use of the community. Clergy undertaking rural ministry are receive support from the Diocese Rural Officer and specific training for

rural ministry is available through our partners at the Arthur Rank Centre and the Churches Rural Resources Centre in Warwickshire.

In rural areas parishes are often grouped together into multi-parish benefices or team ministries which can range in number from two to five parishes to 17 to 24 in which usually an ordained minister is assisted by voluntary workers to ensure that within each parish worship and pastoral care is provided appropriately. The committed ministry of volunteers, particularly from within local congregations is essential to sustaining and extending the work of the church in rural parishes. Recently we have focused on developing the skills and gifts of rural congregation members which has allowed rural churches to explore new ways of ensuring regular worship and a high standard of pastoral care and outreach in rural communities. Stress in clergy particularly those with charge of several parishes is of great concern to the church. Clergy are encouraged to take appropriate time off and to use the services of spiritual directors. Continued training is provided throughout ministry to enable new challenges to be addressed, and specialised training is available for those in working in multi-church situations.

The Church of England is undertaking to make its buildings available for wider extended community use, examples of projects which are currently, including as post offices, shops, libraries, internet cafes, benefit advice centres and citizens advice centres. Wherever possible, we want to see churches as living buildings where as much community activity as possible takes place, and the Church Commissioners will always support such activity. At the recent 'Faith in the Future of the Countryside' conference members of the Church of England discussed the Government's latest plans for the 'Big Society', development and housing in the countryside and the future of the government forests with several of our ecumenical partners. The conference urged the Church to engage with sustainable communities in its work on the 'Big Society' ensuring the safeguarding of ecological, cultural, economic and spiritual benefites which are already evident in the work of the Church in local communities.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

Abortion

Mr Amess: To ask the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross, representing the House of Commons Commission, what material relating to the passage of the (a) Abortion Bill [*Lords*] 1965-66 Session, (b) Abortion Bill [*Lords*] 1966-67 Session, (c) Medical Termination of Pregnancy Bill 1966-67 Session and (d) Abortion (No. 2) Bill 1966-67 Session is stored in the Parliamentary Archives; and if he will make a statement. [28005]

John Thurso: Details of records held by the Parliamentary Archives can be found by searching its online catalogue, Portcullis at:

www.portcullis.parliament.uk

A list of records relating to the above Bills will be deposited in the Library of the House. The records themselves can be ordered to, and consulted in, the Archives' public search room on the second floor of the House of Lords.

Departmental Press: Subscriptions

Robert Halfon: To ask the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross, representing the House of Commons Commission, how much the House of Commons service spent on press cuttings services in each year since 1997. [28158]

John Thurso: Payments by the House of Commons service for press cuttings services have been as follows.

Media and Communications Service:

For coverage of the work of select committees and the House in general.

	£
2007-08	8,502
2008-09	22,028
2009-10	63,649
2010-11 (to date)	48,281

Select Committees:

Some committees purchase a service with a wider remit to inform them of developments in their subject areas.

	£
2007-08	27,289
2008-09	25,646
2009-10	16,457
2010-11 (to date)	8,301

Detailed financial records from which this information can be derived are not kept for earlier periods.

A reduction in this expenditure of £35,000 a year has been proposed by the Management Board as a contribution to the savings target set by the commission.

Parliamentary Archives: Publications

Mr Amess: To ask the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross, representing the House of Commons Commission, what material offered to the Parliamentary Archives was rejected in each of the last 11 years; what the reason for rejection was in each case; and if he will make a statement. [28012]

John Thurso: The acquisition of records—both internal and external—by the Parliamentary Archives is governed by its "Collection & Acquisition Policy", available from its public searchroom and on the parliamentary website at:

<http://www.parliament.uk/documents/upload/archivesacquisitionpolicy09.pdf>

The disposal of the internal records of the administrations of both Houses is governed by its records management procedures, specifically the "Authorised Records Disposal Practice" (ARDP), available on the parliamentary intranet at:

<http://intranet.parliament.uk/research-online/records-archives/records-management/ardp/>

Destruction of records no longer of business or historical value takes place within individual offices as a matter of routine, based on the instructions in the above schedules. Records immediately identifiable as of historic

value are automatically transferred to the Archives in accordance with the ARDP. Where it is not clear whether a business record has historic value or not, that record is “appraised” by the Archives, a procedure which has been used since 2004 when the ARDP was introduced.

The numbers of files selected or rejected by the Parliamentary Archives following appraisal is in the following table:

	<i>Files selected</i>	<i>Files not selected</i>
2004	69	155
2005	865	657
2006	142	353
2007	190	189
2008	19	17
2009	151	56
2010 (Provisional figures)	97	112

Appraisal decisions are based on a number of factors, including the record’s provenance and content; authenticity and reliability; order and completeness; condition and costs to preserve it; and its intrinsic value (where appropriate). Reasons for rejection include: information already published; duplicate information held elsewhere; is of a routine administrative nature that does not add value or understanding to other related records; or does not fit with the collecting themes in the “Collection & Acquisition Policy”. It would incur disproportionate cost to collate and publish all information related to these appraisal decisions. However, the relevant files containing these decisions can be made available for consultation in the Archives’ searchroom on request.

A record is not kept of speculative offers received from external sources but not pursued, which are few in number. Details are only kept of the acquisition of an external record or collection once a decision to acquire has been made; a decision based on the criteria set out in the “Collection & Acquisition Policy”.

Portcullis House

Joan Walley: To ask the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross, representing the House of Commons Commission, what recent risk assessment has been undertaken in respect of the tiled floors in bathroom and shower wet room facilities in Portcullis House; and if he will make a statement. [27775]

John Thurso: There is no record of a formal risk assessment having been undertaken in respect of the bathrooms and shower room facilities in Portcullis House. However, it is understood that staff reviewed the operation of these spaces shortly after the building opened and noted that there was a risk of users with wet, bare feet slipping on the floor. Bath mats are therefore provided.

Portcullis House: Fire Escapes

Joan Walley: To ask the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross, representing the House of Commons Commission, what recent risk assessment has been undertaken of fire safety procedures in Portcullis House in respect of signposting to stairways; and if he will make a statement. [27720]

John Thurso: Following the introduction of the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 a fire risk assessment of Portcullis House was carried out in 2006. This assessment deals, among other things, with signposting. A periodic review of the fire risk assessment has been carried out each year since 2006. A further periodic review is due to be carried out during December 2010.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

Alternative Vote: Referendums

Tom Greatrex: To ask the hon. Member for South West Devon, representing the Speaker’s Committee on the Electoral Commission, whether the ballot papers for the (a) proposed referendum on the alternative vote and (b) elections to the Scottish Parliament in 2010 have been tested for acceptability to voters by the Electoral Commission. [28303]

Mr Streeter: The Electoral Commission has informed me that the designs for the ballot papers for the proposed referendum on the voting system for UK parliamentary elections and the Scottish Parliament elections are prescribed in legislation introduced by the UK Government.

The Commission has not undertaken user-testing of the design of the ballot paper for the proposed referendum, although it undertook extensive user-testing research on the wording of the question that will appear on the ballot paper as part of its assessment of the question to be asked at the referendum.

The Commission has further informed me that it has not undertaken user-testing on the design of ballot papers for the Scottish Parliament elections, although it has made recommendations to the Scotland Office that it should undertake user-testing of the proposed designs in line with the Commission’s “Making your mark” guidance.

Tom Greatrex: To ask the hon. Member for South West Devon, representing the Speaker’s Committee on the Electoral Commission, what assessment the Electoral Commission has made of the compliance with its guidelines of the ballot papers for the (a) referendum on the alternative vote and (b) elections to the Scottish Parliament in 2010 in respect of those with visual impairments. [28305]

Mr Streeter: The Electoral Commission has informed me that it published design guidance (‘Making your mark’) for policy-makers aimed at improving the usability and accessibility of voter materials, including ballot papers, in October 2009. The “Making your mark” guidance is aimed at addressing a wide range of voters’ needs, including the needs of voters with visual impairments, and was developed with input from accessibility and disability awareness groups including the RNIB.

The Commission highlighted in its briefing for parliamentarians at second reading of the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill its concern that the prescribed forms for voters, including the ballot paper for the proposed referendum on changing the voting system for UK parliamentary elections, had not been designed in accordance with the “Making your mark” guidance. The Bill has since been amended to

allow the Chief Counting Officer to specify changes to certain forms to improve the accessibility of the voting process, but this would not extend to the design of the ballot paper.

The Commission has further informed me that it recommended, in response to the UK Government's consultation on the draft Scottish Parliament (Elections etc.) Order 2010, that the design of the ballot paper should be revised in line with its "Making your mark" guidance and user-tested to ensure it could be easily understood by the electorate.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Africa: Agriculture

Heidi Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent discussions he has had with his counterparts in African states on the commitment to spend 10 per cent. of GDP on agriculture made at Maputo in 2003. [28030]

Mr O'Brien: The Secretary of State and I routinely discuss factors affecting economic growth and food security whenever we meet our African counterparts. UK Government officials also participate in twice yearly meetings of the Comprehensive African Agriculture Development Programme. We use these meetings, and our country level work, to review the programme with the African Union and member states, and urge progress towards the Maputo productivity and expenditure targets.

Agriculture: Research

Nic Dakin: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent discussions his Department has had on replenishment of funding for the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research. [27920]

Mr O'Brien: The UK is a founding member and among the top four donors of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR). In 2009-10 the Department for International Development (DFID) contributed about 8% of the total CGIAR budget and has been leading a change process that is bringing about far reaching reform of the organisation.

DFID has held discussions with a range of external stakeholders, including UK-resident CGIAR Centre Board Chairs and Members, bilateral donors, the European Commission (EC), the European Initiative for Agricultural Research for Development (EIARD), National Research and Extension Systems (NARES), the Global Forum for Agricultural Research (GFAR), the World Bank (WB) and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), on how best to harmonise funding for greater research focus on priority issues of climate change, poverty, food security and nutrition.

The reformed CGIAR has established a global trust fund governed by a Fund Council, on which DFID has a seat. The Council will make funding allocations to priority research programmes proposed by the Consortium of CGIAR Centres. From this financial year onwards DFID's contribution will go directly to the CGIAR Fund rather than to specific Centres and programmes as has been the case in the past.

Nic Dakin: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps his Department is taking to support (a) agricultural research and (b) extension needs in respect of the very poorest and most marginalised smallholder farmers in the developing world. [27921]

Mr O'Brien: The Department for International Development (DFID) focuses its agricultural research on priority issues related to agriculture and natural resource management for poor people and smallholders.

The current agriculture research portfolio is built around four main components; providing core support to international research to deliver high quality and effective international public goods to tackle poverty reduction and achieve sustainable growth; getting the outcomes of research into widespread use, through national research and extension systems (NARES), NGOs, the private sector and other partnerships; investing in regional research programmes based in Africa and South Asia; and working in partnerships to take forward advanced research in order to address major research objectives of relevance to poor people, such as climate change, new pests and diseases. This involves targeting and harnessing scientific excellence, and linking this to global partners.

Nic Dakin: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent discussions his Department has had on the role of UK institutions and non-governmental organisations in meeting the need for research tailored to the needs of the most marginal smallholder farmers. [27922]

Mr O'Brien: The Department for International Development (DFID) has recently discussed and agreed a new programme of research with the UK Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC). This programme aims to develop crop varieties which are drought and disease resistant, as well as new production methods relevant to smallholders in Sub-Saharan African and South Asia.

DFID has also engaged in promoting the potential role of non-government organisations (NGOs) in scaling up vitamin enriched crops in Africa. This process has included discussions on the role of NGOs in working with smallholders to select new crop varieties relevant to their needs, and the widespread dissemination of a new vaccine for East Coast Fever in East Africa.

At the 2010 Global Conference on Agricultural Research for Development (GCARD), officials also discussed the research and extension priorities of smallholders and marginalised farmers in developing countries with a wide range of stakeholders. A roadmap was developed that lays out priority actions to improve the participation of marginal smallholder farmers in research and extension work.

Departmental Conferences

Robert Halfon: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps he has taken since his appointment to reduce expenditure on conferences from budgets within his responsibility. [28360]

Mr Duncan: In accordance with the cross-government freeze on marketing and advertising spend, all conferences paid for by the Department for International Development (DFID) are reviewed on a case-by-case basis. This process assesses the business case for the conference, the value for money and potential cost saving opportunities for each conference we fund.

Departmental Contracts

Nicola Blackwood: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps his Department plans to take to encourage and support small and medium-sized enterprises and third sector organisations to compete for departmental contracts, in line with value-for-money policy, UK regulations and EU procurement directives. [28109]

Mr Duncan: The Department for International Development (DFID) currently advertises all contracts over the value of £101,000, a threshold set by the EU, on the European Journal website as well as on the DFID website. Suppliers are chosen on the basis of a competitive bidding process. Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and Third Sector organisations can access these opportunities by expressing their interest in these adverts.

In order to improve access to DFID contracts for all suppliers, DFID is in the process of launching a supplier portal. The portal will allow suppliers to register their company information (including whether they are an SME or Third Sector organisation), view opportunities that DFID is currently tendering and receive automated alerts of competitions in their markets of interest. We plan to launch this new facility, which will be available

free of charge, in early 2011. Further information and updates can be found on the procurement pages of DFID's website:

www.dfid.gov.uk

Departmental Manpower

Heidi Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development (1) how many of his Department's staff at each grade (*a*) in the UK and (*b*) at each overseas office are working on agriculture programmes; [28031]

(2) how many staff at each grade based (*a*) in the UK and (*b*) at each overseas office have agricultural training; [28032]

(3) how many of his Department's staff at each grade based (*a*) in the UK and (*b*) at each overseas office have agricultural experience. [28033]

Mr O'Brien: The Department for International Development supports numerous and diverse programmes addressing food security or agricultural development, involving many staff from a range of professional backgrounds. To determine the extent of agricultural related training and experience among all these staff would incur disproportionate cost.

However, I can confirm DFID has two Senior Civil Service positions and a group of professional livelihoods advisers (currently 57) who are required to have specific expertise and experience in agricultural or rural development, food security, agricultural adaptation to climate change and related livelihoods issues. They must have a minimum of five years relevant experience and a higher degree in a relevant subject. The number of livelihoods staff employed at each civil service grade and their location are provided in the following table.

<i>Number of livelihoods advisers</i>	<i>DFID grade (Traditional Civil Service grade)</i>	<i>Location</i>	
2	Senior Civil Service	UK	2
22	A1 (G6)	UK	11
		Overseas	7
		EC/UN	4
34	A2 (G7)	UK	10
		Overseas	23
		EC	1
1	A2L (SEO)	Overseas	1

Heidi Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many agricultural staff his Department plans to recruit at each grade in the next 12 months; and in which country each will be based. [28034]

Mr O'Brien: The UK Government have committed to spend £1.1 billion on food security and agricultural development between 2009-10 and December 2012, through a combination of support for agricultural research, bilateral programmes and multilateral contributions. The number and deployment of staff resources required to deliver this commitment, including any recruitment needs, will be determined by the outcome of the ongoing reviews of the Department for International Development's (DFID's) bilateral, multilateral, policy and research

programmes. Recruitment is also subject to the current freeze and guidelines on external recruitment to the civil service.

Departmental Press: Subscriptions

Robert Halfon: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much his Department spent on press cuttings services in each year since 1997. [28145]

Mr Duncan: The requested information cannot be provided without incurring disproportionate cost. For details of expenditure in the last 12 months for which figures are available, I refer my hon. Friend to my answer of 23 November 2010, *Official Report*, column 227W.

Developing Countries: Climate Change

Zac Goldsmith: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if he will take steps to encourage multilateral development banks to provide further support for investment and lending for the purposes of adaptation to climate change. [28018]

Mr O'Brien: The Department for International Development (DFID) is working closely with all the multilateral development banks (MDBs) to ensure a clear results framework for all their activities, including climate adaptation, and to help the MDBs to build their understanding of, and capacity to deliver, good adaptation projects and outcomes. Recent replenishment negotiations between DFID and the MDBs will help to provide resources to further climate-related investment and lending to the poorest countries, including for adaptation. Further details of funding committed to the MDBs will be available on the conclusion of the Multilateral Aid Review.

Developing Countries: Health Services

Robert Halfon: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development pursuant to answer of 25 November 2010, *Official Report*, columns 389-90W, on developing countries: health services, by what means his Department plans to support the World Health Organisation to help countries implement the recommendations of the World Health Report. [28227]

Mr O'Brien: The Department for International Development (DFID) has agreed to provide technical assistance to support the World Health Organisation (WHO) in implementing the World Health Report. The technical assistance will be in the form of a senior health economist seconded by DFID for two years. DFID is also evaluating proposals to provide additional financial resources.

These resources will be used to provide direct assistance to developing countries wishing to implement pro-poor health financing reforms. WHO is anticipating a large increase in demand for this type of assistance following the recent publication of the World Health Report, and has approached DFID for this support due to our well-proven and valued track record of providing assistance in this area.

Robert Halfon: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what (a) financial, (b) advisory and (c) training assistance his Department provides to foreign countries to support the provision of health care free at the point of use through each (i) project and (ii) funding stream; what plans he has to evaluate the outputs and outcomes of that work; and if he will make a statement. [28228]

Mr O'Brien: The Department for International Development (DFID) is currently providing considerable support to a number of developing countries to enable them to provide some health services free at the point of delivery. These countries currently include Uganda, Zambia, Ghana, Burundi, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Malawi and Nepal. The type of support depends on the circumstances of the country concerned and may include budget support (Ghana, Uganda and Malawi), contributions to pooled

funds (Liberia), project funding (Sierra Leone and Burundi) and technical assistance (all of these countries).

DFID is monitoring the impact of these reforms by tracking levels of key service outputs, such as outpatient attendances and the number of babies delivered in health centres. We are also assessing the extent to which changes in these outputs are contributing to improved health outcomes for poor and vulnerable people.

DFID is currently reviewing all its aid programmes, including our support to the health sector, to ensure UK aid is effective, accelerates progress towards the millennium development goals and represents value for money. Details of DFID's future support to the health sector in our partner countries will be available on the conclusion of the Bilateral and Multilateral Aid Reviews early next year.

Developing Countries: Politics and Government

Dr Thérèse Coffey: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what consideration he has given to the merits of using a proportion of development aid to improve institutional governance of (a) tax authorities and (b) other authorities in developing countries. [28069]

Mr O'Brien: The Department for International Development (DFID) recognises the importance of better governance for poverty reduction and long-term development. We are strongly committed to building effective public authorities, particularly in conflict affected and fragile countries where capacity is often weak. This includes supporting citizens to demand more transparent and accountable government and improved service delivery.

Effective tax systems are at the heart of DFID's priorities to promote wealth creation, to build public accountability, and to enable the eventual "exit strategy from aid". Work in this area has delivered real and measurable results, generating significant additional resources for frontline basic services such as schools and primary healthcare. For example, DFID assistance to the Tanzania Revenue Authority helped increase the tax take from 12% of GDP in 2006 to 14.5% by 2007-08. In Uganda our support also contributed to additional revenue of £80 million over the period 2005-09.

Overseas Aid

Mr Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development which 10 non-governmental organisations received the highest levels of funding from his Department in the latest period for which figures are available; what restrictions were placed on the use of such funds in each case; and if he will make a statement. [28008]

Mr O'Brien: The 10 non-governmental organisations (NGO) that received the highest levels of funding from the Department for International Development (DFID) in financial year 2009-10 are as follows.

NGO	Total (£000)
British Red Cross	39,611
VSO	34,124
International Rescue Committee UK (IRC)	26,400

NGO	Total (£000)
Save The Children	25,551
OXFAM	23,646
Christian Aid	17,043
CARE International UK	12,005
International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF)	7,426
Overseas Development Institute	7,324
BBC World Service Trust	7,315

These NGOs have received this support through a variety of different DFID funding mechanisms. Details of the conditions attached to all funding to this group cannot be provided without incurring disproportionate cost. However, further details of all DFID projects, including those delivered by NGOs, can be found on the project database on DFID's website.

Each of DFID's funding channels for NGOs has different criteria and a specific application process. However once funding has been agreed there are a number of conditions that DFID applies to all NGOs. For example, they are required to provide quarterly financial reports, a copy of their annual audited accounts and annual reports detailing progress made against agreed objectives. Funds can only be used to support activities and objectives agreed with DFID. All NGOs are also required to produce a project evaluation and project completion reports.

The UK Government are introducing a new Aid Transparency Guarantee, which commits us to making our aid fully transparent to citizens in both the UK and developing countries, increasing accessibility and feedback, and pushing our international partners to follow our lead. Under this guarantee, DFID will publish full and detailed information on all funded projects and programmes

on the DFID website—in a standardised, accessible format so that this information can be freely used by third parties.

Philippines: Overseas Aid

Mr Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development which non-governmental organisations based in the UK receive financial support from his Department for activities in the Philippines; and if he will make a statement. [27967]

Mr Duncan: Through our centrally-funded civil society programme, the Department for International Development (DFID) currently supports Anti-Slavery International's work in the Philippines to prevent child labour and to protect, release and rehabilitate child workers and children at risk.

Mr Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much aid his Department allocated to the Philippines in each category in each year since 2000; and how much aid in each category it plans to allocate in 2011. [27978]

Mr Duncan: The Department for International Development (DFID) has no plans to allocate bilateral aid to the Philippines in 2011. In recent years the Philippines has received aid from DFID in response to humanitarian emergencies; from centrally funded projects by UK civil society organisations; to finalise projects dating from the 1990s under the Aid and Trade Provision; and through the Heads of Mission Small Projects Scheme.

Details of DFID's bilateral aid spending in the Philippines can be found in the annual publication Statistics on International Development, which is available on the DFID website and in the Library of the House. Figures for 2000-01 to 2009-10 are reproduced in the following table.

Funding type	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-10	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10
Humanitarian assistance	250	50	—	—	309	91	300	—	—	2,271
Multilateral organisation	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Not for profit organisation	206	79	199	119	147	163	181	299	13	—
Other bilateral aid	340	149	122	263	198	37	—	—	—	—
Other financial aid	241	3,855	789	1,606	945	1,883	143	12	-5	-2
Procurement of goods and services	—	14	67	55	22	10	—	11	12	9
Total	1,037	4,147	1,177	2,043	1,621	2,185	624	321	20	2,278

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Afghanistan: Equality

Ms Harman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Government of Afghanistan on the implementation of provisions on the recognition of equal treatment of men and women in the Afghan Constitution. [28518]

Alistair Burt: As my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary said to the House on 27 October,

"It is right to draw attention to the role of women in Afghan society and the importance of continuing to build it up in the future."

Our embassy officials in Kabul continue to press the Afghan Government to implement its national and international human rights commitments, including on the equal treatment of women and men.

We continue to provide support to the Afghan Government's Human Rights Support Unit, which opened on 29 September 2010, and to the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission. These two institutions play a key role in ensuring that the human rights of all Afghans are promoted and protected.

Burma: Prisoners

Gemma Doyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with his international counterparts on the imprisonment of Min Ko Naing in Burma. [28872]

Mr Jeremy Browne: The immediate and unconditional release of all prisoners of conscience in Burma remains one of the international community's long-standing demands. The UK was instrumental in ensuring that Min Ko Naing and other high profile political prisoners were specifically mentioned in the UN Human Rights Council resolution on Burma in March this year and the UN General Assembly 3rd Committee resolution on the human rights situation in Burma in November.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Mr Hague) discussed the issue of over 2,200 people still imprisoned for their political beliefs in Burma most recently with the Thai Foreign Minister on 29 November. My hon. Friend the Minister for Europe, the Member for Aylesbury (Mr Lidington) also raised our concern with EU Foreign Ministers at the Foreign Affairs Council in Brussels on 22 November.

The Government will continue to press for the release of Min Ko Naing and all other prisoners of conscience in Burma.

Departmental Written Questions

Mr Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent estimate he has made of the number of questions to his Department tabled in the (a) House of Commons and (b) House of Lords that remained unanswered after 10 working days as a result of observation of guidance on the timing of answers to similar questions tabled to more than one Department in the latest period for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [28494]

Mr Lidington: In the House of Commons, 28 questions out of a total of 789 tabled for ordinary written answer in this session up to 12 November 2010 took longer than 10 sitting days to answer and were also tabled to more than one Department. The reasons for the delay in answering will have varied for each question.

In the House of Lords, no questions tabled for written answer in this session up to 12 November 2010 took longer than 10 sitting days to answer and were also tabled to more than one Department.

Government Hospitality: Wines

Mr Watson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will review his decision not to publish the entries in the Government wine cellar database to take into account the determination of the Information Commissioner on the application of commercial confidentiality criteria to a request under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, reference FS50277632. [26389]

Alistair Burt: I can confirm that in light of the determination of the Information Commissioner, I will be reviewing the decision not to publish some details of the Government wine cellar's database.

Mr Watson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs from which wine (a) merchants and (b) producers his Department has purchased wine since his appointment. [26873]

Mr Bellingham [holding answer 29 November 2010]: Between 14 May and 23 November 2010, Government Hospitality purchased wines by the following merchants: Lea & Sandeman; John Armit Wines Ltd; Waitrose; Lay & Wheeler; Haynes Hanson & Clark; Jereboams; Berry Bros & Rudd; O. W. Loeb & Co. Ltd and Averys. It was sourced by the merchants from producers in the following countries: France, New Zealand, Australia and South Africa.

Mr Watson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many requests his Department has received since his appointment to publish a copy of the entries in the Government wine cellar database. [26875]

Mr Bellingham [holding answer 29 November 2010]: One, which was from the hon. Member.

Kashmir

Vernon Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with (a) the government of Pakistan and (b) the government of India on the future of Kashmir. [28423]

Alistair Burt: Officials in our high commissions in Islamabad and New Delhi regularly discuss India-Pakistan relations, including Kashmir, with the Governments of Pakistan and India. However the long standing position of the UK is that it is for Pakistan and India to find a lasting resolution to the situation in Kashmir, one which takes into account the wishes of the Kashmiri people. It is not for the UK to prescribe a solution or to mediate in finding one. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary reiterated this in the Foreign Affairs debate on 27 May and during his visit to Pakistan in June.

Vernon Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of (a) the political situation in Kashmir and (b) prospects for the future of Kashmir; and if he will make a statement. [28424]

Alistair Burt: Officials in our high commissions in New Delhi and Islamabad closely monitor the situation in Indian and Pakistan administered Kashmir. They regularly discuss the situation with the Governments of India and Pakistan and make clear our hope that they can make progress on the issue. We welcome the efforts that both sides are making towards constructive dialogue. However the long standing position of the UK is that it is for India and Pakistan to find a lasting resolution to the situation in Kashmir, one which takes into account the wishes of the Kashmiri people.

It is not for the UK to prescribe a solution or to mediate in finding one. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary reiterated this in the Foreign Affairs debate on 27 May and during his visit to Pakistan in June.

We continue to call for an improvement in the human rights situation on both sides of the Line of Control and for an end to external support for violence in Kashmir. UK funding supports human rights, conflict prevention and peace building efforts on both sides of the Line of Control.

Middle East: Armed Conflict

Guto Bebb: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports he has received on the acquisition of anti-aircraft missiles by Hamas; what discussions he has had with the Government of Israel on this issue; and if he will make a statement. [28485]

Alistair Burt: The UK regularly discusses the issue of arms smuggling with the Israeli Government. The details of these discussions are confidential. However, the UK continues to call for the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1860, including halting the smuggling of weapons to armed groups in Gaza and the need to ease the restrictions on Gaza's crossing points.

Morocco

Dr Murrison: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on what dates each Minister in his Department has (a) visited Morocco and (b) had a meeting to discuss issues related to Morocco since 1997. [28440]

Alistair Burt: I visited Morocco between 30 November and 2 December 2010.

Previous visits by Foreign and Commonwealth Ministers since 1997 include:

the hon. Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis), November 2009
Dr Kim Howells (former Member for Pontypridd) April 2008, June 2006 and July 2005

The right hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr Straw), February 2006

The right hon. Baroness Symons of Vernham Dean, January 2005, May 2004 and September 2003

The right hon. Member for Rotherham (Mr MacShane), December 2004

Mike O'Brien, (former Member for North Warwickshire) February 2004

As Minister with responsibility for our relations with Morocco, I have regular meetings to discuss the country. I am sure this was the case with previous Governments.

North Korea

Jonathan Reynolds: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the effects on international peace and stability of the recent actions of the government of North Korea. [28454]

Mr Jeremy Browne: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary strongly condemned North Korea for its unprovoked attack on Yeonpyeong Island on 23 November,

which has raised tensions and threatened security on the Korean Peninsula. Recent reports that North Korea has been developing a uranium enrichment facility are also deeply concerning. This is in clear violation of UN Security Council resolutions and poses a threat to the region.

Philippines: Homicide

John McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs whether he has had discussions with the Government of the Philippines on the killings at Maguindanao in the Southern Philippines on 23 November 2009; and if he will make a statement. [28217]

Mr Jeremy Browne: Both our ambassador in Manila and the EU presidency made statements strongly condemning the killings in Maguindanao on 23 November 2009, and conveying condolences to the families of the victims. We also called for urgent action to bring the perpetrators to justice.

Our ambassador to the Philippines met the chair of the Philippines Commission for Human Rights to discuss the situation and make our position clear.

UN Resolutions: Capital Punishment

Ms Bagshawe: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) what representations he made at UN level on the decision of the Third Committee of the UN General Assembly to delete the reference to sexual orientation from its resolution condemning extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions; [28127]

(2) what discussions he has had with his UN counterparts on the decision of the Third Committee of the UN General Assembly to delete the reference to sexual orientation from the resolution condemning extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions. [28924]

Mr Jeremy Browne: The Government were very disappointed that the reference to sexual orientation was removed from the UN General Assembly resolution on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions. Prior to the vote on this amendment, we made a statement objecting to the deletion of this reference:

“To accept this amendment would be to accept that this particularly vulnerable group of people do not deserve specific mention, perhaps even to suggest that they do not warrant the same protection from killings. To us this suggestion is an affront to equality and respect for human dignity.”

We voted against the amendment.

We are currently discussing the outcome of the resolution with like-minded countries. While we remain disappointed that the explicit mention of sexual orientation has been removed from language on “killings committed for any discriminatory reason”, we interpret the broad language which replaced it to include these types of killings, and will support the text as a whole in the plenary meeting of the UN General Assembly on that basis.

The Government continue to oppose violence and discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people in all circumstances. We will continue to

work bilaterally and through international organisations, including the UN, to promote and protect the rights of LGBT people.

Western Sahara: Human Rights

Mr Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had at the United Nations on the deployment of human rights monitors to Western Sahara. [28418]

Alistair Burt: The Government support the idea of greater transparency and independent verification of the human rights situation in Western Sahara. Discussions regarding human rights monitoring in Western Sahara need to explore all options and identify which organisation is best placed to deliver that function.

We remain in close touch with a range of partners on the question of human rights in Western Sahara, including at the United Nations.

Zimbabwe: Press Freedom

John McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent assessment he has made of the safety of journalists in Zimbabwe; and if he will make a statement. [28218]

Mr Jeremy Browne: Despite the substantial reduction in violence since the formation of the Inclusive Government, we continue to be concerned about politically-inspired human rights abuses perpetrated against journalists, as well as political and civil society activists. All forms of intimidation, harassment and arbitrary arrests are unacceptable. We advise British journalists intending to carry out any reporting or official photography in Zimbabwe to ensure that they have applied for the proper accreditation.

We remain concerned that the Zimbabwean parliament has not yet repealed repressive legislation and there has been little progress on judicial reform or establishing the rule of law. We continue to monitor the situation on the ground and urge all sides of government to observe the spirit as well as the letter of the Global Political Agreement full. We call regularly, both bilaterally and with EU member states, for an end to all such abuses and the restoration of internationally accepted human rights standards in Zimbabwe.

EDUCATION

Classroom Assistants: Manpower

Chris Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Education how many classroom assistants he expects to be employed in schools in each of the next five years. [24217]

Mr Gibb: The numbers of teachers and classroom assistants that schools employ in future years will, as now, be a matter for them to decide, according to local needs and subject to statutory requirements that infant class sizes will not exceed 30 pupils.

Departmental Food

Julian Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Education whether his Department has guidelines on ensuring that food used for his Department's official functions is of domestic origin. [25538]

Tim Loughton: The Department for Education has no formal guidelines on ensuring that food for official department functions is of domestic origin. This does not preclude the Department specifying to the supplier that, where practicable and within departmental spend guidelines, they should use food that is locally produced and sourced.

Education Maintenance Allowance

Richard Burden: To ask the Secretary of State for Education what plans his Department has to provide financial support to young people to encourage them to continue their education past the age of 16. [24948]

Mr Gibb: As the Chancellor of the Exchequer, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne) announced on 20 October 2010, *Official Report*, columns 949-65, we are replacing the education maintenance allowance (EMA) scheme, from September 2011, with an enhanced discretionary learner support fund. We have taken this decision because the evidence suggests that around 90% of the young people who receive EMA would still have participated in education if the scheme were not available.

Replacing EMA with an enhanced discretionary fund will mean that decisions about support will be made on the basis of a local assessment of the personal circumstances of individual students, enabling closer targeting of resource to individual young people who face a real financial barrier to participation.

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education what rights of appeal will be given to (a) students and (b) their parents whose applications for financial help under the Government's plans to replace the education maintenance allowance are refused. [24956]

Mr Gibb: We will replace the education maintenance allowance with an enhanced discretionary learner support fund, so that schools, colleges and training organisations can more effectively target support to those individual students that they assess as in most need.

We will consult with schools and colleges before finalising arrangements for the new scheme, including any routes of appeal. Under current arrangements for discretionary learner support funding it is for the school, college or training organisation to set out their procedures for students to appeal.

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education what meetings he has had with head teachers to discuss his plans to replace the education maintenance allowance; and who was present at each such meeting. [24974]

Mr Gibb: The Government took the decision to end the education maintenance allowance (EMA) on the basis of evaluation and other research evidence which indicates that the scheme does not effectively target

those young people who need financial support to enable them to participate in education and training. In finalising the enhanced discretionary learner support scheme that will replace EMA the Department will consult with schools, colleges and training organisations.

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education whether he intends to produce guidance for head teachers and college principals on the criteria which should be used to allocate the money they receive under the Government's plans to replace the education maintenance allowance. [24976]

Mr Gibb: The enhanced fund will build on the current discretionary learner support funds, which many schools, colleges and training organisations already use very effectively. They are better placed than Government to target support to individual students who have most need of it to continue in education.

The Department intends to consult with schools, colleges and training providers about the arrangements for the enhanced discretionary learner support fund, including any guidance that may be provided.

Education Maintenance Allowance: Birmingham

Richard Burden: To ask the Secretary of State for Education what assessment he has made of the effects of removing education maintenance allowance on disadvantaged young people in Birmingham. [24949]

Mr Gibb: We are committed to making sure that every young person remains in education or training until they are 18. Where young people need extra support to realise their potential we will ensure that services are in place to support the most vulnerable.

In reaching the decision to end Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) we have looked closely at evaluation evidence and other research, which indicates that the scheme does not effectively target those young people who need financial support to enable them to participate in education. The evidence suggests that around 90% of the young people who receive EMA would still have participated in education if the scheme were not available.

From 2011/12, EMA will be replaced by an enhanced learner support fund that will be administered by schools and colleges themselves, targeting those young people who face a real financial barrier to participation.

Education Maintenance Allowance: Erith

Teresa Pearce: To ask the Secretary of State for Education how many students in Erith and Thamesmead constituency claimed education maintenance allowance in each of the last five years. [23912]

Mr Gibb: This is a matter for the Young People's Learning Agency (YPLA) who operate the education maintenance allowance for the Department for Education. Peter Lauener the YPLA's chief executive, will write to the hon. Member with the information requested and a copy of his reply will be placed in *Hansard* and the House Libraries.

Free School Meals

John McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education (1) what estimate he made of the number of pupils in each constituency who were eligible to receive free school meals in year 11 who went on to (a) sixth form college, (b) a further education college, (c) employment-based training, (d) full-time employment, (e) part-time employment, (f) part-time education or training and (g) economic inactivity in each of the last five years; [24709]

(2) what estimate he made of the number of pupils in each constituency who were eligible to receive free school meals in year 11 who (a) went on to study A-levels, (b) undertook an apprenticeship and (c) participated in other forms of education or training in each of the last five years. [24710]

Mr Gibb: The information requested, providing estimates of the activities of young people who had been in receipt of free school meals (FSM) in year 11, by local authority, for each year between 2004/05 and 2008/09 has been placed in the House Libraries. The information is based on what they were doing at academic age 16, normally the first year after completing compulsory education. The source of these estimates is the Young People's Matched Administrative Dataset (YPMAD). The YPMAD cannot be used to produce robust estimates of participation at constituency level, so local authority figures are provided. This source cannot provide information on either employment or economic status.

Chris Skidmore: To ask the Secretary of State for Education (1) how many pupils eligible for free school meals were entered for GCSEs in (a) physics, (b) chemistry, (c) biology and (d) three separate sciences in each local authority in 2009; [24239]

(2) how many pupils eligible for free school meals were entered for a modern language GCSE in each local authority in 2009. [24240]

Mr Gibb: The information requested has been placed in the House Libraries.

New Schools Network

Lisa Nandy: To ask the Secretary of State for Education what responsibilities he has assigned to (a) the free schools group in his Department and (b) the New Schools Network in respect of free schools. [24758]

Mr Gibb: The Free Schools Group (FRG), situated within the Infrastructure and Funding Directorate of the Department, is responsible for all aspects of free schools policy and implementation. The FRG is, for example, working with groups wishing to join the first wave of free schools. Informed by its work with these early groups, supporting them through the process, the FRG is developing policy for future free schools. The FRG is also working with those groups that have started the business case and plan stage and will support them through the process, up to and including the opening of the new school.

The New Schools Network is an independent charitable organisation that is funded by the Department to offer support to individuals and groups interested in setting up a new school.

Lisa Nandy: To ask the Secretary of State for Education what advice he received from officials in his Department on the New Schools Network prior to awarding it a grant to administer advice on free schools. [24759]

Mr Gibb: My right hon. Friend received a range of advice from officials in respect of the awarding of a grant to New Schools Network, including finance, procurement and legal advice.

Schools: Admissions

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for Education what information local authorities are required to provide to his Department on the number of children resident in their areas who do not have school places. [26365]

Mr Gibb [*holding answer 25 November 2010*]: The Department does not collect information on the number of children in a local authority that have not been allocated a school place. It is the responsibility of each local authority to manage the supply and demand for primary and secondary school places in its area and to secure a place for every child of statutory school age who wants one.

Schools: North Yorkshire

Julian Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Education how many complaints he has received on the consultation process relating to the schools reviews being undertaken by North Yorkshire county council. [25539]

Mr Gibb: Decisions on school reorganisations are taken under the statutory local decision-making process. Consultation forms the first part of this process, and any responses or complaints about the consultation being carried out should be directed to the LA which is running the consultation and which will decide whether to move to the publication of proposals, and not the Secretary of State. I can however confirm that to date seven pieces of correspondence have been received by the Department about the consultation which North Yorkshire county council has conducted.

Teachers: Further Education

Mr Graham Stuart: To ask the Secretary of State for Education whether he plans to allow further education lecturers to teach in maintained schools. [25772]

Mr Gibb: Schools may already employ suitably skilled and experienced staff with a further education background as instructors, provided that no suitable qualified or trainee teacher is available to the school to fill the post.

Teachers: Manpower

Chris Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Education how many teachers he expects to be employed by schools in each of the next five years. [24220]

Mr Gibb: The numbers of teachers and classroom assistants that schools employ in future years will, as now, be a matter for them to decide, according to local needs and subject to statutory requirements that infant class sizes will not exceed 30 pupils.

Teachers: Pay

Iain Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Education whether the freeze on public sector salaries applies to progress on pay spines for teachers. [24423]

Mr Gibb: There are no changes planned to the pay progression provisions within the School Teachers' Pay and Conditions Document as a result of the Government's announcement in the emergency Budget of a two-year freeze to public sector pay.

Teachers have benefitted from a three-year pay deal which has seen increases of 2.45%, 2.3% and 2.3% with the last increase being paid from September 2010. The pay freeze will take effect from September 2011 for teachers but will not alter provisions for progression through the pay scales.

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Audit Commission: Marketing

Mr Burley: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government how many and what types of gift products the Audit Commission purchased from (a) the Purple Company (UK) and (b) Giftpoint in each of the last three financial years; and at what cost to the public purse. [27911]

Robert Neill: This is an operational matter for the Audit Commission and I have asked the chief executive of the Audit Commission to write to my hon. Friend direct.

Letter from Eugene Sullivan, dated 6 December 2010:

Your Parliamentary Question has been passed to me to reply.

The Audit Commission has purchased a small number of products from the Purple Company in the last three financial years:

		£
11 May 2010	66 x Tombo Teamwear Sports T-shirts @ £11.70 each ¹	772.20
22 May 2010	6 x Tombo Teamwear Sports T-shirts @ £11.70 each ¹	70.20

¹ Reimbursed by staff.

Our office premises in Bristol houses a gym for use by staff. This is a member-supported club where an annual fee is charged for use of the gym and for any equipment purchased, including sports wear. The T-shirts purchased were paid for by members (staff) out of their annual membership fees. There is a nil cost to the Audit Commission.

Additionally there were 1000 Post-It notes and 50 T-shirts purchased as support material supplied at our National Managers' Conference in November 2008. It was used on the Human Resources and Audit stands.

		£
29 October 2008	1,000 x Post-It Notes + 50 T-shirts	990.00

The Audit Commission has purchased three gift products from Giftpoint in the last three financial years:

		£
21 January 2009	250 cotton shopper bags	290.00
21 January 2009	Ball pens	3,567.25
19 March 2009	250 cotton shopper bags	290.00

Cotton shopper bags (2 invoices totalling £580) were purchased for distribution at our events for Governors and Directors/Senior Management of Foundation Trusts and Mental Health Trusts. The ball pens were a promotional item at these and other events at which we exhibit.

Audit Commission: Pensions

David Mowat: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government when he plans to announce his proposals for the future of the Audit Commission's pension scheme. [27995]

Robert Neill: My Department is working with the Audit Commission and other partners to consider a range of options for the future of local audit following the disbandment of the Commission. This includes discussing options for the Commission's pension scheme with its Chair of Trustees and Commission colleagues, and we intend to make an announcement as soon as practicable.

Care Homes: Pets

Dr Thérèse Coffey: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government whether he is taking steps to ensure that residential homes give adequate consideration to granting requests from residents to take their pets into homes. [28394]

Paul Burstow: I have been asked to reply.

The Government appreciate that pets and companion animals can be a source of great comfort to their owners. We would certainly encourage residential care providers to give careful consideration to granting requests from residents to take their pets into care homes.

However, there are no plans to issue directions to residential care providers. This is a complex matter; there are many, sometimes competing issues to consider. For example, care home premises may not necessarily be suitable for the keeping of pets, or certain kinds of pet. The wishes of all residents must be taken into account; some may not wish to share their environment with animals. Residents who are frail or in poor health may not be able to care for their pets properly, however much they might wish to.

The Government consider that the only practically workable approach is to allow care providers the freedom to decide, in the light of individual local circumstances, whether or not to permit residents to keep pets.

Departmental Postal Services

Brandon Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what the monetary value was of contracts between his Department and its predecessors and (a) Post Office Ltd and (b) Royal Mail in (i) 1997-98 and (ii) each year since 2004-05. [24907]

Robert Neill: The Department no longer hold details of the monetary value of contracts that may have been held with Post Office Ltd and Royal Mail in 1997-98.

Since 2004-05 the following amounts have been paid to Royal Mail in relation to postage:

Financial year	£
2004-05	901,275
2005-06	5,572
2006-07	297,524
2007-08	14,342
2008-09	9,175
2009-10	4,855
2010 (to October)	1,929

No payments have been made to Post Office Ltd.

It has been the Department's practice to ask its facilities management provider to sub-contract all postal services. Expenditure with Royal Mail is largely for transactional postal cost in outlying DCLG stations that do not have access to the facilities management arrangements. However in 2004-05 and 2006-07 the following amounts were paid to Royal Mail to support large projects:

Financial year	£
2004-05	893,696
2006-07	284,068

This breaks down as follows:

Financial year	Project	£
2004-05	Elected Regional Assemblies	377,062
	Mailing on Fire Safety	180,000
	Elected Regional Assembly Door Drop Leaflet.	169,736
	Elected Regional Assemblies	117,098
	Regional Assemblies (NE Durham House Mailer)	29,353
	Mailing on Fire Safety	20,447
	Total	893,696
2006-07	Fire and Rescue Service Postal Survey.	178,830
	Fire and Rescue Service Postal Survey.	105,238
	Total	284,068

Departmental Public Appointments

Caroline Flint: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government whether his Department issues internal guidance on the communication of decisions regarding appointments or reappointments of board members to public bodies. [28695]

Robert Neill: Decisions about ministerial appointments and reappointments to the boards of public bodies are taken in accordance with the Commissioner for Public Appointments' Code of Practice, which sets out requirements for communicating those decisions. There is no separate internal guidance issued on the communication of decisions regarding appointments or reappointments of board members to public bodies.

Caroline Flint: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what assessment he has made of his Department's compliance with the code of practice of the Commissioner for Public Appointments in respect of ministerial appointments to public bodies in relation to the decision not to reappoint Ms Jenny Watson to the Audit Commission. [28696]

Robert Neill: Decisions about reappointments to the Board of the Audit Commission were taken in accordance with the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments' Code of Practice.

English Regions Network: Finance

Mr Burley: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government if he will cease all funding to the English Regions Network; and how much the Network received from his Department and its predecessors in each year since its inception. [27313]

Robert Neill: The Department no longer provides funds to the English regions network. The following table sets the grants provided to the English regions network since it was established. The English regions network was the umbrella organisation for the regional assemblies.

	£
2001-02	1,000,000
2002-03	200,000
2003-04	200,000
2004-05	200,000
2005-06	200,000
2006-07	240,000
2007-08	229,000
2008-09	58,790
2009-10	60,000

EU Grants and Loans: North East

Catherine McKinnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what steps he is taking to align the proposed Regional Growth Fund with the North East England 2007-2013 European Regional Development Fund Competitiveness Programme. [29059]

Robert Neill: I can confirm that we intend to align the regional growth fund with the European regional development fund, as stated in the Local Growth White Paper "Local Growth: realising every place's potential", a copy of which is available in the Library of the House.

My officials are currently holding discussions with colleagues in the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills with a view to facilitating this. Organisations

in the north-east can apply for support from both funds, where the aims of their bids are eligible for support from both funds.

Catherine McKinnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what risk assessment his Department has undertaken of the potential effects of the abolition of One North East on the delivery of the North East England 2007-2013 European Regional Development Fund Competitiveness Programme; and what steps he has taken to mitigate any risks identified. [29118]

Robert Neill: We are currently considering the future arrangements for running European regional development fund programmes in England, after the abolition of the regional development agencies. As part of this consideration, we have carried out a detailed assessment of the implications of the change to new delivery arrangements and the mitigating measures needed to ensure that the programmes continue to be run in compliance with the EC regulations. We will make an announcement when the decision has been reached.

Fire Services

Vernon Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what assessment he has made of the likely effect on fire services of the outcome of the comprehensive spending review. [28409]

Robert Neill: An equality impact assessment will be published in due course. I also refer the hon. Member to my letter to fire authorities on the spending review, a copy of which is in the Library of the House.

Fire Services: Greater London

Teresa Pearce: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government pursuant to the answer of 22 November 2010, *Official Report*, column 50W, on fire services: Greater London, for what reasons he has had no discussions with the Chairman of the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority on the deployment of the 27 engines used to provide emergency fire cover during the recent strike. [28801]

Robert Neill: No discussions on this matter were requested and none were sought. All operational decisions on the deployment of assets, including fire engines, are the responsibility of London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority, and not central Government.

Fire Services: Pay

Mr Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what estimate he has made of the number of firefighters who will be affected by the public sector pay freeze. [29065]

Robert Neill: Decisions about firefighter pay are for fire and rescue authorities. However, we would expect all local authorities to exercise pay restraint in keeping with the central Government public sector pay freeze announced in the emergency Budget.

Homelessness: North West

Tim Farron: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government how many people have been recorded as homeless in (a) Cumbria, (b) the North West and (c) each parliamentary constituency in Cumbria since 1979. [27980]

Grant Shapps: Summary tables giving the number of households accepted as owed a main homelessness duty, the number of households in temporary accommodation arranged by each local authority and rough sleeper counts and estimates as far back as each series is available have been placed in the Library of the House.

Information about local authorities' discharge of their duties under homelessness legislation is collected on quarterly PIE returns. Summary information about English local housing authorities' actions under the homelessness legislation (part 7 of the Housing Act 1996) is collected at local authority level, and published by the Department in the quarterly Statistical Release on Statutory Homelessness, available both in the Library of the House and via the DCLG website:

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/housing/housingresearch/housingstatistics/housingstatisticsby/homelessnessstatistics/publicationshomelessness/>

Data collected include the number of households accepted by local housing authorities as eligible for assistance, unintentionally homeless and in priority need, and therefore owed a main homelessness duty (to secure that suitable accommodation is available). If a settled home is not immediately available, the authority must secure temporary accommodation until a settled home becomes available and this information is also collected. Information on acceptances and number of households in temporary accommodation at local authority level is available from 1997-98 onwards.

Information is also collected on rough sleeping. Since 1998, only councils in areas with a known, or suspected, rough sleeping problem were required to conduct an official rough sleeper count—which meant that only 70 councils submitted information to central Government. Figures published in July 2010 showed that under this previous method, on any given night there were 440 rough sleepers in England. However, when the remaining 256 councils provided estimates of the scale of the problem in their areas, this added a further estimated 807 rough sleepers—taking the national total to 1,247 rough sleepers on any given night.

Under new guidance all councils across England will now provide information on rough sleeping. This move follows consultation with homelessness charities and councils and is aimed at getting a clearer picture of the scale of the problem in each area so more targeted support can be provided to some of the most vulnerable in society.

Rough sleeping figures are published by the Department on the DCLG website:

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/corporate/statistics/roughsleepingcount2010>

The Department does not collect data on homelessness at parliamentary constituency level.

Local Enterprise Partnerships

Simon Kirby: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what progress he has made on the creation of local enterprise partnerships. [28782]

Robert Neill: On 28 October, the Government published their Local Growth White Paper, which set out their approach to achieving local economic growth by shifting power to local levels and helping to create the right conditions for growth and recovery. This included announcing the first 24 local enterprise partnerships which would proceed. These partnerships are now in the process of establishing their boards and local governance structures in line with local requirements.

Government will work with the relevant local authority and business partners in other parts of the country where no local enterprise partnership has been announced, in order to ensure future proposals allow all areas to progress, where civic leaders and business community wish to do this. I have asked my officials to engage directly with these local partners. Government will welcome revised proposals from these places and make further announcements as they become ready.

Local Government Finance

Steve Rotheram: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (1) whether he has sought the advice of the District Auditor on the appropriateness of the use by local authorities of cash reserves; [29041]

(2) if he will ensure that in circumstances in which local authorities reduce the level of funds held in reserve for contingencies his Department provides funding to match any shortfall arising from the realisation of the financial risks against which reserves had previously been earmarked. [29050]

Robert Neill: The use of a local authority's reserves is for each council to determine.

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my right hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Mr Pickles) said in a press notice on 30 November that it is sensible, as part of wider financial planning, for council treasurers to consider drawing on their reserves to address short term costs and pressures, such as necessary restructuring, and to invest now in order to realise savings in the longer term.

Local Government Finance: Liverpool

Steve Rotheram: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government if he will ensure that Liverpool city council receives a smaller percentage reduction in its grant income than more affluent local authorities. [29043]

Robert Neill: We will announce our proposals for the local government finance settlement for 2011-12 in the usual manner in due course.

Non-domestic Rates

Ms Bagshawe: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government how much was collected by each local authority in England in national non-domestic rates in each of the last three years for which figures are available; how much was received by each local authority in Revenue Support Grant in each of those years; and what the net income was for each local authority from these transactions. [28121]

Robert Neill: I have today placed in the Library of the House tables for 2007-08, 2008-09 and 2009-10 that give details of (a) how much was received by each local authority in England in redistributed national non-domestic rates, Revenue Support Grant and other grants including Police Grant and (b) how much was contributed to the national non-domestic rates pool by each local authority in England.

Details of the net income for each local authority from these transactions has not been included as it is not a meaningful figure. National non-domestic rates are collected by 326 authorities and paid into a central pool before being redistributed to 421 authorities.

Second Homes

Tim Farron: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government how many and what proportion of dwellings in each local authority area were registered as second homes for council tax purposes in each year since 1997. [27982]

Robert Neill: I have today placed in the Library of the House, a table containing details of the number and proportion of dwellings in each local authority area in England that were registered as second homes for council tax purposes since 2004. Information for previous years is not available.

The data are from a snapshot taken each year and are as recorded by each local authority in the council tax base returns submitted annually to the Department for Communities and Local Government.

Reliable estimates before 2004 are not available because there was no particular incentive for local authorities to distinguish between second homes and long-term empty homes on their council tax base forms. However, from April 2004, local authorities have had the discretion to set the council tax discount on properties considered to be second homes at between 50% and 10%.

Supporting People Programme

Emma Reynolds: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government whether there is any variation in the mechanism by which the level of the Supporting People grant is calculated by local authorities in different regions of England, including data in respect of additional needs. [28194]

Andrew Stunell: The Supporting People Programme grant has previously been allocated to top tier local authorities using the Supporting People Distribution Formula which takes account of population, level of deprivations, people at risk and other relevant needs data.

TRANSPORT

Accident Investigation

John McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what assessment he has made of the likely effects on the functions carried out by his Department's (a) Air Accident Investigation Branch, (b) Rail Accident Investigation Branch and (c) Marine Accident Investigation Branch of reductions to his Department's central administration budget; and if he will make a statement. [27043]

Mr Philip Hammond: The accident investigation branches (AIBs) do not form part of the Department's central administration budget as they are categorised as Programme expenditure.

We have however, carried out an assessment of potential productivity improvements in the AIBs which could be made without impacting their statutory functions. Our assessment shows that cost reductions can be made by focusing their activities more closely on their core safety role and through rationalising support functions and other efficiency improvements. This will include sharing facilities and equipment across the three AIB's wherever this is practical.

Airports: Security

Steve McCabe: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what timetable he has set for the introduction of his proposed new regulatory system for passenger security checks at airports. [21803]

Mr Philip Hammond: There is no finalised timetable for the introduction of a new regulatory system for passenger security checks at airports. The issuing of timing will be addressed in the forthcoming consultation.

Steve McCabe: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport with whom his Department plans to consult on his proposals for a new regulatory system for passenger security at airports; and if he will place in the Library (a) a copy of the consultation document and (b) a list of all consultees. [21805]

Mr Philip Hammond: The Department for Transport plans to consult widely with all stakeholders in accordance with the Government Code of Practice on Consultation. A copy of the consultation document including a list of all consultees will be placed in the Library when the consultation paper is published.

Departmental Consultants

John Woodcock: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what the (a) purpose and (b) nature was of the management consultancy for which his Department paid Interfleet (i) £106,817.12 on 13 May 2010 and (ii) £108,379.16 on 20 July 2010. [27144]

Mrs Villiers: Interfleet is contracted by the Department for Transport to provide specialist technical advice for the procurement of new trains required for the Thameslink Programme.

John Woodcock: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what the (a) purpose and (b) nature was of the legal advice for which his Department paid Freshfields £148,773.21 on 9 September 2010. [27145]

Mrs Villiers: Freshfields is contracted by the Department for Transport to provide specialist legal advice for the procurement of new trains required for the Thameslink Programme.

John Woodcock: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what the (a) purpose and (b) nature was of the legal advice for which his Department paid CMS Cameron (a) £269,116.77 on 31 August 2010, (b) £98,150.98 on 27 September 2010 and (c) £166,610.73 on 28 September 2010. [27146]

Mrs Villiers: The legal fees paid to CMS Cameron McKenna were in relation to advice provided by them on: the restructuring of the UK, French and Belgian interests in Eurostar into a standalone company on 1 September 2010; and on the sale of HS1 and associated properties and lease arrangements that was announced on 5 November 2010.

John Woodcock: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what the (a) purpose and (b) nature was of the management consultancy for which his Department paid the Nichols Group £145,593.02 on 18 May 2010. [27148]

Mrs Villiers: The majority of the payment to Nichols Group dated 18 May 2010 was for specialist consultancy services in respect of programme management, and commercial and franchise negotiations required as part of the Intercity Express Programme (IEP). The IEP Programme was started by the previous Administration, and sought to replace Britain's fleet of high speed trains, originally deployed by British Rail in the 1970s and 1980s.

In addition, £22,980.80 of the payment was made in respect of management consultancy on the Strategic Roads Investment Programme and £18,485.69 on the Pendolino Lengthening Programme.

John Woodcock: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what the (a) purpose and (b) nature was of the management consultancy for which his Department paid Jacobs Engineering (a) £149,911.38 on 21 June 2010, (b) £135,940.96 on 15 July 2010, (c) £112,538.46 on 2 August 2010 and (d) £114,159.35 on 3 September 2010. [27149]

Mrs Villiers: Jacobs Engineering UK Ltd is engaged jointly by the Department for Transport (DfT) and Transport for London (TfL) to carry out a 'project representative' function for the Crossrail project, in which the Government are directly investing £4.7 billion. Half of the costs paid by DfT are subsequently recovered from TfL.

The project representative provides technical advice and assurance on all aspects of the delivery of the Crossrail project to both DfT and TfL. It is made up of a small team of specialists with expertise in many areas of large construction programmes including design, construction, procurement, commercial, risk management

and value engineering as well as specific competencies related to the scheme, including civil engineering, tunnelling, rolling stock, signalling, railway systems, and railway operations.

John Woodcock: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what the (a) purpose and (b) nature was of the management consultancy for which his Department paid Mott MacDonald (a) £142,963.63 on 26 May 2010 and (b) £187,567.16 on 27 May 2010. [27150]

Mrs Villiers: The payments to Mott MacDonald on the above dates were for specialist advice and consultancy services in respect of the commercial and franchise negotiations required as part of the Intercity Express Programme (IEP) during the last two financial periods of the 2009-10 financial year.

The IEP programme was started by the previous Administration and sought to replace Britain's fleet of high speed trains, originally deployed by British Rail in the 1970's and 1980's.

John Woodcock: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what the (a) purpose and (b) nature was of the management consultancy for which his Department paid PricewaterhouseCoopers (a) £162,040.95 on 20 May 2010 and (b) £102,590.87 on 16 June 2010. [27151]

Mrs Villiers: PricewaterhouseCoopers is contracted by the Department for Transport to provide specialist financial advice for the procurement of new trains required for the Thameslink Programme.

Departmental Grants

Anas Sarwar: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) what grants have been awarded by his Department in 2010-11 to date; what grants he plans to award in each of then next two years; what the monetary value is of each such grant; and to which organisations such grants are made; [27669]

(2) how much funding his Department has allocated in grants for (a) 2009-10 and (b) 2010-11; and how much such funding he plans to allocate for 2011-12. [27672]

Norman Baker [holding answer 30 November 2010]: The Department for Transport allocated £9.1 billion to grants in 2009-10, and estimates that it will allocate £8.4 billion to grants in 2010-11.

Year to date grant payments for 2010-11 are included in the data available on the Department for Transport's website, which details monthly spend as part of the Government's transparency agenda. This can be found at:

<http://www.dft.gov.uk/about/procurement/contracts/spending>

Grant expenditure can be identified from the 'expense type' category.

Detailed information relating to grant allocations for 2011-12 and 2012-13 is not currently available, but announcements have been made about high level grant budgets for the spending review period. These can be found in the Department for Transport's press notice of 20 October 2010, at:

<http://nds.coi.gov.uk/clientmicrosite/Content/Detail.aspx?ClientId=202&NewsAreaId=2&ReleaseID=416118&SubiectId=36>

Departmental Press: Subscriptions

Mr Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how much (a) his Department and (b) the non-departmental public bodies for which he is responsible

spent on press cuttings services in each of the last 12 months. [25482]

Norman Baker: The cost of press cuttings services to the Department for the 12 months from October 2009 to September 2010 is provided in the following table.

(a) Cost of press cuttings services to the Department for Transport

	<i>DFT Central</i>	<i>Driving Standards Agency</i>	<i>Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency</i>	<i>Highways Agency</i>
£				
<i>2009</i>				
October	14,806.77	352.43	Nil	3,140.57
November	12,662.02	340.85	220.45	6,082.86
December	14,631.88	385.38	230.25	4,935.48
<i>2010</i>				
January	14,574.21	352.89	673.60	6,133.48
February	12,538.01	412.28	205.75	3,894.38
March	14,620.17	652.46	144.50	3,754.39
April	13,990.25	471.66	161.65	2,233.25
May	11,824.49	438.89	Nil	2,032.17
June	9,246.44	406.01	Nil	1,776.34
July	10,197.06	527.96	Nil	3,848.82
August	9,000.15	557.35	Nil	4,202.87
September	9,240.35	778.29	Nil	1,616.89

The remaining executive agencies—the Government Car and Despatch Agency, the Maritime and Coastguard Agency, the Vehicle Certification Agency, and the Vehicle and Operator Services Agency—have not procured press cuttings services in the 12 months from October 2009 to September 2010.

(b) Cost of press cuttings services to the Department for Transport's non-departmental public bodies could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Departmental Security

John McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport whether security functions carried out for his Department by TRANSEC will be affected by reductions to his Department's central administration budget; and if he will make a statement. [27042]

Mr Philip Hammond: TRANSEC does not form part of the Department's central administration budget as it is funded out of Programme expenditure.

During the spending review we carried out a thorough reassessment of the most cost-effective way of providing transport security in the future. This will result in internal efficiencies and other changes which will produce cost savings while maintaining essential security functions.

Departmental Sponsorship

Priti Patel: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what expenditure (a) his Department and (b) its non-departmental public bodies incurred on sponsorship in each year since 1997 for which figures are available. [27529]

Norman Baker: I am afraid that the information requested can be provided only at disproportionate cost. A marketing and communications freeze was introduced in May 2010.

Dover Harbour Board

Maria Eagle: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport pursuant to the answer to the right hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East of 22 November 2010, *Official Report*, column 34W, whether the proposal from Dover People's Port to buy the assets of the Dover Harbour Board is also under consideration; and upon what basis his decision will be made. [26886]

Mike Penning [*holding answer 29 November 2010*]: The Decision Minister, my right hon. Friend the Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mrs Villiers), is currently considering the proposed transfer scheme from Dover Harbour Board, as well as the representations received from third parties. The Decision Minister will make her decision having regard to the factors contained in the Department's guidance note on the procedure for the voluntary sale of trust ports, a copy of which is in the Library of the House.

I have written to the Dover People's Port Trust Limited to explain that, until there has been a decision on the transfer scheme, it would be premature for any offers for the Port of Dover to be considered.

Maria Eagle: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what legal advice he has received from his Department on whether primary legislation is required before any sale of the assets of the Dover Harbour Board may proceed; and if he will make a statement. [26966]

Mike Penning [*holding answer 29 November 2010*]: The Government do not normally disclose their legal advice.

The Ports Act 1991 was used in the 1990s to achieve a transfer in ownership of several major trust ports.

The Act remains in force. The Department for Transport produced guidance earlier this year as to how it expects applications made under that Act by relevant harbour authorities to be brought forward and processed. A copy of the guidance is in the Library of the House.

Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency

Mr Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what (a) material, (b) administrative and (c) postage costs the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency incurred in issuing tax discs in the latest year for which figures are available. [28870]

Mike Penning: The latest figures for the cost of issuing tax discs this year (2010-11) are.

	£
Material	5,037,493
Administrative	48,457,495
Postage	13,746,012

Mr Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what posts exist in the tax disc section of the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency; and what salary is payable to holders of each such post. [28871]

Mike Penning: Around 45 million tax discs are issued annually, raising £5.6 billion in vehicle excise duty for the Exchequer. Tax discs are sold through three channels. Post offices account for 57% of applications; the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency's electronic vehicle licensing internet and telephone system accounts for around 41% of applications. The remaining 2% of tax disc applications are handled by the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency's local offices.

As well as staff employed in the local office network and supporting the electronic vehicle licensing system, the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency also employs staff who are involved in the procurement, despatch and the refund of tax discs. None of these staff work solely on the issuing of tax discs. These staff are mainly at the administrative grades. DVLA's administrative pay structure is:

	Minimum	Target
£		
<i>National</i>		
Pay band 1	14,000	15,200
Pay band 2	16,735	18,000
<i>London</i>		
Pay band 1	17,486	18,895
Pay band 2	20,730	21,655

Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency: Local Government

Mr Watson: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport which local authorities have been (a) banned and (b) suspended from accessing the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency database in the last 12 months; and if he will make a statement. [23823]

Mike Penning [*holding answer 12 November 2010*]: No local authority has been banned from accessing the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency's vehicle database within the last 12 months. The following authorities have been temporarily suspended during the last 12 months from requesting information from the database until they could demonstrate full compliance with the strict terms and conditions for access to data.

Ashfield District Council
 Aylesbury Vale District Council
 Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council
 Bedford Borough Council
 Birmingham City Council
 Blackpool Borough Council
 Blaenau Gwent Borough Council
 Bournemouth Borough Council
 Bracknell Forest Council
 Breckland Council
 Bristol City Council
 Broadlands District Council
 Bromley L B
 Buckingham County Council
 Burnley Borough Council
 Cambridge City Council
 Cannock Chase Council
 Carlisle City Council
 Carmarthen Council
 Carmarthenshire County Council
 Central Bedfordshire Council
 Chiltern District Council
 Chorley Borough Council
 City of York
 Cornwall Council
 Croydon Council
 Cumbria County Council
 Dacorum Borough Council
 Dudley Council
 Durham County Council
 Ealing Council
 East Dorset District Council
 East Riding of Yorkshire Council
 Erewash Borough Council
 Fenland District Council
 Forest Heath District Council
 Gloucester City Council
 Guildford Borough Council
 Hampshire Council (East)
 Hampshire County Council
 Hartlepool
 Hastings Council
 Hereford Council
 Ipswich Borough Council

Kent County Council
 Kirklees District Council
 Leicester City Council
 Lewes Council
 London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham
 London Borough Epping Forest
 London Borough Newham
 Manchester City Council
 Mendip District Council
 Middlesbrough
 Milton Keynes Council
 N E Lincolnshire
 New Forest District Council
 Newcastle upon Tyne
 North Kesteven District Council
 Northumberland
 Oldham Council
 Pendle Borough Council
 Poole Council
 Portsmouth City Council
 Ribble Borough Council (South)
 Ribble Valley Borough Council
 Richmond on Thames
 Salford County Council
 Selby District Council
 Shropshire Council
 Somerset County Council
 South Cambridgeshire Council
 South Lakeland
 Southampton Council
 Southend on Sea Borough Council
 St Albans City and District Council
 St Helens Council
 Stockton on Tees
 Stroud District Council
 Surrey Heath Borough Council
 Three Rivers District Council
 Warrington Borough Council
 Warwick District Council
 Watford Borough Council
 Wigan MBC
 Wiltshire Council
 Worcester County Council
 Wychavon District Council
 Wycombe District Council

Driving Tests

Jack Lopresti: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what steps he is taking to reduce the amount of time learner drivers have to wait to take a driving test. [26791]

Mike Penning: Waiting times across the country are currently higher than expected. The Driving Standards Agency (DSA) has a shortfall in the number of driving examiners required to deliver the demand for practical driving tests and this is being addressed through a programme of recruitment.

In addition, to help mitigate the impact of the current examiner shortfall, DSA has undertaken a number of actions to increase the number of tests it can deliver. These include:

(1) Offering out-of-hours tests (early mornings, evenings and weekends) at most locations;

(2) Having examiner managers do an increased amount of testing.

Driving: Eyesight

Mr Leech: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will take steps to raise awareness among drivers (a) of the risks inherent in driving with poor vision and (b) that driving with vision below the required standard is an offence; and if he will make a statement. [26773]

Mike Penning: The Department for Transport takes appropriate opportunities to raise awareness of the risks inherent in driving with poor vision.

Driving licence application forms and associated leaflets remind drivers about the ongoing requirement to be able to meet the eyesight standard. Specific information is available on the DirectGov website. Advertisements also appear on the motoring pages reminding drivers that driving while unable to meet the appropriate eyesight standard is an offence. This advice is also included in the Highway Code that provides essential advice for all drivers. The driving test also requires candidates to demonstrate their ability to meet the required eyesight standard.

Ferries: Fuels

Mr Bain: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what assessment he has made of the extent of the use of alternative fuels in the river ferry sector. [25917]

Mike Penning: The Government have not made an assessment of the extent to which alternative fuels are in use in the river ferry sector. The Maritime and Coastguard Agency has some knowledge of the application of alternative fuels in connection with its role as regulator. Currently this information is limited to a very small number of vessels that could be considered to be experimental.

We know that compressed natural gas is being used on ferries in Canada and the Norwegian Government have introduced a number of programmes for their fleet of coastal and fjord vehicle ferries, after the successful experience with the prototype GLUTRA.

Liquid biofuels are now being used by a number of river ferry operators. These are diluted into fuel at low concentrations and reduce the demand for fossil fuels. These types of fuel will be increasingly adopted for use on inland waterway vessels in Europe in the future.

Freight Facilities Grant

Cathy Jamieson: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how much funding his Department has allocated to the Freight Facilities Grant in each of the last five years. [26905]

Mike Penning: The value of the Freight Facilities Grant (FFG) awards made by the Department in each of the last five years was as follows:

	<i>Total value of awards¹ (£ million)</i>
2005-06 ²	0.9
2006-07 ²	3.2
2007-08	1.2
2008-09	1.8
2009-10	1.5

¹ Figures do not include awards made which were later declined, expired or were withdrawn.

² Includes awards made by the Department and the Strategic Rail Authority.

Cathy Jamieson: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what assessment his Department has made of the effect of the outcome of the comprehensive spending review on the future of the Freight Facilities Grant. [26907]

Mike Penning: No formal announcement on the future of the Freight Facilities Grant (FFG) scheme has yet been made by the Department for Transport. Following the spending review settlement, we are currently considering what budgets will be available across a number of the Department's smaller programmes (including FFG).

Cathy Jamieson: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what recent representations he has received on the Freight Facilities Grant scheme. [26908]

Mike Penning: The organisation 'Freight on Rail' made a representation to me on Freight Facilities Grants in May.

Great Western Railway: Electrification

Jessica Morden: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport when he plans to make an announcement on the proposed electrification of the Great Western line to South Wales. [26853]

Mrs Villiers: In his ministerial statement of 25 November 2010, *Official Report*, columns 52-54WS, the Secretary of State for Transport, my right hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr Hammond), confirmed that the Great Western main line between London and Didcot, Oxford and Newbury would be electrified. The extent of further electrification for intercity services on the Great Western main line is dependent on final decisions on the intercity train option that we choose.

My right hon. Friend also announced that the Department for Transport would be working with the Welsh Assembly Government to review the business case for electrification to Swansea.

Local Transport Plans

Jim Fitzpatrick: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what plans he has to estimate the effect on levels of walking and cycling in respect of his Department's objectives of the implementation of the second round of local transport plans (LTPs); and what methodology he plans to use to evaluate the effectiveness of LTP3 delivery. [26176]

Norman Baker: The coalition Government have set out their commitment to localism and to ending the top-down performance management of local authorities

by Whitehall. In July I announced that central Government will no longer review local authorities' progress against their Local Transport plans.

In the interests of transparency, and to enable local communities and other stakeholders to hold local transport authorities to account, the Department intends to continue publishing relevant statistics at local authority level as set out in the Transparency section of its Business Plan.

The Department of Health is also developing an outcomes framework for directors of public health to monitor the health and well-being of the local population, and a consultation document on appropriate indicators will be announced shortly.

Motor Vehicles: Insurance

Mr Watson: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many people his Department employs as part of the Motor Insurance Database's Continuous Insurance Enforcement Project Team. [26872]

Mike Penning [*holding answer 29 November 2010*]: The Department for Transport currently employs in the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency seven full-time equivalents in the Continuous Insurance Enforcement Project Team.

Railways: Fares

Brandon Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will take steps to align the timing of off-peak travel periods between different train operating companies. [25886]

Mrs Villiers: There are no plans at present to harmonise the definition of 'off-peak' for all train operators.

The Franchise Agreement allows individual train operators the flexibility to define what is 'off-peak' according to local conditions. We do not consider it appropriate to require all train operators to have the same off-peak periods as this could lead to many passengers being subject to restrictions at times when it was not necessary.

Railways: Standards

Andrew Gwynne: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport which 20 rail routes are with the highest levels of congestion. [25792]

Mrs Villiers: Information on rail overcrowding is currently published annually in aggregate form by the Office of Rail Regulation (ORR) within the National Rail Trends Yearbook, and is available on the ORR website:

www.rail-reg.gov.uk

The latest published data relate to passenger counts carried out by train operators in autumn 2009.

Rescue Services: Helicopters

Michael Dugher: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) what the evidential basis was for his Department's conclusion that the changes proposed to the resourcing of the search and rescue helicopter programme could be accommodated without initiating a new procurement process; [26671]

(2) what estimate his Department has made of the cost to the public purse of fully funding a de-militarised search and rescue helicopter programme from his Department's departmental expenditure limit; and if he will make a statement. [26672]

Mike Penning: The Government announced in June 2010 that the search and rescue helicopter project would be reviewed in the context of wider pressures on public spending. That review is still ongoing and it would be inappropriate to comment on any specific aspects of the project until decisions have been made on the way forward.

Roads: Accidents

Dr Poulter: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what progress the Government are making on developing road safety measures to reduce the frequency of minor accidents. [26502]

Mike Penning: Existing policies and trends have already delivered the safest roads in the world, with significant falls in all casualties, as well as deaths and the most serious injuries. The Department for Transport is making progress on initiatives to continue to reduce the frequency

of both major and minor accidents, including work on a new strategic framework for road safety and related measures.

Most recently we have produced the "Safe Place to Cross" toolkit aimed at six to eleven-year-olds and the innovative partnership between the THINK! team and four major football clubs.

We have also announced in September the Local Sustainable Transport Fund that will challenge local transport authorities outside London to develop packages of measures that support economic growth and reduce carbon in their communities as well as delivering cleaner environments, improved safety and increased levels of physical activity.

Tim Farron: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many (a) fatalities, (b) serious injuries and (c) other outcomes from road traffic accidents in (i) Cumbria and (ii) England were reported to his Department in each month of the last five years. [27981]

Mike Penning: The following table shows the number of casualties who were (a) killed, (b) seriously injured or (c) slightly injured in reported personal injury road accidents in (i) Cumbria and (ii) England, in each month, between 2005 and 2009.

Casualties in reported personal injury road accidents, by injury severity and month: Cumbria and England, 2005-09

Year	Month	Killed	England			Total	Killed	Cumbria		Total
			Serious	Slight	Serious			Slight		
2005	January	224	1,891	17,415	19,530	2	24	179	205	
	February	199	1,767	15,406	17,372	3	45	168	216	
	March	221	1,834	15,987	18,042	5	20	146	171	
	April	185	1,927	16,924	19,036	5	31	164	200	
	May	214	2,232	18,167	20,613	2	29	207	238	
	June	225	2,223	17,925	20,373	1	41	233	275	
	July	218	2,285	18,260	20,763	10	29	186	225	
	August	230	2,244	17,559	20,033	1	36	205	242	
	September	247	2,096	17,687	20,030	0	33	183	216	
	October	244	2,307	18,690	21,241	7	32	224	263	
	November	259	2,300	19,938	22,497	4	33	214	251	
	December	269	2,104	18,581	20,954	5	29	194	228	
	Total	2,735	25,210	212,539	240,484	45	382	2,303	2,730	
2006	January	200	1,945	15,892	18,037	3	13	160	176	
	February	223	1,755	14,791	16,769	4	9	150	163	
	March	173	1,826	15,783	17,782	3	27	159	189	
	April	213	1,851	14,926	16,990	3	23	144	170	
	May	198	2,097	17,096	19,391	3	21	156	180	
	June	232	2,278	16,578	19,088	10	27	181	218	
	July	223	2,337	17,843	20,403	7	29	203	239	
	August	240	2,056	16,505	18,801	9	34	180	223	
	September	243	2,126	17,742	20,111	6	30	194	230	
	October	264	2,172	18,228	20,664	2	20	187	209	
	November	229	2,269	18,358	20,856	2	34	226	262	
	December	257	2,144	17,284	19,685	7	18	196	221	
	Total	2,695	24,856	201,026	228,577	59	285	2,136	2,480	

Casualties in reported personal injury road accidents, by injury severity and month: Cumbria and England, 2005-09

Casualties

Year	Month	England				Cumbria			Total
		Killed	Serious	Slight	Total	Killed	Serious	Slight	
2007	January	209	2,040	16,213	18,462	2	32	171	205
	February	168	1,634	13,988	15,790	1	21	147	169
	March	205	1,934	15,919	18,058	4	33	169	206
	April	219	2,061	14,718	16,998	10	46	199	255
	May	218	1,975	16,937	19,130	1	15	169	185
	June	184	2,084	16,568	18,836	3	21	164	188
	July	202	2,186	17,015	19,403	5	15	163	183
	August	226	2,122	15,991	18,339	8	18	212	238
	September	220	2,106	16,097	18,423	3	20	167	190
	October	218	2,062	16,328	18,608	3	20	200	223
	November	220	2,159	17,323	19,702	4	19	186	209
	December	213	1,855	15,647	17,715	1	14	152	167
	Total		2,502	24,218	192,744	219,464	45	274	2,099
2008	January	192	1,784	14,734	16,710	4	18	143	165
	February	162	1,840	14,935	16,937	0	15	131	146
	March	158	1,705	14,243	16,106	2	17	166	185
	April	158	1,722	14,349	16,229	8	24	149	181
	May	183	1,930	15,084	17,197	3	22	182	207
	June	159	1,977	14,823	16,959	1	23	150	174
	July	209	1,920	15,415	17,544	2	29	152	183
	August	170	1,838	14,246	16,254	1	26	160	187
	September	156	1,994	15,091	17,241	2	14	204	220
	October	217	1,984	16,441	18,642	2	14	150	166
	November	179	1,804	15,602	17,585	3	17	176	196
	December	180	1,748	14,825	16,753	1	28	148	177
	Total		2,123	22,246	179,788	204,157	29	247	1,911
2009	January	175	1,708	14,232	16,115	1	15	155	171
	February	142	1,350	11,488	12,980	2	15	107	124
	March	137	1,685	13,856	15,678	0	17	110	127
	April	174	1,787	13,464	15,425	1	18	135	154
	May	166	1,907	14,618	16,691	7	15	151	173
	June	154	1,916	14,471	16,541	2	26	146	174
	July	160	1,818	15,367	17,345	2	16	166	184
	August	183	1,792	14,319	16,294	2	27	174	203
	September	152	1,962	14,262	16,376	2	29	156	187
	October	157	1,968	15,954	18,079	1	24	158	183
	November	140	1,856	16,684	18,680	2	12	156	170
	December	140	1,577	14,859	16,576	1	10	168	179
	Total		1,880	21,326	173,574	196,780	23	224	1,782

Roads: Snow and Ice

Mr Watson: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will place in the Library a copy of the Highways Agency's Salt Stock Strategy document.

[26396]

Mike Penning: The Highways Agency's policy and standards for its winter service, including salt stock management, is detailed in its largely technical Network

Management Manual (NMM). The relevant winter section, along with the full document, is available at the following website:

http://www.standardsforhighways.co.uk/nmm_rwsc/docs/nmm_part_5.pdf

The Highways Agency constantly reviews and revises the NMM to confirm changes in standards to its contractors and to reflect lessons learned and developing best practice on all aspects of its maintenance activities. I understand that the Highways Agency will be updating the document highlighted by the previous link very shortly.

Speed Limits: Rural Areas

Stephen Phillips: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport whether his Department plans to take steps to (a) amend the way in which speed limits for rural roads are set and (b) ensure that the mean speed for vehicles using rural roads is not taken into account in setting appropriate speed limits for those roads. [26658]

Mike Penning: The Department for Transport has no plans to change the way in which speed limits for rural roads are set. Nor are there plans to move away from using mean speeds as the method of indicating an appropriate speed limit.

Local authorities are responsible for setting local speed limits. The Department provides them with guidance, "DfT Circular 01/2006—Setting Local Speed Limits", which ensures speed limits are appropriately and consistently set. The guidance recommends local authorities use mean speeds to determine the appropriate speed limit.

Twickenham Railway Station

Tony Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what assessment his Department has made of the merits of lengthening of the platforms at Twickenham rail station to facilitate crowd management at stadium events. [26846]

Mrs Villiers: Platform lengthening at Twickenham station is being considered as part of a package of works to facilitate the operation of longer trains and more passenger capacity on the route to London Waterloo by 2014. The Department is in negotiation with Stagecoach South West Trains, the operator of Twickenham station for the delivery of this additional capacity.

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

Constituencies: Lancashire

Graham Jones: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what recent representations he has received on the effect of his proposals for constituency boundaries on the boundaries of constituencies serving mill towns in East Lancashire. [27221]

Mr Harper: The Cabinet Office does not record correspondence in a way that would enable us to readily identify the specific content of correspondence to establish this.

Electoral Register

Mr Spellar: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what recent estimate has his Department made of the number of owners of second homes who are registered as voters in more than one constituency. [28614]

Mr Harper: The Government have made no such estimate. An individual may be registered at more than one address if it appears to the electoral registration officer in more than one local authority area that they meet the residence requirement in each area. However, it is an offence for a person to vote twice in a general election.

CABINET OFFICE

Government Departments: Procurement

Nick Boles: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office on how many occasions Government Departments have required professional indemnity from a contractor to the level of £1 million or above in each of the last five years; and what the monetary value was of the contracts concerned. [27166]

Mr Maude: This information is not held centrally.

In circumstances where it is appropriate to require professional indemnity insurance, the Cabinet Office advises Departments to set the level of required cover commensurate with the contract's value and associated risks. Setting the level too high could exclude many potential bidders including SMEs.

There are two contracts that have indemnity insurance over this level in the Cabinet Office; the Total Fm contract is £14 million, and the Fujitsu Flex contract is £5 million.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Departmental Regulation

Richard Graham: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what plans his Department has to adopt the one-in one-out system for regulation. [21956]

Chris Grayling: The Department has already adopted the Government's one-in, one-out policy. All new DWP regulatory measures brought forward, and which are within scope of the policy, will be managed accordingly.

Disability Living Allowance

Margaret Curran: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what his most recent estimate is of the number of people who will be affected by the implementation of his proposals to remove the mobility component of disability living allowance in 2014-15. [29066]

Maria Miller: We estimate that approximately 80,000 people who claim disability living allowance and live in residential care will be affected by the measure to cease paying the mobility component in Great Britain from October 2012.

Accurate estimates of the number of people who claim disability living allowance and live in residential care are difficult to produce because before 1998 there was no requirement to record entry or exit dates in to residential care.

The available evidence has been updated in light of new information on the status of care home residents who entered residential care before 1998. We subsequently updated our estimate of the number of people affected by the measure.

Housing Benefit: Wales

Jessica Morden: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what estimate he has made of the number of (a) women and (b) men in Wales who will be affected by the implementation of his proposed changes to housing benefit in the comprehensive spending review period. [29051]

Steve Webb: Impact assessments will be completed for each proposed measure in the emergency Budget and the comprehensive spending review. These assessments will be published in the normal way, accompanying the relevant legislation when introduced in Parliament.

Jobcentre Plus: Deptford

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what the running cost was of the Jobcentre Plus service in Deptford high street in the last 12 months for which figures are available. [28866]

Chris Grayling: The administration of Jobcentre Plus is a matter for the chief executive of Jobcentre Plus, Darra Singh. I have asked him to provide the hon. Member with the information requested.

Letter from Darra Singh:

To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, what the running cost was of the Jobcentre Plus service in Deptford High Street in the last 12 months for which figures are available. This is something that falls within the responsibilities delegated to me as Chief Executive of Jobcentre Plus.

The running cost of the Jobcentre in Deptford High Street over the 2009/10 financial year was £2.2 million, including £0.33 million of estate running costs. This includes both salary costs and associated discretionary spend.

Jobcentre Plus is an agency of the Department for Work and Pensions and many costs are only available for the whole of Jobcentre Plus and are not split down by individual sites. These costs therefore do not include centrally charged costs, such as information technology.

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what the cost per square metre was of the premises at 120-124 Deptford high street rented by Trillium on behalf of his Department in 2009-10. [28869]

Chris Grayling: The cost per square metre for the Jobcentre Plus premises at 120-124 high street, Deptford for the year 2009-10 was £400.44. This includes rent (at £59.46 per square metre), business rates, and other components that make up the unitary charge paid by the Department to Telereal Trillium for the provision of fully fitted and serviced accommodation.

Jobcentre Plus: South East

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what the average cost was of running Jobcentre Plus services at Jobcentres in the South East in the last 12 months for which figures are available. [28867]

Chris Grayling: The administration of Jobcentre Plus is a matter for the chief executive of Jobcentre Plus, Darra Singh. I have asked him to provide the hon. Member with the information requested.

Letter from Darra Singh:

To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, what the average cost of running Jobcentre Plus services at Jobcentres in the South East in the last 12 months for which figures are available. This is something that falls within the responsibilities delegated to me as Chief Executive of Jobcentre Plus.

The average running cost of running a Jobcentre in the South East region over the 2009/10 financial year was £2.19 million, including £0.54 million of estate running costs. This includes both salary costs and associated discretionary spend.

Jobcentre Plus is an agency of the Department for Work and Pensions and many costs are only available for the whole of Jobcentre Plus, and are not split down by individual sites. These costs therefore do not include centrally charged costs, such as information technology.

Materials Handling Equipment: Accidents

Mrs Ellman: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions when the Health and Safety Executive plans to publish its report into the collapse of a crane at Chandler's Wharf in Liverpool on 6 July 2009; and if he will make a statement. [28540]

Chris Grayling: Inspectors from the Health and Safety Executive have recently concluded their investigation into the incident and are now considering if legal action should be taken. Until a decision has been reached and if instituted, any legal action concluded, the Health and Safety Executive are not in a position to release a report.

State Retirement Pensions: Uprating

Mr Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what plans he has for uprating the state earnings-related pension scheme in the period to 2014-15. [28631]

Steve Webb: Additional pension paid under the state earnings-related pension scheme (SERPS) will in future years continue to be increased in line with the growth in prices in the preceding year as measured by the consumer prices index.

HEALTH

Ambulance Services

David Morris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to reduce incidences of ambulance stacking attributable to a shortage of nursing staff and beds in accident and emergency departments. [28216]

Mr Simon Burns: Local health care organisations know the health care needs and priorities of their local populations. They are best placed to determine the workforce required to deliver safe patient care within their available resources.

The Department expects accident and emergency services and NHS ambulance services to be able to respond to varying workloads at different times and under varying pressures. The Department recommends that local health partners work closely together to draw up contingency arrangements to ensure that the national health service can cope efficiently and that trusts and strategic health authorities take urgent local action to ensure escalation plans include robust action to avoid ambulances queuing and therefore not to delay ambulance handover times.

Ambulance Services: Finance

David Morris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations he has received on changing the ambulance funding model from a block grant to a per call-out tariff; and if he will make a statement. [28041]

Mr Simon Burns: While we have not received direct representations on this matter, departmental officials and colleagues from the national health service have worked together to develop 'currencies' for ambulance services which could form the basis of a future tariff.

The use of these currencies in the collection of ambulance service activity and cost data will be mandatory for 2011-12, with the expectation being that currencies will be used for contracting in 2012-13 with prices agreed locally.

Ambulance Services: Regulation

Mr Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what discussions his Department has held with representatives of the private ambulance industry on the likely effect on that sector of the introduction of regulations governing it in April 2011. [28061]

Mr Simon Burns: The Department undertook a consultation in March 2008 on the scope of registration with the Care Quality Commission (CQC) and the registration requirements. Details of the consultation, titled "a consultation on the framework for the registration of health and adult social care providers", and the Department's response have already been placed in the Library.

Departmental officials met representatives from the private ambulance sector in March 2009 to discuss proposed regulations on registration with CQC.

Blood: Diseases

Zac Goldsmith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health whether his Department plans to develop a strategy to reduce the risk posed by known and unknown pathogens to the security of the donated blood supply. [28019]

Anne Milton: The United Kingdom blood services must comply with the Blood Safety and Quality Regulation (2005), as amended. The principal measure to protect patients against transfusion-transmitted infections is the careful selection of blood donors, supplemented by specific testing for transfusion-transmitted infections.

There are well established systems in place within the UK blood services to identify, assess and respond to threats to the UK blood supply posed by known and emerging pathogens that may be transmitted by transfusion. The independent expert Advisory Committee on the Safety of Blood, Tissues and Organs and the National Expert Panel on New and Emerging Infections also monitor developments nationally and internationally, and provide advice to the Department and to the blood services.

A number of safety measures are in place to reduce the risk of transmission of variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (vCJD) as there is no specific test available for

screening of donors. These include lifetime deferral from donation by people who have been advised they may be at increased risk from vCJD and by those previously transfused; leucodepletion of all donated blood; the use of non-UK plasma for production of plasma products such as clotting factors; and importation of fresh frozen plasma for treatment of children under 16.

The introduction of bacterial screening of platelets provides an additional safety measure for these products.

Cataracts: Surgery

Mike Weatherley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to widen choice for patients undergoing cataract surgery in NHS facilities; and if he will make a statement. [28202]

Mr Simon Burns: We are committed to extending choice for all national health service patients and service users, including those who are referred for elective care such as cataract treatment. We are currently consulting on proposals for giving patients and service users greater choice and control over their care and we will publish our response along with more detailed policy proposals early next year.

Clostridium

Mr Watts: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will encourage hospital trusts with high numbers of clostridium difficile infections to conduct trials of prebiotic supplements; and if he will make a statement. [28395]

Anne Milton: Participation in trials is a local decision. Trials of suitable prebiotics or other adjuncts to treatment may be considered in addition to the implementation of best practice guidance on the diagnosis and treatment of clostridium difficile infection. This guidance stresses the role of isolation of cases, hand washing with soap and water, and the use of appropriated antibiotics for treatment, together with sound antibiotic stewardship policies. These measures, unlike the use of prebiotics, have been shown to reduce infections and improve patient outcomes.

Mr Watts: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much each hospital trust in England spent on the prevention and treatment of clostridium difficile in 2009. [28396]

Mr Simon Burns: This information is not collected centrally.

Complementary Medicine: Regulation

David Morris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent discussions he has had on statutory regulation of acupuncturists, herbalists and practitioners of Chinese medicine; and if he will make a statement. [28043]

Anne Milton: The Government are currently considering their overall strategy on professional regulation, including the possibility of establishing a registration scheme for practitioners of these traditional forms of medicine.

The Department has had discussions with the Health Professions Council, the Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council and the General Pharmaceutical Council about the possibility of establishing a statutory register for herbal medicine practitioners. We are discussing policy options with the Devolved Administrations and we expect to make an announcement on the way forward shortly.

Dental Services

Mr Ward: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate his Department has made of the number of people not registered with a dentist in (a) Bradford East constituency and (b) England in the latest period for which figures are available. [29061]

Mr Simon Burns: Information is not available in the format requested.

Under the dental contractual arrangements, introduced on 1 April 2006, patients do not have to be registered with a national health service dentist to receive NHS care. The closest equivalent measure to 'registration' is the number of patients receiving NHS dental services ('patients seen') over a 24 month period. However, this is not directly comparable to the registration data for earlier years.

Information on the number of patients seen in the previous 24 months, in England, is available in Table D1 of Annex 3 of the "NHS Dental Statistics for England—2010-11, First quarterly report". Information is available at quarterly intervals, from 31 March 2006 to 30 September 2010 and is provided by primary care trust and by strategic health authority but is not available by parliamentary constituency.

This report, published on 24 November 2010, has been already placed in the Library and is also available on the NHS Information Centre website at:

www.ic.nhs.uk/pubs/dentalstats1011q1

Departmental Contracts

Nicola Blackwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps his Department plans to take to encourage and support small and medium-sized enterprises and third sector organisations to compete

for departmental contracts in line with value-for-money policy, UK regulations and EU procurement directives. [28111]

Mr Simon Burns: The Department is fully committed to the coalition's pledge to promote small business procurement, as set out in section 2, page 10 of the document 'The Coalition: our programme for government'.

In the financial year 2009-10, small and medium enterprises (SMEs) accounted for more than 25% of the total of suppliers to the Department and it is anticipated that a similar level of business will be awarded by the Department to SME's in 2010-11.

In addition, to further encourage and support SMEs and third sector organisations to compete for contracts, the Department complies with the requirements of the coalition's transparency agenda by publishing online all new information and communications technology contracts and tender documents over £10,000. From January 2011, all new contracts will be published online. It is also the Department's intention to utilise an online 'contracts finder' application, which will give users greater visibility on procurement opportunities.

Departmental Manpower

Eric Ollerenshaw: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the (a) names, (b) job titles and (c) qualifications are of the members of his Department's Steering Group of officials in respect of the review of prescription drug addiction. [27945]

Mr Simon Burns: The membership of the Steering Group to oversee the policy on addiction to medicines takes account of all the relevant policy areas within the Department and its arm's length bodies. It includes officials and experts representing drugs policy, mental health, pharmacy issues, the National Treatment Agency for Substance Misuse and the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency.

In line with Freedom of Information rules the Department's policy is that the names of officials should be withheld from disclosure unless they are members of the senior civil service or have a high profile that would justify release. The names have therefore been edited accordingly.

<i>Organisation</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>Name</i>
Department of Health	Deputy Director Alcohol and Drugs	Chris Heffer
Department of Health	Senior Medical Officer, Drugs and Alcohol	Dr Mark Prunty
Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency	Group Manager, Therapeutic Review	Jeremy Mean
Department of Health	Deputy National Clinical Director for Mental Health in England	Hugh Griffiths

There are six other members of the Steering Group below senior civil service level.

Departmental Press: Subscriptions

Robert Halfon: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much his Department spent on press cuttings services in each year since 1997. [28143]

Mr Simon Burns: The Department sources its national press cuttings service via a framework agreement used

by various Government Departments. Daily cuttings from the national press have been provided by Precise Media since 1 July 2007.

Prior to April 2010, regional press cuttings were sourced from Kantar Media Intelligence (formally known as TNS Media Intelligence) via a rolling agreement. Since April 2010, the regional press cuttings service has been provided by Precise Media.

The total amount the Department has spent on press cutting services (both national and regional cuttings) in each year since 2003-04 is provided in the following table:

<i>Department of Health</i>	
<i>Financial year¹</i>	<i>Spend on press cuttings² (£)</i>
2003-04	102,771.22
2004-05	87,932.69
2005-06	157,749.99
2006-07	186,726.95
2007-08	130,126.92
2008-09	119,180.72
2009-10	133,055.81

¹ The legal requirement for the Department to hold financial data is seven years. We are therefore unable to provide any figures before 2003-04.

² The figures provided are all inclusive of VAT and are based on payment date, rather than invoice date.

Depressive Illnesses: Suicide

Tim Farron: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients with manic depression have committed suicide in each NHS trust in England in each of the last 10 years. [28802]

Paul Burstow: We do not collect such data centrally. The National Confidential Inquiry into Suicide and Homicide by People with Mental Illness team at Manchester University collects data on suicide cases in mental health patients but the inquiry does not provide data by trust. Rather it publishes national data through their National Confidential Inquiry reports.

I should also refer the hon. Member to the table I provided in the response of 25 November 2010, *Official Report*, column 424W, which shows a breakdown by year of the number of patients with a primary diagnosis of bipolar disorder, formerly known as manic depression, who died by suicide in the most recent 10 years for which data is available.

General Practitioners

Derek Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Health whether board meetings of GP consortia will be held in public under his proposals for re-organisation of the NHS. [27353]

Anne Milton: General practitioner consortia will define their own governance processes within a broad legislative framework, which will be outlined in the forthcoming Health and Social Care Bill. Some consortia might choose to adopt public board meetings as part of their appropriate governance arrangements, but this will be up to them to decide.

Health Services

Mr Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Health whether centres of excellence for the care of conditions such as diabetes will be retained after the implementation of the proposals in the Health White Paper. [27157]

Mr Simon Burns: We believe that patients should have access to high quality treatment, at the right place and at the right time. Services should be locally accessible wherever possible and centralised only where necessary,

but it is for the national health service to determine the design of local services. The reforms outlined in the White Paper *Equity and Excellence: Liberating the NHS* will therefore liberate professionals and providers from top-down control. This will secure the quality, innovation and productivity needed to improve outcomes.

We will give responsibility for commissioning and budgets to groups of general practitioner practices; and providers will be free to shape their services around the needs and choices of patients. Any decisions about the configuration of local health services should take full account of clinical evidence, public engagement, general practitioner commissioning and referral intentions, and the current and prospective pattern of patient choice.

Health Services: South East

Mr Andrew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the effects of the work of NHS Innovations South East on the quality of health services; and if he will make a statement. [28683]

Mr Simon Burns: Responsibility for reviewing and commissioning the services provided by the nine innovation hubs (NHS Innovations) and to promote innovation in the national health service currently rests with strategic health authorities (SHAs), which will continue until March 2012.

It is a matter for South East Coast and South Central SHAs following their review of NHS Innovations South East (NISE) to decide on the value of services provided by NISE in these challenging times.

Herbal Medicine

Mike Weatherley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what procedures are followed for testing herbal medicines before they are provided on the NHS. [27249]

Anne Milton: Manufactured herbal medicines placed on the United Kingdom market are required to have either a marketing authorisation, based on evidence of safety, quality and efficacy, or a traditional herbal registration, based on evidence of safety, quality and traditional use. Certain unlicensed herbal remedies are not required to meet specific standards: those supplied following a face to face consultation under section 12(1) of the Medicines Act 1968, and those supplied under section 12(2) of the Act. Section 12(2) will no longer be available following the expiry at 30 April 2011 of the transitional protection afforded by the European Directive on traditional herbal medicinal products.

Human Experiments: Nuclear Weapons

Mr Wallace: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people have had their medical records flagged under the (a) Nuclear Weapons Tests Participants (MR1185) and (b) National Registry for Radiation Workers (MR47) study. [26903]

Anne Milton: The success of these epidemiological studies depends on accurate and unbiased cause of death and cancer incidence data. This information is sourced, through the National Health Service Central

Registers (NHSCRs), from national registries such as cancer registries and mortality registers. The NHSCR records are flagged but medical records are neither flagged nor accessed for either of the studies. The most recent analysis reports for each study show the number of individuals in the study populations. All study members were submitted for flagging on the NHSCRs.

A total of 43,690 records (21,357 test participants and 22,333 controls) had been submitted for flagging on the NHSCRs and were reported in the 2003 Nuclear Weapons Test Participant Study analysis report. Follow up of mortality and incidence of cancer 1952-98 in men from the United Kingdom who participated in the UK's atmospheric nuclear weapon tests and experimental programmes. *Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, 60, 165-172 (2003). Muirhead CR, Bingham D, Haylock RGE, O'Hagan JA, Goodill AA, Berridge GLC, English MA, Hunter N and Kendall GM.

A total of 174,541 records had been submitted for flagging on the NHSCRs and were reported in the 2009 National Registry for Radiation Workers analysis report. This study population is still increasing and additional records are being flagged over time. Mortality and cancer incidence following occupational radiation exposure: 3rd analysis of the National Registry for Radiation Workers. *Br J Cancer*, 100, 206-12 (2009). Muirhead CR, O'Hagan JA, Haylock RGE, Phillipson MA, Willcock T, Berridge GLC and Zhang W.

Human Experiments: Nuclear Weapons

Mr Wallace: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the Nuclear Weapons Tests Participants medical research study MR1185 was first instigated; and what criteria were set for the flagging of medical records.

[26902]

Anne Milton: In 1983, scientists from the National Radiological Protection Board (NRPB, now part of the Health Protection Agency) and from the Imperial Cancer Research Fund (now Cancer Research UK) were commissioned by the Ministry of Defence to carry out an independent epidemiological study of participants in the United Kingdom atmospheric nuclear weapons tests, both in the Pacific and in Australia:

Epidemiological studies of UK test veterans: I General Description. *Journal of Radiological Protection* 24 199-217; Kendall G. M., Muirhead C. R., Darby S. C., Doll R., Arnold L., O'Hagan J. A.

The success of the study depends on accurate and unbiased cause of death and cancer incidence data. This is sourced, through the National Health Service Central Registers (NHSCRs), from national registries such as cancer registries and mortality registers. The NHSCR records are flagged but medical records are neither flagged nor accessed for the study. Every individual study member was submitted for flagging with the NHSCRs.

Maternity Services

Dr Poulter: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will take steps to ensure that implementation of the (a) Toolkit for High Quality Neonatal Services and (b) NICE specialist neonatal care quality standard is made a local priority in the 2011-12 NHS Operating Framework.

[28455]

Anne Milton: The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence 'Quality Standard for Specialist Neonatal Care' and the 'Toolkit for High Quality Neonatal Services' are tools to assist national health service commissioners and providers in the provision high quality care for babies and their families.

It is too early to say what is in or out of the NHS Operating Framework for 2011-12. We are currently developing the transitional arrangements for ensuring that the NHS can deliver on the spending review settlement while remaining focused on finance, quality, performance, work force and QIPP (Quality, Innovation, Productivity and Prevention) in the light of the NHS White Paper.

Meat: Dairy Products

Mr Bain: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what his policy is on the entry of meat and dairy products from cloned animals into the food chain.

[27811]

Anne Milton: Any food obtained from cloned animals is regulated as a "novel food" under Regulation (EC) No 258/97¹. According to this regulation, novel foods may not be marketed in the European Union without an authorisation. Applications for authorisation of novel foods are evaluated by national authorities against criteria of safety, nutritional quality and not misleading the consumer. The Food Standards Agency is the competent authority for novel foods in the United Kingdom and expert advice on applications is provided by the independent Advisory Committee on Novel Foods and Processes. This advice would form the basis of the Agency's risk assessment which would be subject to review by all 26 other EU member states before an authorisation is issued. To date, the Agency has not received any applications for the authorisation of food produced from cloned animals.

¹ Regulation of the European Parliament and the Council concerning novel foods and novel food ingredients.

In October 2010 the European Commission published a report on animal cloning which recommended a temporary ban on the marketing of products obtained from cloned animals. The Government's view is that such a ban would be disproportionate in terms of food safety and animal welfare and insufficient evidence has been provided to justify it.

Any proposal should be supported by an impact assessment that demonstrates the need for and benefit of new regulation.

Medical Equipment: Hygiene

Mr Andrew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the procedures of the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency in respect of the regulation of the sterility of medical containers.

[28659]

Mr Simon Burns: The Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency is the competent authority under European Union legislation for medical devices in the United Kingdom: it has responsibility for ensuring

that medical devices placed on the UK market meet the requirements of the Medical Devices Regulations including those relating to sterility.

If a medical device is placed on the market as being sterile then the manufacturer must meet the relevant regulatory requirements set out in the regulations. Any assessment required under the regulations is carried out by a third party independent certification organisation known as a notified body. The agency is not part of this certification process but does designate and audit UK notified bodies as being competent to undertake this task.

Myasthenia: Drugs

Mr Anderson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health whether he has had discussions with BioMarin on the provision of drugs for (a) Lambert-Eaton myasthenic syndrome and (b) congenital myasthenic syndrome. [27927]

Mr Simon Burns: Departmental officials have had discussions with BioMarin about the pricing and provision of Firdapse (amifampridine) for the treatment of Lambert-Eaton myasthenic syndrome. Firdapse is not licensed for the treatment of congenital myasthenic syndrome.

Public Health: Finance

Ms Abbott: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what mechanisms will be in place to ensure that the funding held by primary care trusts for public health improvement will be transferred in full to local authorities when they take responsibility for that matter; and if he will make a statement. [28197]

Mr Simon Burns: Subject to Parliament, following the abolition of primary care trusts (PCTs), responsibilities for local health improvement, and some aspects of health protection, will transfer to local authorities. A ring-fenced grant of appropriate size will be made to upper tier and unitary local authorities for this purpose. The first such grant will be made for 2013-14.

The Department has made an initial assessment of baseline spend on the areas for which Public Health England will become responsible. This is the first step in determining the size of the future ring-fenced public health budget. The Department will shortly publish a consultation, following 'Healthy Lives, Healthy People', on the details of the proposed scope, funding and commissioning responsibilities in the new public health system, including the role of local authorities.

South London Healthcare NHS Trust: Pay

Mr Evennett: To ask the Secretary of State for Health whether he has made an estimate of the number of staff at South London Healthcare NHS Trust who earn over £100,000 per year. [28445]

Mr Simon Burns: This information is not held centrally.

Information in relation to remuneration for South London Healthcare NHS Trust's executive directors can be found in the trust's annual report.

Weather: Health Services

Ms Abbott: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps his Department has taken in preparation for anticipated severe weather to ensure that (a) older people and (b) other vulnerable groups are protected; and if he will make a statement. [28199]

Paul Burstow: I refer the hon. Member to the written answer given to the hon. Member for Bolton West (Julie Hilling) on 22 November 2010, *Official Report*, column 168W.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Departmental Conferences

Robert Halfon: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport what steps he has taken since his appointment to reduce expenditure on conferences from budgets within his responsibility. [28351]

John Penrose: Following the formation of the new Government and the resulting spending review, the Department announced an intention to reduce administration costs by 50% by 2014-15.

As part of this budget reduction all administration costs across the Department are subject to review, including those for hosting conferences, events and all other hospitality.

All proposals also continue to be subject to scrutiny to ensure value for money.

Departmental Contracts

Nicola Blackwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport what steps his Department plans to take to encourage and support small and medium-sized enterprises and third sector organisations to compete for departmental contracts in line with value-for-money policy, UK regulations and EU procurement directives. [28116]

John Penrose: The Department has adopted a proactive approach in the past by implementing many of the recommendations made by the Glover report.

Currently, the Department works to the simplified Pre Qualification Questionnaire issued by the Office of Government Commerce. This enables public sector purchasers to identify the most suitable suppliers to invite to tender.

All departmental contracts of £10,000 or over awarded in the last five years have been advertised through supply2gov, who provide small businesses with visibility of public sector contract opportunities.

The Department also measures and monitors the percentage of spend with small and medium-sized enterprises against large suppliers on a yearly basis.

Departmental Overtime

Andrew Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport how much his Department spent on overtime for staff working within the Secretary of State's private office in each of the last five years. [28570]

John Penrose: The amount of money paid as overtime to staff working in the Secretary of State's private office in each of the last five years is set out in the table.

Financial year	Amount of overtime spent (£)
2009-10	11,553
2008-09	32,117
2007-08	36,553
2006-07	33,944
2005-06	35,999

Departmental Publications

Robert Halfon: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport what estimate he has made of his Department's expenditure on printing (a) Command Papers, (b) papers laid before Parliament by Act, (c) consultation documents and (d) other papers in each of the last 10 years. [28386]

John Penrose: The Department's accounting system does not separate the printing costs of parliamentary, consultation and other official documents by type.

The table lists the Department's expenditure on printing and publications through The Stationery Office for the last 10 years.

	Cost (£)
2009-10	60,381.98
2008-09	45,695.16
2007-06	71,057.97
2006-07	54,518.23
2005-06	66,306.77
2004-05	74,964.98
2003-04	90,692.52
2002-03	94,298.60
2001-02	52,820.05
2000-01	52,988.07
1999-2000	44,599.77

Departmental Travel

Paul Maynard: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport how much his Department spent on grey fleet in (a) 2008-09 and (b) 2009-10. [28841]

John Penrose: The amount claimed for motor mileage on departmental business in private vehicles within travel and subsistence in the UK cannot be separately identified without incurring disproportionate costs.

The Department's policy on staff travel limits claims at the HMRC approved mileage rate to official journeys which could not practically be made by public transport, or where the employee needs to use a car because of

disability. Where, exceptionally, a staff member needs to use a private vehicle for any other reason, claims are paid at a reduced rate.

Horseracing Betting Levy

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport when he plans to announce the conclusions of his Department's review of remote gambling; and whether he has taken account of the effect on the Horseracing Betting Levy of the remote gambling industry in formulating those conclusions. [27722]

John Penrose: A consultation on the Regulatory Future of Remote Gambling in Great Britain closed on 18 June 2010. Since then, I have been examining the issues and identifying possible solutions.

I have also received advice from the Levy Board about securing fair contributions from overseas betting operators towards the Horserace Betting Levy.

I hope to be able to make an announcement in due course.

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport if he will take steps to ensure that all areas of the betting industry contribute to the Horseracing Betting Levy. [27723]

Hugh Robertson: We are discussing the options with the Levy Board and the racing and betting industries, to ensure that funding for racing is fair and is collected from as broad a base as possible.

Olympic Games 2012

Julian Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport what discussions his Department has had with transport operators on travel from elsewhere in the UK to London for (a) those volunteering, (b) adults with paid tickets and (c) schoolchildren with donated tickets to the London 2012 Olympics and Paralympics. [28605]

Hugh Robertson: The Department for Culture, Media, and Sport has had no direct discussions with transport operators as these discussions take place with the Olympic Delivery Authority (ODA).

The ODA is in discussion with transport operators, such as train operating companies and coach companies, to develop Olympic Service Delivery Plans (OSDP). These plans focus on the provision of additional capacity to meet the extra demand there will be at games time, including trains running earlier in the morning or later at night. More detail on these services will be announced next year.

Julian Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport what discussions his Department has had with local authorities and others on accommodation for those from elsewhere in the UK in London who are (a) volunteering, (b) adults with paid tickets and (c) schoolchildren with donated tickets to the London 2012 Olympics and Paralympics. [28606]

Hugh Robertson: There are no central plans to provide volunteers or spectators with accommodation in London. However there are venues at other locations across the UK which will give people the chance to get involved with the Games in their own local area.

The London Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games (LOCOG) has made it clear that volunteers and spectators will be expected to find and pay for their own accommodation. This has not put people off applying to become London 2012 Games Makers, as LOCOG has received over 240,000 applications from across the UK.

The Life-Time UK Alliance, initiated by Volunteering England, is setting up discussions with voluntary organisations, which have capacities to offer accommodation for volunteers, to explore whether they could make provision within their resources for volunteers.

Olympic Games 2012: Finance

Mr Ward: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport what savings to the public purse his Department identified in the budget for the 2012 London Olympics as part of the comprehensive spending review. [29124]

Hugh Robertson: The spending review reduced the Olympic Delivery Authority's (ODA) forecast completion cost by £20 million. This saving will be achieved by no longer delivering the external "Wrap" around the Olympic Stadium, unless alternative sources of funding, or savings from other efficiencies, can be found. This decision is subject to planning conditions. The £20 million saving has been added to the contingency fund potentially available for the Olympic programme.

This cost reduction is additional to over £700 million of savings to the public purse achieved in the Olympic programme to date, including the £27 million saving announced in May 2010 as part of the in-year savings across Government.

The Government remain committed to delivering a safe and successful games within the £9.3 billion public sector funding package, and are seeking cost savings wherever possible.

Royal Parks

Nicholas Soames: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport what legislation he proposes to bring forward in respect of the Royal Parks. [26769]

John Penrose [*holding answer 29 November 2010*]: It remains a Government policy to transfer responsibility of the Royal Parks to the Greater London authority and we will legislate at the first available opportunity.

Sports

Ian Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport what recent assessment he has made of the relationship between the level of success at elite level sport and mass participation in sport at grassroots level; and if he will make a statement. [27407]

Hugh Robertson: The results of UK Sport's post-Beijing Sporting Preferences survey were that 18% of British adults said that the success of Team GB at the Beijing Olympics or Paralympics had led to specific changes in their participation, involvement or interest in sport.

In addition, research commissioned by Sport England in 2009 with Mike Weed from the Centre for Sport, Physical Education and Activity Research (SPEAR), titled 'The Potential of the Demonstration Effect to Grow and Sustain Participation in Sport', concluded that people can be inspired by elite sport, sports people or sports events to participate themselves. On the issue of increasing the numbers of participants, it was found that this was mainly the case with former participants whose participation has lapsed. The study also showed that this was most effective where there was a local connection.

UK Sport is currently finalising research into the inspirational effects of major sports events, which they will publish in the new year.

Sports Cabinet

Ian Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport (1) who he plans to invite to the meeting of the Sports Cabinet planned for early 2011; [27401]

(2) if he will invite representatives of School Sports Partnerships or their young ambassadors to the meeting of the Sports Cabinet planned for early 2011; [27402]

(3) what subjects will be on the agenda for the meeting of the Sports Cabinet planned for early 2011. [27403]

Hugh Robertson: The Sports Cabinet comprises the Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport and the four home country Ministers with responsibility for sport, as well as the chairs of UK Sport and the home country sports councils.

Its focus is on issues affecting sport across the UK. We are working with colleagues in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to finalise the agenda for the next meeting scheduled for 15 February 2011.

The Sports Cabinet is able to draw on expert advice on particular issues but there are no plans to invite representatives of school sport partnerships or young ambassadors at this stage.

BUSINESS, INNOVATION AND SKILLS

Aimhigher Programme

Mr Lammy: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills how many (a) interventions were made in respect of and (b) people participated in the Aimhigher programme in the most recent year for which figures are available. [26651]

Mr Willetts: In the 2009-10 academic year, the latest year for which figures are available, the total number of events reported by Aimhigher partnerships was 54,544.

It is not possible to give a figure for the number of separate participants. However, in the 2009-10 academic year, the number of individual contacts totalled 2,226,580. Many participants took part in more than one activity and it is not possible to estimate the number of people helped.

In addition, the national roadshow held 4,850 sessions for approximately 70,000 learners.

The coalition Government are committed to providing a new impetus for social mobility in this country and will be investing in raising the attainment and aspiration of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Universities and schools have learned a lot from the Aimhigher programme about "what works" and can build on this in a way that best supports their pupils and students.

Animal Experiments

Philip Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills whether he plans to ensure that the (a) Medical Research Council and (b) Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council include improving the protection of animals in their corporate and strategic aims. [28213]

Mr Willetts: The Medical Research Council (MRC) and Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC) are non-departmental public bodies which receive their grant in aid from this Department. In keeping with the Haldane principle, day-to-day decisions on the scientific merits of different strategies, programmes and projects are taken by the Research Councils without Government involvement.

The MRC and BBSRC are committed to ensuring that any research programmes they fund follow high standards of animal welfare, and avoid the use of animals wherever an alternative exists. In partnership with other funders of biomedical research in the UK the MRC and BBSRC have published guidelines on "Responsibility in the use of animals in bioscience research" This is available from NC3R's website:

<http://www.nc3rs.org.uk/document.asp?id=1319>

and also from the MRC and BBSRC. Compliance with the guidelines is a condition of funding for all grants involving the use of animals.

The MRC and BBSRC are also the major funders of the National Centre for the Replacement, Refinement and Reduction of Animals in Research (NC3Rs):

www.nc3rs.org.uk

The centre provides a UK focus for the promotion, development and implementation of the 3Rs in animal research and testing, and brings together academia, industry, government and animal welfare organisations. NC3Rs aims to facilitate the exchange of information and ideas, and the translation of research findings into practice that will benefit both animals and science. The centre funds high-quality 3Rs research, organises workshops and symposia to disseminate and advance the 3Rs, and develops 3Rs information resources and guidelines.

Philip Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills whether he plans to ensure that the (a) Medical Research Council and (b) Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council prioritise

reductions in expenditure on animal experiments and the development of methods that reduce and replace the use of animals in laboratory experiments. [28214]

Mr Willetts: The Medical Research Council (MRC) and Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC) are non-departmental public bodies which receive their grant in aid from my Department. In keeping with the Haldane principle, day-to-day decisions on the scientific merits of different strategies, programmes and projects are taken by the Research Councils without Government involvement.

The law states that the use of animals in research where it may cause pain, suffering, distress or lasting harm, is subject to licence and will be permitted only where there is no practicable alternative. The MRC and BBSRC are committed to ensuring that any research programmes they fund follow high standards of animal welfare and avoid the use of animals wherever an alternative exists. All proposals submitted to the MRC and BBSRC are subject to robust peer review which includes assessment of the justification for the proposed use of animals. The MRC and BBSRC are committed to supporting research which aims to refine techniques, reduce numbers, and replace animals in research wherever possible, supporting research programmes which contribute to developing new knowledge or new methods that help replace or refine animal use and in providing funding for the National Centre for the Replacement, Refinement and Reduction of Animals in Research (NC3Rs):

www.nc3rs.org.uk

Apprentices

Steve Rotheram: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills what proportion of the new apprenticeships announced in his Department's paper Investing in Skills for Sustainable Growth he expects to be in the (a) public and (b) private sector; and what proportion of such apprenticeships of each type he expects to be at level (i) two, (ii) three and (iii) four. [28651]

Mr Hayes [holding answer 3 December 2010]: Last month, "Skills for Sustainable Growth" and "Investing in Skills for Sustainable Growth" set out the Government's plans to abolish central targets and increase freedom and flexibility for Further Education colleges and training organisations to respond effectively to the needs of employers, learners and their communities. Support for employers to offer more Apprenticeships will be a key part of that response. The Apprenticeships Programme is demand led, so the Government do not set targets for Apprenticeships by sector or level. But the Government have announced that they will increase annual funding for Apprenticeships by up to £250 million a year, so that by 2014-15 up to 75,000 more places will be available than under the previous administration.

We are committed to improving and expanding Apprenticeships, and will reshape the Apprenticeships programme so that Level 3 becomes the level to which learners and employers aspire.

Steve Rotheram: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills how many people aged 19 years and over are taking apprenticeships at level

(a) 2, (b) 3 and (c) 4 in 2010-11; and how many such people took apprenticeships at each level in each of the three previous years. [28655]

Programme starts by level for learners aged 19 years and over in England for 2005/06 to 2008/09, the latest year for which full year data are available.

Mr Hayes [*holding answer 3 December 2010*]: The following table shows the number of Apprenticeship

Apprenticeship programme starts for learners aged 19 and over by level, 2005/06 to 2008/09

	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
Apprenticeship (Level 2)	45,700	46,600	69,800	84,300
Advanced apprenticeship (Level 3)	29,700	32,100	47,400	56,100
Higher apprenticeship (Level 4 or higher)	—	100	—	100
All apprenticeships	75,500	78,800	117,200	140,600

Notes:

1. Figures are rounded to the nearest 100.
2. '—' Indicates a base figure of less than 50.
3. Figures are based on age at start of programme.

Source:

Individualised Learner Record

This Government are committed to increasing the number of apprenticeships, in particular, advanced and higher apprenticeships. British employers currently face a work force with insufficient skills at intermediate technician and associate professional level, critical to many industries of the future.

Expanding Level 3 and Level 4 apprenticeships will make a significant contribution to remedying the shortage of people with this level of qualification.

Information on the number of apprenticeship starts is published in a quarterly statistical first release (SFR). The latest SFR was published on 16 November 2010:

http://www.thedataservice.org.uk/statistics/statisticalfirstrelease/sfr_current

Broadband

Ian Lucas: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills what estimate he has made of the proportion of households in each parliamentary constituency which have access to broadband at speeds of 2 Mb or more. [29030]

Mr Vaizey: This Department has not published estimates by constituency. According to the Digital Britain report published in 2009 approximately 11% of households do not have access to broadband at speeds of 2 MBps or more.

Broadband Delivery UK is assessing current broadband provision at community level across the UK in its work to deliver the coalition Government's objective to facilitate universal broadband access of at least 2 Mbps.

Broadband: Rural Areas

Alun Cairns: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills what steps he is taking to support sub-loop unbundling to increase broadband competition in rural areas. [26409]

Mr Vaizey: Sub loop unbundling (SLU) is a regulated product offered by BT Openreach. Take-up of SLU is first and foremost a matter for Openreach and its customers, with Ofcom able to intervene if necessary.

I have had discussions with communications service providers, Ofcom and BT Openreach regarding this

subject and will play a facilitative role where there are issues that need to be addressed in discussion between the parties.

Susan Elan Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills what financial assistance is available to (a) individuals and (b) community groups in rural areas who wish to be connected to broadband services. [28315]

Mr Vaizey: The coalition Government have committed £530 million in the recently announced comprehensive spending review (CSR) to support broadband rollout, including a standard level of service for all. Broadband Delivery UK (BDUK) are in the process of assessing the models for commercial deployment of broadband with public support in commercially challenging/rural areas and will be working with local government bodies, such as county councils on models for local delivery of broadband.

Broadband: Wales

Susan Elan Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills what his most recent estimate is of the level of access to broadband in Wales; and what steps his Department is taking to increase that level. [28322]

Mr Vaizey: This Department has not published estimates. However, according to the most recent Ofcom Communications Market Report published in August, broadband delivered over a standard fixed telephony line is also available to all homes and commercial properties in Wales, as all local exchanges in Wales are DSL-enabled. But various factors (such as line length and contention) influence the actual broadband speed at customer premises. Broadband take-up in Wales has risen to 64% of homes but this still lags behind the UK average of 71%.

Broadband Delivery UK is assessing current broadband provision at community level across the UK in its work to deliver the Coalition Government's objective to facilitate universal broadband in the UK.

The Government aim to stimulate private sector investment to deliver the best superfast broadband network in Europe by 2015. Broadband Delivery UK is working with the Welsh Assembly Government to bring the benefits of superfast broadband investment to Wales.

Consumer Direct

Susan Elan Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills how many people contacted Consumer Direct in each of the last five

years; and how many such contacts related to debt and consumer finance issues. [28063]

Mr Davey: The following table details the required information.

	<i>All contacts¹ (Thousand)</i>	<i>Unique contacts²</i>	<i>Unique contacts regarding credit and debt</i>	<i>Percentage of credit/debt unique contacts</i>
2006	1,100	979,176	14,518	1.5
2007	1,600	1,141,691	18,615	1.6
2008	1,700	1,181,279	22,988	1.9
2009	1,700	1,142,320	29,653	2.6
2010 ³	1,100	1,013,278	29,145	2.9
Total	7,200	5,457,744	114,919	2.1

¹ All contacts to the service even if they are from the same person about the same issue.

² One record per issue from a consumer.

³ To date.

Credit

Susan Elan Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills what proposals to improve access to affordable credit he has considered.

[28316]

Mr Davey: Well-informed, empowered consumers are central to our vision for how a credit market between customers and lenders should work. I want to encourage both to take responsible decisions and to strengthen protection where necessary, particularly for the most vulnerable. Earlier this year I announced a joint BIS and HM Treasury review of consumer credit and personal insolvency that will look at all aspects of the consumer credit lifecycle from the decision to take out a loan through the lifetime of the loan.

The review will also provide a framework for us to consider how best to take forward the recommendations from the recent OFT review of the high cost credit market. Among those being considered are that the Government should work with lenders to provide information on high-cost credit loans through price comparison websites, and that the Government work with credit reference agencies to explore ways in which high cost credit lenders could provide information to credit reference agencies on the payment performance of their customers, allowing those with good payment records to use mainstream lenders more easily in the future.

Government are also firmly supportive of a stronger link up between the Post Office and credit unions and we are actively looking into ways the two can work more closely together. For example, Post Office Ltd plans to share guidance with sub-postmasters shortly to demonstrate how they can work with local credit unions.

Financial Services: Regulation

Harriett Baldwin: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills whether his Department has assessed the likely effects on (a) small businesses and (b) independent financial advisers of the Financial Services Authority's proposals to implement the recommendations of the Retail Distribution Review.

[27915]

Mr Hoban: I have been asked to reply.

The Financial Services Authority (FSA), an independent body, is introducing the Retail Distribution Review (RDR). The FSA has consulted extensively on the RDR since 2006 and in accordance with the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000, has published cost-benefit analyses of the proposals.

The FSA has also published analysis of the impact of its proposals on different sectors of the industry alongside policy documents; including research by Deloitte and Oxera, as well as a survey from NMG Consulting which asked specific questions about the impact of the changes on sole traders. This information is available on the FSA's website.

Higher Education: Finance

Nicola Blackwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills what assessment he has made of the effect of the Government's proposals for higher education funding on the international competitiveness of universities in (a) England and (b) Oxford West and Abingdon constituency. [27976]

Mr Willetts: The UK higher education system is already recognised as world class and internationally competitive. The reforms we are proposing seek to build on and strengthen that position. In particular we expect that increased student choice will improve quality and drive up standards. This country is already a popular destination for international students second only to the United States and we expect that to continue as the student experience improves. Our reforms will put university funding on to a more sustainable footing which will benefit institutions in Oxford West and Abingdon and across the country.

Greg Mulholland: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills how much his Department plans to spend on higher education in each year to 2014-15; and what estimate he has made of the level of such expenditure under the current arrangements for higher education funding in each such year. [29125]

Mr Willetts: Funding for the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) for 2011-12 will be published in its annual grant letter before Christmas this year.

Funding for subsequent years will be announced in due course.

National Union of Students

Conor Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills if he will place in the Library a copy of the accounts of the National Union of Students for each of the last five years. [28181]

Mr Willetts: The Department does not hold this information. The accounts of the National Union of Students will be available from the organisation itself.

Regional Growth Fund

Grahame M. Morris: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills with reference to paragraph 4.8 of the Local Growth White Paper, Cm 7981, from what budget headings the funding from other departmental budgets to increase the regional growth fund will be drawn. [22706]

Danny Alexander: I have been asked to reply.

As set out in “Local Growth: realising every place’s potential”, published on 28 October 2010, funding for the regional growth fund will be drawn from the Department for Transport, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Department for Communities and Local Government.

Royal Mail: Greater London

Lyn Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills what plans he has for the future of the East London Mail Centre; and if he will make a statement. [28914]

Mr Davey: Decisions relating to the East London Mail Centre are an operational matter for Royal Mail.

I have therefore asked Moya Greene, the Chief Executive of Royal Mail, to respond directly to the hon. Member and a copy of her reply will be placed in the Libraries of the House.

Social Enterprises

Martin Vickers: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills what information his Department holds on the number of social enterprises established in the last 10 years; and what information it holds on the proportion of such enterprises which have continued to operate after three years. [28541]

Mr Prisk: BIS does not hold information on the number of social enterprises established in the last 10 years. It also does not hold information on the proportion of such enterprises which have continued to operate after three years.

BIS do produce estimates of the number of social enterprises in the UK. Latest estimates are that there are around 60,000 social enterprises with employees in the UK—around 5% of all SMEs with employees.

More information on social enterprises can be found in the BIS report “Social Enterprise Barometer February 2010” at:

<http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/enterprise/docs/s/10-1076-social-enterprise-barometer-feb-2010>

Student Unions

Conor Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills (1) if he will place in the Library copies of the financial reports of each student union which have been made available to governing bodies in accordance with section 22(2)(h) of the Education Act 1994 since the implementation of that Act; [28180]

(2) what steps he classifies as reasonably practicable for the purposes of complying with the requirements provided for in section 22(2) of the Education Act 1994; [28182]

(3) what guidance on (a) secondary legislation and (b) compliance his Department and its predecessors have provided to (i) governing bodies and (ii) students’ unions in respect of section 22 of the Education Act 1994; [28183]

(4) what the name and address is of each independent person appointed by each higher education institution governing body to investigate and report on complaints from students on their union in accordance with section 22(2)(m) of the Education Act 1994; [28186]

(5) if he will place in the Library copies of publications by each higher education institution that bring to the attention of students those matters listed in section 22(5) of the Education Act 1994 for the most recent period in which such publications are available; [28188]

(6) what steps his Department and its predecessors have taken to ensure compliance by (a) governing bodies and (b) students’ unions with the provisions of section 22(1) to (5) of the Education Act 1994 on requirements to be observed in relation to students’ unions; [28189]

(7) whether his Department has been informed of an infringement of the requirements of (a) section 22(1), (b) section 22(2)(a), (c) section 22(2)(b), (d) section 22(2)(e), (e) section 22(2)(f), (f) section 22(2)(g), (g) section 22(2)(h), (h) section 22(2)(i), (i) section 22(2)(j), (j) section 22(2)(k), (k) section 22(1)(i), (l) section 22(2)(m), (m) section 22(2)(n), (n) section 22(2)(c)(i), (o) section 22(2)(c)(ii), (p) section 22(3), (q) section 22(4) and (r) section 22(5) of the Education Act 1994 in the last 10 years; [28190]

(8) if he will place in the Library a copy of each publication published by each higher education institution governing body bringing to the attention of students those matters listed in sections 22(4)(b) and 22(4)(c) of the Education Act 1994; [28338]

(9) if he will place in the Library a copy of each code of practice published by each higher education institution governing body in accordance with section 22(3)(b) of the Education Act 1994 since the implementation of that Act. [28339]

Mr Willetts: The Department does not hold copies of the reports, publications or codes of practice requested. They would need to be requested from the relevant higher education institution or student union, as appropriate. Nor does the Department hold details of the independent persons referred to in section 22(2)(m) of the Education Act 1994.

Higher education institutions, as autonomous organisations, are themselves responsible for determining what steps they need to take to ensure compliance with any relevant piece of legislation which applies to them. As far as records show the Department has not been informed of any infringements of these provisions of the Education Act 1994. Nor has the Department issued guidance on (a) secondary legislation or (b) compliance in respect of section 22. Any infringement of legislation would be a matter for the courts to consider.

Conor Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills whether he plans to bring forward proposals to make (a) student unions and (b) external organisations affiliated to student unions subject to the requirements of the Freedom of Information Act 2000. [28618]

Mr Willetts: There are no plans to make (a) students' unions or (b) external organisations affiliated to students' unions subject to the requirements of the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Police Officer Numbers

18. **Susan Elan Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate she has made of the change in the number of police officers in England and Wales between March 1997 and March 2010. [28285]

Nick Herbert: On 31 March 2010 there were 142,132 police officers, compared with 125,825 on 31 March 1997.

National DNA Database

19. **Dr Thérèse Coffey:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department by what date she expects DNA records of people not charged with a crime to have been removed from the national DNA database. [28286]

Mrs May: The Government are committed to restoring the rights of individuals, particularly the presumption of innocence until proven guilty. We will bring forward proposals for a more proportionate DNA retention regime in the new year. This will adopt the protections of the Scottish model. We will remove the vast majority of unconvicted people from the National DNA Database as soon as possible after Parliament has agreed to our proposals.

We are also taking steps to ensure that the database will, for the first time, hold the profiles of all serving prisoners and all those previously convicted of serious crimes, rather than wasting resources on the retention of the DNA of innocent people.

Security Threats

20. **Richard Graham:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what methodology her Department follows to determine the nature of security threats to the UK. [28287]

Mrs May: As part of the Government's National Security Strategy, we conducted a National Security Risk Assessment. This is the first time that Government have ever undertaken a comprehensive assessment of all national security risks to the UK. The most important risks were then placed into three tiers to inform the strategic defence and security review.

Police Community Support Officers

21. **Graham Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent discussions she has had with police forces on the likely number of police community support officers at the end of 2014-15. [28288]

Nick Herbert: The number of police officers is not set by central Government, but we believe that forces can make savings to ensure that visible and available policing is secured for the public.

Licensing

22. **Natascha Engel:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans she has to review the provisions of the Licensing Act 2003. [28289]

Mrs May: The Government's proposals for amendments to the Licensing Act were outlined in our response to the consultation on "Rebalancing the Licensing Act", which was published on 1 December. Many of these measures will be introduced through legislation included in the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Bill, which was introduced on 30 November.

Crime: Alcoholic Drinks

Justin Tomlinson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many recorded crimes attributable to alcohol per 1,000 crimes there were in (a) each local authority in Wiltshire, (b) Wiltshire and (c) England in each of the last 10 years for which figures are available; and what the cost to the public purse was of such crime in each such area in each such year. [28037]

James Brokenshire [holding answer 1 December 2010]: Data relating to police recorded crime where alcohol is an attributable factor is not collected centrally and could be collated only at disproportionate cost.

The total number of defendants proceeded against at magistrates courts for alcohol-related offences, and the number of alcohol related offences per 1,000 prosecutions for all offences, in the Wiltshire police force area and England, from 2000-09 can be viewed in following table. Court proceedings data for 2010 are planned for publication in spring 2011.

These figures cover the Wiltshire police force area because data held on the Ministry of Justice's Court Proceedings Database are not available at local authority area level.

Total number of defendants proceeded against at magistrates courts for alcohol-related offences¹, and number per 1,000 prosecutions for all offences, Wiltshire police force area and England, 2000-09^{2,3}

Area	Number of defendants									
	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
<i>England</i>										
Total proceeded against for alcohol-related offences	108,281	107,549	114,039	117,245	110,501	102,218	101,614	99,979	93,726	91,503
per 1,000 proceeded against for all offences	61	63	63	63	59	58	61	62	61	58
of which:										
<i>Wiltshire police force area</i>										
Total proceeded against for alcohol-related offences	1,232	1,301	1,290	1,437	1,340	1,232	1,136	895	787	712
per 1,000 proceeded against for all offences	64	64	60	60	59	54	54	45	46	37

¹ Includes offences of:

(a) Drunkenness simple.

(b) Drunkenness with aggravation.

(c) Offences by licenced person.

(d) Other offences against intoxicating liquor laws.

(e) Driving after consuming alcohol or taking drugs.

(f) Causing death by careless driving whilst under the influence of drink or drugs.

² The figures given in the table on court proceedings 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 it 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.

³ 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.

Departmental Redundancy

Philip Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many staff of (a) her Department and (b) its agencies have been offered enhanced early retirement packages in each of the last three years. [22027]

Nick Herbert: In accordance with Cabinet Office guidance and in the knowledge that the Superannuation Bill will remove the option for enhanced benefits, the Home Office and its agencies (UK Border Agency, Criminal Records Bureau and Identity and Passport Service) have offered no enhanced terms in the recent voluntary early departure scheme. The figures for previous years are in the following table:

Employer name	Staff leaving with enhanced terms								
	2007-08			2008-09			2009-10		
	CER	FER	Total	CER	FER	Total	CER	FER	Total
Criminal Records Bureau	—	—	0	—	1	1	—	—	0
Identity and Passport Service	—	2	2	26	—	26	—	10	10
Main Home Office (including UKBA)	3	11	14	—	91	91	3	83	86
Total	3	13	16	26	92	118	3	93	96

Key:

CER—Compulsory early retirement

FER—Flexible early retirement

UKBA—United Kingdom Border Agency

Departmental Sponsorship

Priti Patel: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what expenditure (a) her Department and (b) its non-departmental public bodies incurred on sponsorship in each year since 1997 for which figures are available. [27525]

The exception is spend that has been identified for the Identity and Passport Service in relation the National Identity Service and is shown in the following table. Records are unable to be identified of any sponsorship activity earlier than 2008, and to do so would also incur disproportionate costs.

	Amount spent (£)
2010	0
2009	63,737.50
2008	10,868.75

Nick Herbert: Expenditure incurred on sponsorship in each year since 1997 for the Department and the non-departmental public bodies cannot be given without incurring disproportionate cost.

Detention Centres: Croydon

Malcolm Wicks: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department whether she plans to establish an immigration detention centre in Croydon; and if she will make a statement. [28136]

Damian Green [*holding answer 2 December 2010*]: There are no current plans to establish an immigration removal centre in Croydon.

Drugs

Mr Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department whether she plans to review the effects of the international treaties on drugs to which the UK is a signatory on the scope of UK legislation on drugs. [28535]

James Brokenshire [*holding answer 3 December 2010*]: The UK is currently a signatory to all three UN drug conventions: the single convention on narcotic drugs of 1961 as amended by the 1972 protocol; the convention on psychotropic substances of 1971; and the convention against illicit traffic in narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances of 1988.

The Home Office has no plans to review the effects of international treaties on drugs to which the UK is a signatory.

Drugs are a global problem. A co-ordinated international response is vital in our commitment to tackle drug misuse. The UK's Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 implements the provisions of the UN conventions on drugs to which we are signatories, and continues to provide a coherent legal framework.

Drugs: Crime

Mr Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what her most recent estimate is of the size of the illicit drug market. [27959]

James Brokenshire [*holding answer 2 December 2010*]: The most recent estimate by the Home Office of the size of the UK illicit drugs market was published in 2006, which estimated the value of the UK illicit drug market at between £4-£6.6 billion for the reference year 2003-04. This report is available on the Home Office website at:

<http://rds.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs06/rdsolr1606.pdf> and I will place a copy in the Library.

Mr Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate she has made of the proportion of acquisitive crime which was drug-related in each of the last five years. [28084]

James Brokenshire [*holding answer 2 December 2010*]: The last estimate for the proportion of acquisitive crime which is drug-related was published in 2005. This estimated that between one-third and a half of acquisitive crime was related to use of class A drugs. This report, 'Measuring the harm from illegal drugs using the Drug Harm Index', is available on the Home Office website at:

<http://rds.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs05/rdsolr2405.pdf> and I will place a copy in the Library.

Entry Clearances: EU Nationals

Mr Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when she expects to make a decision on the application for a residence card as a family member of a European Economic Area national of the constituent of the hon. Member for Torbay, Ms Maria Bellucci (CTS Reference: B29682/9) and what steps she is taking to reduce the time taken to process such applications. [28392]

Damian Green: The Home Office would not usually publicly discuss details of an individual's case. However, if my hon. Friend would care to write to me, I will provide an update on Ms Bellucci's status.

The UK Border Agency (UKBA) has introduced a package of measures to speed up the consideration of applications for residence cards. UKBA has increased case working resources, restructured staff training, and put new case monitoring systems in place. These measures have allowed UKBA to reduce processing times for residence cards applications to under five months.

Entry Clearances: Overseas Students

Charlotte Leslie: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans she has for the future of the student visa system. [28280]

Damian Green: As the Secretary of State for the Home Department, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) announced in her statement to Parliament of 23 November 2010, *Official Report*, columns 169-71, the Government will shortly launch a public consultation on proposed changes to the student visa arrangements. The proposals will result in a more selective system and reduce the numbers to support our aim of reducing net migration to sustainable levels.

Fixed Penalties

Simon Hart: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many fixed penalty notices in each category have been issued in the last two years. [28733]

James Brokenshire: Data on the number of fixed penalty notices (FPNs) for motoring offences (held by the Home Office), disorder offences (provided by the Ministry of Justice) and environmental offences (held by the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) are provided in the following tables.

The data provided are for the two most recent years for which data are available for each series.

Detailed data on motoring FPNs and penalty notices for disorder are available in the Library of the House. Web links are as follows:

For motoring fixed penalties:

Police Powers and Procedures—England and Wales 2008-09 and 2007-08—chapter 3 —Fed Penalty notices
<http://rds.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/police-powers.html>

For penalty notices for disorder (PNDs):

Criminal Statistics, England and Wales 2009, Supplementary Tables—chapter 2, table 2.1

<http://www.justice.gov.uk/criminalannual.htm>

Data for environmental FPNs are not published in official statistical bulletins, however data for England can be found at the following web link:

<http://www.defra.gov.uk/corporate/docs/data/index.htm>

Data for Wales are published by the Welsh Government, available via the following web link.

<http://wales.gov.uk/topics/environmentcountryside/epq/cleanneighbour/fixedpenalty/0809/?lang=en>

Number of fixed penalty notices issued in England and Wales by category and year¹

	<i>Number of motoring FPNs issued</i>	<i>Number of environmental FPNs issued</i>
2007-08	2,599,983	42,241
2008-09	2,289,778	45,076

Table 2: Penalty notices for disorder

	<i>Number issued</i>
2008	176,164
2009	170,393

¹ Data provided for the two most recent years available for each series. Updates for all data series for more recent years will be published during 2011.

Hemp: Licensing

George Freeman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment she has made of the effect on industrial growers of hemp of recent changes to licences for that activity under the provisions of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. [28282]

James Brokenshire: My officials have met with hemp growers, hemp industry representatives, and the National Farmers Union to discuss licensing arrangements that met their needs while conforming to the requirements of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 and our international obligations under UN Conventions. The Home Office is currently reviewing licensing arrangements for industrial hemp with Business, Innovation and Skills, Department of Energy and Climate Change and Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

Human Trafficking

Mr Frank Field: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans she has to involve the third sector in formulating policy to reduce the incidence of human trafficking. [28174]

Nick Herbert [holding answer 2 December 2010]: The voluntary sector plays a key role in the identification of, and provision of support to, victims of human trafficking.

We are strongly supportive of this role and will continue to work in partnership with voluntary organisations to reduce the incidence of human trafficking.

Immigration: Appeals

Andrew Percy: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many appeals before the Immigration and Asylum tribunal were adjourned because no representative of her Department was present in each of the last five years for which figures are available. [27762]

Damian Green [holding answer 1 December 2010]: The number of appeals which were adjourned because no Home Department representative was present (in each of the last five years for which figures are available) are:

Adjournments where no Home Office representative was present (percentage of all adjournments)

	<i>AIT immigration judge stage</i>		<i>AIT reconsideration stage</i>	
	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
2005-06	51	0.44	9	0.28
2006-07	86	0.75	12	0.28
2007-08	47	0.56	20	0.47
2008-09	77	0.85	11	0.32
2009-10	92	1.02	20	0.54

Note:

The percentage figures show the percentage of the total adjournments for the year.

On 15 February 2010, the Asylum and Immigration Tribunal became part of the unified Tribunal system. The Asylum and Immigration Tribunal (AIT) Immigration Judge stage is equivalent to the First-Tier Tribunal (Immigration and Asylum Chamber) and the AIT reconsideration stage is equivalent to the Upper Tribunal (Immigration and Asylum Chamber).

The statistical information provided is taken from locally held management information provided by the Tribunals Service. This information has not been quality assured under National Statistics protocols and its validity is completely reliant on the quality and timeliness of the information held on the database.

Andrew Percy: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps are being taken to increase the level of her Department's representation at appeals before the Immigration and Asylum Tribunal. [27766]

Damian Green [holding answer 1 December 2010]: There is a difference in representation rates between the first-tier Tribunal (Immigration and Asylum Chamber) and the Upper Tribunal (Immigration and Asylum Chamber) where all hearings are represented. At the first-tier appeal hearings are prioritised for representation initially on the basis of harm.

There are a number of initiatives to increase representation at the first-tier Tribunal. We are currently in the process of training asylum case-owners to handle a wider range of appeal types. This will provide a flexible resource whereby case-owners can be utilised to increase overall representation in court.

Work is also under way looking at how UK Border Agency can balance its presenting resource with the demand for appeals in regional hearing centres. We are working with the Tribunals Service looking at the forecasted volume and location of hearings to ensure that ties up with UK Border Agency's available resource.

Other work has also been undertaken recently to analyse the productivity of our presenting resources with the aim of identifying ways to improve performance through introducing new working practices, some of which will be driven through modernising our IT systems.

Members: Correspondence

Ms Harman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when she plans to respond to the letter from the right hon. Member for Camberwell and Peckham dated 8 October 2010 on police numbers in Southwark. [27737]

Nick Herbert: I refer the right hon. and learned Lady to my letter of 30 November 2010, and will place a copy of that letter in the Library.

Mr Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when she plans to reply to the letter of 7 September 2010 from the hon. Member for Torbay on his constituent, P. Griffith. [28391]

James Brokenshire: I refer my hon. Friend to my letter of 6 December 2010, and will place a copy of that letter in the Library.

National Police Improvement Agency

Alex Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what arrangements she plans to make for the undertaking of the functions of the National Police Improvement Agency after its closure. [27716]

Nick Herbert: The Home Office is currently working with the National Policing Improvement Agency (NPIA), and the wider police service, to determine the most appropriate arrangements for those functions that will continue after the NPIA is phased out.

Police: Accountability

Alex Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what arrangements she plans to put in place for scrutiny of elected police commissioners. [27778]

Nick Herbert: In paragraph 2.16 of our response to the consultation on Policing in the 21st Century: Reconnecting police and the people, we state

“We are keen to encourage independent candidates to stand for election alongside those candidates supported by the main political parties. In partnership with the Electoral Commission we will embark on a programme of activity which seeks to raise public awareness of Police and Crime Commissioners to secure a healthy voter turn out, and to encourage independent candidates to represent their communities.”

Police Community Support Officers

Alex Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) whether responsibility for determining the number of police community support officers (PCSOs) will rest with proposed police commissioners; and who will decide in March 2012 how many PCSOs are to be (a) retained and (b) funded; [27777]

(2) what plans she has for funding of police community support officers after March 2012. [27712]

Nick Herbert: Decisions on the neighbourhood policing fund will be announced shortly when provisional policing settlements will be placed before the House.

Wood

Mr Bain: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment she has made of the compliance of her Department with the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation's criteria for sourcing sustainable timber. [27846]

Nick Herbert: The Home Office actively seeks to procure timber and wood derived products originating from either legal and sustainable or Forest Law Enforcement Governance and Trade licensed or equivalent sources. This is in line with UK Government timber procurement policy.

TREASURY

Capital Gains Tax

Mr Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the cost of (a) increasing and (b) reducing the capital gains tax annual exempt amount by £5,000. [27589]

Mr Gauke: HMRC holds limited data on individuals with gains below the annual exempt amount (AEA) due to reporting requirements. Estimating the behavioural response to large increases or decreases in the AEA is exceptionally difficult as there is little direct evidence and conflicting arguments about potential responses, therefore estimates can be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Estimates of the revenue implications of small increases to the annual exempt amount for the new CGT regime will be available in Table 1.6 (Direct effects of illustrative changes tax changes) on the HMRC website from 31 December 2010.

Child Benefit

Caroline Lucas: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer whether his Department undertook an equalities impact assessment in respect of his proposal to withdraw child benefit from households with one higher rate tax-payer; and if he will make a statement. [18205]

Mr Gauke: HM Treasury has considered the equalities impact of the change to child benefit. The Government published an ‘overview of the impact of Spending Review 2010 on equalities’ alongside the spending review document. This document considers the overall impact of the spending review on groups protected by equalities legislation and it can be found at:

http://cdn.hm-treasury.gov.uk/sr2010_equalities.pdf

Conflict Prevention: Finance

Yvette Cooper: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much funding from his Department was allocated to the Conflict Pool in (a) 2008-09, (b) 2009-10 and (c) 2010-11. [27265]

Danny Alexander [*holding answer 29 November 2010*]: The Conflict Pool was created in 2009 by the previous Government by merging the Conflict Prevention Pool and Stabilisation Aid Fund. In 2010-11—the first full year of its existence—the Conflict Pool has a budget of £229 million.

Departmental Written Questions

Mr Amess: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what recent estimate he has made of the number of questions to his Department tabled in (a) the House of Commons and (b) the House of Lords that remained unanswered after 10 working days as a result of observation of guidance on the timing of answers to similar Questions tabled to more than one Department in the latest period for which figures are available. [28006]

Justine Greening: No such estimate has been made.

Employment: Scotland

Margaret Curran: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the number of people likely to be employed in the (a) public and (b) private sector in (a) Scotland, (b) Glasgow and (c) Glasgow East constituency in each of the next five years. [27772]

Danny Alexander [*holding answer 2 December 2010*]: The Treasury has not made estimates of employment for the public and private sectors in Scotland, Glasgow and Glasgow East. In devolved areas it is for the Scottish Government to make its own decisions and assessments of the employment effects of its policies. The latest forecasts for the whole of the UK were published by the Office of Budget Responsibility on 29 November.

Financial Services: International Cooperation

Lorely Burt: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what steps the Government are taking to ensure that consumer protection in financial services forms part of the work of the G20 to address the global financial crisis. [27917]

Justine Greening: At the G20 Summit in Seoul on 11-12 November, where the Prime Minister represented the UK, G20 leaders asked the relevant international institutions to explore

“options to advance consumer finance protection through informed choice that includes disclosure, transparency and education; protection from fraud, abuse and errors; and recourse and advocacy”. They have been asked to report back by the next summit. The Summit Declaration can be found at

<http://www.g20.utoronto.ca/summits.html>

Lorely Burt: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his policy is on establishing an expert group to report to the G20 summit in 2011 to deliver recommendations on supporting effective financial consumer protection around the world. [28071]

Justine Greening: At the G20 summit in Seoul on 11-12 November, where the Prime Minister represented the UK, G20 leaders “asked the Financial Stability Board (FSB) to work in collaboration with the Organisation

for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and other international organisations to explore, and report back by the next summit, on options to advance consumer finance protection...”. The G20 will consider next steps once the FSB has completed its report. The Summit Declaration can be found at:

<http://www.g20.utoronto.ca/summits.html>

Mortgages

Harriett Baldwin: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the regulatory effect of the proposals on mortgage lending made by (a) the Financial Services Authority and (b) the European Commission. [27910]

Mr Hoban: The Government are committed to a healthy housing and mortgage market.

The Financial Services Authority (FSA) is conducting a wholesale review of mortgage regulation in the UK, the ‘Mortgage Market Review’.

The Government believe that it is right for the FSA to ensure that the UK mortgage market has responsible lending practices. We will continue to work with the FSA, mortgage lenders and intermediaries, and consumer groups to ensure a mortgage market that is sustainable for all participants.

The FSA published ‘Mortgage Market Review: Responsible Lending’ in July. This paper forms one part of an ongoing consultation process.

The FSA has stated that they will fully assess the potential impact on the market before implementing any rule changes.

The European Commission has not yet announced any proposals on responsible lending. Should any proposals be put forward the Secretariat General requires that all Commission initiatives with significant impacts be supported by an impact assessment.

Mr Marcus Jones: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his policy is on fiscal measures to assist first-time homebuyers who decide to commit a large proportion of their income in mortgage payments in order to get onto the property ladder. [27987]

Mr Hoban: First time buyers of residential property worth up to £250,000 can claim relief from stamp duty land tax (SDLT) on the purchase of their first home. The relief is available for two years and will expire on 24 March 2012.

The Government have committed to review this relief, taking into account its impact on affordability and value for money.

Mr Marcus Jones: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what estimate he has made of the number of borrowers who may not be able to take out remortgages following the introduction of the Financial Services Authority’s proposals for the mortgage market; and if he will bring forward fiscal measures to assist such borrowers; [27988]

(2) what estimate he has made of the number of mortgages granted since 2005 which would not have been issued under the Financial Services Authority’s proposals for the mortgage market; [27989]

(3) what assessment he has made of the likely regulatory burden arising from responsible mortgage lending proposals made by (a) the Financial Services Authority and (b) the European Commission; [27990]

(4) if he will take steps to ensure that (a) self-employed homebuyers and (b) other homebuyers with variable incomes will be able to obtain mortgages under the Financial Services Authority's proposals for the mortgage market. [27992]

Mr Hoban: The Government are committed to a healthy housing and mortgage market.

The Financial Services Authority (FSA) is conducting a wholesale review of mortgage regulation in the UK, the 'Mortgage Market Review'.

The Government believe that it is right for the FSA to ensure that the UK mortgage market has responsible lending practices. We will continue to work with the FSA, mortgage lenders and intermediaries, and consumer groups to ensure a mortgage market that is sustainable for all participants.

The FSA published 'Mortgage Market Review; Responsible Lending' in July. This paper forms one part of an ongoing consultation process.

The FSA has stated that they will fully assess the potential impact on the market before implementing any rule changes.

The European Commission has not yet announced any proposals on responsible lending. Should any proposals be put forward, the Secretariat General requires that all Commission initiatives with significant impacts be supported by an impact assessment.

Private Finance Initiative

Andrea Leadsom: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will take steps to encourage local private finance initiative providers to renegotiate the terms of their contracts with local public bodies for the purpose of taking into account the effects on them of changes in the economic situation since those contracts were first negotiated. [28246]

Danny Alexander [*holding answer 2 December 2010*]: The Treasury continues to recommend that local authorities seek value for money in PFI contracts. Guidance on where value for money savings may be made within existing PFI contracts and where renegotiation is unlikely to provide value for money will be set out in due course. Treasury officials have met with a number of major equity holders in PFI contracts to discuss options for savings.

Public Expenditure

Dr Francis: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what steps he took to ensure that the outcomes of the comprehensive spending review were compliant with the (a) Human Rights Act 1998 and (b) Equality Act 2010; and if he will make a statement. [20054]

Danny Alexander: The Treasury takes equalities matters very seriously. Policy makers are aware that all policies have to be Human Rights Act compliant and legal

advice will be sought where there are concerns. In addition, where a measure resulting from the spending review requires primary legislation it will be accompanied by a statement under section 19 of the Act as to compatibility.

There are currently statutory obligations on Government Departments to have regard to promoting equality in regard to gender, race and disability when considering policy changes.

The 2010 Equality Act does not fully come into force until April 2011.

Whether or not a full equality impact assessment will be carried out in any case depends on the likely impact of a proposed policy on members of the relevant groups of people and whether it would be proportionate and possible to do so.

On 20 October 2010 the Treasury published an overview of the impact of the spending review on groups protected by equalities legislation.

However, the Treasury does not dictate the details of how other Departments will live within their settlements—this will be for Departments to decide themselves. Other Government Departments will ensure that equality and human rights considerations are taken into account when these decisions are made. Decisions about the publication of Equality Impact Assessments are also for individual Departments to make.

With regard to its own spending, the Treasury will ensure that equalities are taken into account as policies are developed following the spending review, in line with its legal obligations.

Public Expenditure: Wales

Jessica Morden: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what recent assessment he has made of the likely effects of the outcome of the comprehensive spending review on women in Wales. [29053]

Danny Alexander: The Treasury had a role to play in assessing the impact of public expenditure reductions as a whole during the spending review process. The Treasury made a qualitative assessment of the likely impact of the spending review on different groups using the information that is currently available, and these assessments were considered when decisions were made. Further assessments will be made by Departments themselves as they make decisions about the allocation of resources to different policy areas.

The Government have not made an assessment of the likely effects of the outcome of the spending review on women in Wales. The role of the Treasury in making decisions about public expenditure in devolved areas of spending is to allocate resources—it is then up to these areas to decide how best to manage these resources. In devolved areas of spending it is for the Welsh Assembly Government to conduct their own equality impact assessments of policy proposals, in line with their legal obligations.

The Treasury published the document, "Overview of Equalities Impacts of the Spending Review on Equalities" alongside the spending review announcement.

Public Sector: Redundancy

Bridget Phillipson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will publish his Department's impact assessment of the likely effects of reductions in the number of public sector jobs in areas where the private sector is classified as underdeveloped. [28164]

Danny Alexander: The United Kingdom faces the largest peacetime deficit in our history. The public sector paybill accounts for around half of departmental resource spending, so deficit reduction will inevitably impact on the public sector workforce. However, not tackling the deficit would be the worst thing for jobs in the medium term, across the public and private sector

It will be for individual employers to determine the exact workforce implications of their settlements.

The Treasury published information on actions being taken to encourage growth across the country, and how each region will benefit from schemes announced in the spending review, including capital investment programmes. This information is available online at

www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/spend_sr2010_regions.htm

Rescue Services: Helicopters

Michael Dugher: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) whether the budgetary settlement agreed by his Department with the Ministry of Defence included an assumption that a proportion of the costs of the SAR (H) programme would be borne by the Ministry of Defence; [26337]

(2) whether his Department has been asked to approve a transfer of resources between the Ministry of Defence and Department for Transport as a result of the proposal to de-militarise the Search and Rescue (Helicopter) programme; [26657]

(3) whether the Ministry of Defence departmental expenditure limit he announced in the comprehensive spending review will be changed as a result of the proposal to de-militarise the Search and Rescue (Helicopter) programme; and if he will make a statement. [26673]

Danny Alexander [*holding answer 25 November 2010*]: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire (Mr Robathan) gave the right hon. Member for Coventry North East (Mr Ainsworth), on 19 November 2010, *Official Report*, column 967W.

Revenue and Customs: Complaints

David Morris: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many complaints Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs received in each of the last five years. [28171]

Mr Gauke: Complaints information for the last five years is published in HMRC Annual Reports for 2005-06, 2006-07, 2007-08, 2008-09 and the HMRC Departmental Accounts for 2009-10. The information is reported on an annual basis and is available from the HMRC website:

www.hmrc.gov.uk/about/reports.htm

Revenue and Customs: Manpower

Mr Hanson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) how many compliance officers HM Revenue and Customs had on 5 April 2010; and how many he expects there to be on the same date in (a) 2011 and (b) 2012; [26007]

(2) how he proposes to allocate the funding his Department has announced for measures to reduce tax evasion; [26035]

(3) how much revenue which would otherwise have been lost through (a) tax avoidance and (b) fraud his Department has recovered in (i) 2008-09 and (ii) 2009-10; and how much he expects to recover in (A) 2011-12 and (B) 2012-13. [26110]

Mr Gauke: Reducing tax loss, whether it stems from avoidance or evasion, is a key priority for this Government and we have recently announced that £900 million will be made available over the spending review period, to enable HMRC to step-up its activity in tackling tax loss to bring in £7 billion additional benefits per annum by 2014-15.

HM Revenue and Customs deployed approximately 31,000 staff across all grades at 31 March 2010 on a variety of compliance activities including risk assessment, addressing inaccurate returns and verifying repayment claims, debt collection and criminal investigations across all heads of duty. We estimate that at 31 March 2011 there will be approximately 29,000 compliance staff. HMRC are expected to find resource savings of 15% through the better use of new technology, greater efficiency and better IT contracts. HMRC are not able to provide estimates for 2012 yet.

HMRC are currently working on business plans which will be published in spring 2011. These will include for example a new team to crack down on offshore tax evasion and additional criminal investigations to increase the number of criminal prosecutions.

The additional tax liability (including penalties and interest) resulting from all HMRC compliance work in 2008-09 was £12 billion. Data for 2009-10 is not yet available. HMRC do not have a breakdown of how much they hope to recover from compliance activity in 2011-12 or 2012-13. The Government's investment of £900 million should raise additional benefits of around £7 billion by 2014-15.

Revenue and Customs: Rural Areas

Susan Elan Jones: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what provision HM Revenue and Customs make for those in rural areas who are required to enter their tax returns online and who do not have broadband access. [28321]

Mr Gauke: Taxpayers who do not wish to or have difficulty in filing their income tax self-assessment return online have the option to file a paper return by 31 October following the end of the tax year concerned.

Social Security: Equality

Julie Hilling: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what gender impact assessment his Department has undertaken to determine the relative effects of the

implementation of his proposals regarding child benefit and entitlement to national insurance credits on (a) men and (b) women. [20348]

Mr Gauke [*holding answer 1 November 2010*]: The withdrawal of child benefit from families containing a higher rate taxpayer will not affect national insurance credits for state pension entitlement.

Students: Loans

Dr Pugh: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make it his policy to enter the debts attributable to the Student Loan Company on the public sector balance sheet. [27550]

Mr Gauke: The total balance outstanding for the UK student loan book (including loans not yet due for repayment) at the end of the financial year 2009-10 was £35.95 billion. This figure is recorded in the national accounts as part of public sector net debt. The OBR in its 'Economic and fiscal outlook—November 2010', Box 4.3 page 123, gives an overview of how student loans are scored in the accounts and an estimate of how recent policy changes will affect the forecast.

Tax Allowances: Up-rating

Chris Leslie: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he plans to announce the next annual up-rating of allowances and thresholds for tax and national insurance for 2011-12. [28764]

Mr Gauke: On 2 December the Government confirmed 2011-12 rates and thresholds for income tax, national insurance contributions (NICs), and tax credits. The limit for individual savings accounts (ISA) for 2011-12 was also confirmed.

A note containing this information was deposited in the Libraries of both Houses and is available on the HM Treasury website at:

http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/tax_autumn_updates.htm

Tax Yields

Mr Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the real-terms growth of (a) actual and (b) underlying tax revenues in each year from 1985-86 to 2009-10; and if he will make a statement. [25665]

Mr Gauke: The Office for National Statistics publishes tax receipts from 1946-47 to 2009-10 in "Public Sector Finances: Supplementary Data", which is available at:

<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/STATBASE/Product.asp?vlnk=805>

Real terms growth of these tax receipts can be calculated the using GDP deflators that are published on HM Treasury website and available at:

http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/d/gdp_deflators.xls

More information on cyclical adjustment methodology is set out in "Public finances and the cycle: Treasury Economic Working Paper No. 5", November 2008, available at:

<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20100407010852/>

http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/prebud_pbr08_publicfinances.htm

This information helps to inform any assessment of 'underlying' tax receipts.

Welfare Tax Credits

Mr Douglas Alexander: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the number of tax credit recipients who experience marginal deduction rates of (a) 70% or less, (b) between 71 and 73%, (c) between 73 and 76% and (d) over 76%. [26046]

Mr Gauke: Table A3 of the June Budget shows the Government's estimate of the number of working heads of families facing high marginal deduction rates in 2011-12 who are in receipt of income-related benefits or tax credits where at least one person works 16 hours or more a week, and the head of the family is not receiving pensioner or disability premia. For those in receipt of tax credits, around 400,000 are estimated to face a deduction rate of 70% or less; 1,345,000 a deduction rate of between 71 and 73%; 5,000 a rate of between 73 and 76%; and 145,000 a rate of over 76%.

High marginal deduction rates are a long-standing problem that this Government are taking action to address through the new universal credit. This will replace the current complex system of means-tested working-age benefits with a simple streamlined payment. The universal credit will improve financial work incentives by ensuring that support is reduced at a consistent and managed rate as people return to work and increase their working hours and earnings.

Working Tax Credit: Wales

Jessica Morden: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the number of women in Wales who will be affected by the proposed reduction in the childcare element of the working tax credit from 80 per cent. to 70 per cent. [29052]

Mr Gauke: The information requested is not available.

Jessica Morden: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the number of single (a) women and (b) men without children in Wales who will qualify for working tax credits in each of the next three years. [29054]

Mr Gauke: The information requested is not available.

ATTORNEY-GENERAL

Departmental Press: Subscriptions

Robert Halfon: To ask the Attorney-General how much the Law Officers' Departments spent on press cuttings services in each year since 1997. [28160]

The Solicitor-General: The Attorney-General and Solicitor-General superintend the Crown Prosecution Service, Serious Fraud Office, National Fraud Authority, Treasury Solicitor's Department and HM Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate. The only Law Officers' Departments which use press cuttings services are the Attorney-General's Office (formerly Legal Secretariat to the Law Officers), the CPS and the SFO and this answer is provided on their behalf.

Attorney-General's Office
AGO press cuttings¹

<i>Financial year</i>	<i>Total (£ excl VAT)</i>
2000-01 ²	11,520
2001-02	12,707
2002-03	13,624
2003-04	16,543
2004-05	23,527
2005-06	35,589
2006-07	37,656
2007-08	37,048
2008-09	23,964
2009-10	30,057
2010-11 to date	12,352

¹ There is no separate account coding for 'Press Cuttings' but based on recorded expenditure with press cutting suppliers since 2000-01, the expenditure on press cutting services for the Attorney-General's Office, excluding VAT, is above

² Figures prior to April 2000 are not held on the Department's current accounting system and cannot be accessed without incurring disproportionate costs.

Crown Prosecution Service

<i>Financial year</i>	<i>Total (£ inclusive of VAT)</i>
<i>CPS press cuttings</i>	
1997-98	21,040.67
1998-99	24,096.13
1999-2000	24,045.55
2000-01	24,635.53
2001-02	19,107.95
2002-03	23,926.08
2003-04	28,741.23
2004-05	24,135.14
2005-06	30,724.78
2006-07	30,192.39
2007-08	27,636.98
2008-09	19,879.94
2009-10 ¹	24,460.61
2010-11 to date ²	18,845.38

RCPO press cuttings

2008-09	20,300.00
2009-10	18,051.46
2010-11 to date	857.28

¹ The CPS merged with RCPO on 1 January 2010, and the total amount is a reflection of both the CPS's and RCPO's spending.

² Includes online and broadcast media monitoring costs as well as press cuttings services.

Serious Fraud Office
SFO press cuttings

<i>Financial year</i>	<i>Total (£ excl VAT)</i>
1997-98	10,511
1998-99	13,380
1999-2000	10,630
2000-01	8,826
2001-02	8,535
2002-03	14,769
2003-04	16,913
2004-05	15,838
2005-06	14,341
2006-07	28,261
2007-08	13,908
2008-09	16,574
2009-10	15,342
2010-11 to date	7,131

JUSTICE

Courts: Repossession Orders

Mike Weatherley: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice how many landlord possessions claims were dismissed by courts because the claimant had not followed civil procedure rules in the first two quarters of 2010. [28203]

Mr Djanogly: The Ministry of Justice does not hold figures centrally on the number of landlord possession claims dismissed by courts because the claimant had not followed civil procedure rules in the first two quarters of 2010.

While the administrative computer systems used in the county courts contain the incidence of orders made, those specifically relating to the dismissal of claims because the claimant had not followed civil procedure rules cannot be distinguished from other types of orders made. This information could be obtained only through the examination of individual case files at disproportionate cost.

Departmental Contracts

Nicola Blackwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice what steps his Department plans to take to encourage and support small and medium-sized enterprises and third sector organisations to compete for departmental contracts, in line with value-for-money policy, UK regulations and EU procurement directives. [28108]

Mr Djanogly: The Cabinet Office recently announced a package of measures designed to help government meet their aspiration that 25% of government contracts go to small and medium sized enterprises. The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) is working closely with the Cabinet Office to ensure that these measures are embedded in its procurement practices.

The MoJ also acts proactively to engage and attract the interest of the Voluntary Community and Social Enterprise Sector (VCSE). Opportunities are currently advertised through Supply to Government and will shortly migrate to the new Contracts Finder portal where all government opportunities over £10,000 will be published. Opportunities are also advertised through Clinks, a charity that assists in communication to the sector.

Procurement activity is tailored to the value and complexity of the requirement but tends to be shorter and involve engagement opportunities with the sector via dialogue sessions to discuss the requirement. MoJ has recently implemented an e-procurement tool that is easy for small businesses and the VCSE to use. The MoJ procurement processes comply with the Cabinet Office VCSE Compact compliant.

Departmental Data Protection

Mr Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice on how many occasions in the last three years the Secretary of State has used his power under section 59(2) of the Data Protection Act 1998 to release minutes relating to the business of his Department; and if he will make a statement. [28873]

Mr Djanogly: Section 59(2) of the Data Protection Act 1998 protects information supplied to the Information Commissioner by public authorities and data controllers as part of his investigations into their compliance with the Freedom of Information and Data Protection Acts. The commissioner and his staff may not disclose this information except with lawful authority. To do otherwise is an offence. The commissioner has lawful authority to disclose information, among other circumstances, when a public authority or data controller gives consent to disclose.

The decision whether the Department would consent to the release of information provided to the commissioner during the course of his investigations would be based on the merits of each request to do so and on the particular circumstances of the case.

The Department does not keep central records of the instances which it has been approached for consent to disclose information by virtue of section 59(2). This information could be provided only at disproportionate cost by examining individual case records.

Departmental Press: Subscriptions

Robert Halfon: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice how much his Department and its predecessors spent on press cuttings services in each year since 1997. [28154]

Mr Kenneth Clarke: The annual expenditure by MoJ—not including the Office of the Public Guardian (OPG)—on press cuttings from 2005-06 onwards was:

	£
2005-06	62,278
2006-07	23,009
2007-08	56,663
2008-09	94,075
2009-10	¹ 144,724

¹ The primary cause of the higher spend in 2009-10 was the increase in high profile issues concerning the department in that Year. Additionally in 2009-10 regional coverage and a digital service were added.

The data for 2005-06 and 2006-07 refer to press cutting services provided for the Department of Constitutional Affairs (MoJ's immediate predecessor for the elements not contained within the Home Office). The data for 2007-08 to 2009-10 refer to a joint service provided to MoJ headquarters, the National Offender Management Service, The Tribunals Service and HM Courts Service.

The total spend by the MoJ and its predecessors is held for locally only from 2005-06. Retrieving archived information for before 2005 would exceed the disproportionate cost and time limits.

OPG was formed in 2007 and maintains a separate press cutting service. Its annual expenditure on these services was:

	£
2007-08	7,477
2008-09	4,181
2009-10	3,595

Additionally, the Tribunals Service has also maintained a separate press cutting service for web based news since May 2008. Its annual expenditure these services from May 2008 was:

	£
May 2008 - July 2009	4,136
August 2009 - July 2010	2,300
August 2010 - July 2011	2,421

Before 2006 the tribunals were not part of one single agency. It would incur disproportionate costs to identify tribunals-specific expenditure in the various departments that operated tribunals between 1997-98 and 2005-06.

Departmental Publications

Robert Halfon: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice what estimate he has made of the expenditure of his Department and its predecessor on printing (a) Command Papers, (b) papers laid before Parliament by Act, (c) consultation documents and (d) other papers in each of the last 10 years. [28376]

Mr Djanogly: The Ministry of Justice and its executive agencies produce a wide range of internal and external publications each year, including:

- Command Papers
- Papers presented to Parliament by Act
- Consultation documents

As well as:

- Annual accounts
- Annual reports
- Public information material
- Statistical information
- Internal documents, guides and handbooks

Copies of all the external publications the MoJ publishes can be found at:

<http://www.justice.gov.uk/publications.htm>.

It is not possible to identify expenditure on specific types of publications without incurring disproportionate cost as this would involve examination of a very large number of transactions across a range of accounting categories.

Offenders

Mark Lancaster: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice what proportion of people convicted of criminal offences in the latest period for which figures are available had no previous cautions. [28465]

Mr Blunt: 35% of offenders convicted for indictable offences in England and Wales in 2009 had no previous cautions, reprimands or warnings. These figures have been derived from the dataset used to produce table 6.2 of 'Sentencing Statistics: England and Wales 2009' which was published on 21 October 2010.

The 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.

Mark Lancaster: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice what proportion of people who received cautions were subsequently convicted of a criminal offence in the latest period in which figures are available. [28466]

Mr Blunt: In 2008, 17% of juveniles who received a reprimand or warning and 16% of adults who received a caution were subsequently convicted of a criminal offence within one year.

Further information on reoffending following a caution can be found in the 'Compendium of reoffending statistics and analysis' which was published on 4 November 2010, available at:

<http://www.justice.gov.uk/publications/compendium-reoffending.htm>

The 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.

Mark Lancaster: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice what the minimum period is after which a caution is considered spent. [28468]

Mr Blunt: Under the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974, a simple caution is considered to be spent immediately, for both adult and juvenile offenders. A conditional caution is considered to be spent three months from when the caution is administered, again for both adult and juvenile offenders.

We are conducting an assessment of sentencing and rehabilitation policies, and this will include the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act. We will publish a Green Paper shortly with our proposals for consultation.

Offenders: Drugs

Susan Elan Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice what guidance he has issued on the release on licence of offenders with unresolved drink or drug dependency issues. [28064]

Mr Blunt: Guidance on the release on licence of offenders with unresolved drug dependency issues is contained in Probation Circular (PC36/2007) "Managing Drug Misusers under Probation Supervision: Guidance for Probation, Criminal Justice Integrated Teams and Counselling Assessment Referral Advice and Throughcare Teams". Additionally; "Drug Misusing Offenders: Ensuring the continuity-of-care between prison and community", provides specific guidance on managing the continuity-of-care journey that drug misusing offenders follow on entering prison from the community, whilst in prison, and exiting prison. "National Offender Management Service Alcohol Interventions Guidance", issued in December 2009, includes equivalent guidance for offenders with alcohol problems.

Offenders: Release

Susan Elan Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice under what circumstances offenders serving a custodial sentence following conviction for a violent offence may be released from custody on licence. [28065]

Mr Blunt: Legislation requires that adult offenders serving an immediate determinate custodial sentence must be released from custody at the halfway point of the sentence. Those serving determinate sentences of 12 months or more serve the second half of the sentence on licence in the community under supervision, and subject to recall to custody. Eligible offenders serving a determinate sentence of less than four years may be released under the home detention curfew scheme up to four and a half months earlier than the half-way release point if they pass a risk assessment. Offenders serving an indeterminate sentence, either a life sentence or a sentence of imprisonment for public protection (IPP), must serve in custody the full minimum term imposed by the court. After that point it is for the Parole Board to determine if and when they are safe to be released on licence.

Offenders: Sentencing

Susan Elan Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice if he will consider the merits of setting a minimum custodial sentence for offenders convicted of a second or third violent offence. [28066]

Mr Blunt: We are conducting a full assessment of sentencing and rehabilitation policy to ensure it is effective in deterring crime, protecting the public, punishing offenders and cutting re-offending. We will consult on any proposals shortly.

Office of the Public Guardian: Complaints

Stephen Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice how many complaints the Office of the Public Guardian received in the last 12 months; and how many such complaints were responded to within its target timescale. [28097]

Mr Djanogly: In the period of November 2009 to October 2010 the Office of the Public Guardian responded to 3,521 complaints. 2,650 (75%) of these responses were provided within the published 10-day target.

Preston Prison: Health Services

Paul Maynard: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice what proportion of HM Prison Preston's certified normal accommodation consists of healthcare beds. [28931]

Mr Blunt: Current records indicate that 30 places in HMP Preston's baseline certified normal accommodation of 453 are in in-patient health care units.

Prisoners: Custodial Treatment

Susan Elan Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice what steps he is taking to ensure that prisoners with a drink or drug dependency are appropriately treated while in custody. [28067]

Mr Blunt: Drug treatment is in place to help prisoners with addiction, comprising clinical services, psychosocial interventions, case management and through care services, Alcohol treatment and rehabilitation services for those with an alcohol dependency are in the main also provided within the wider drug treatment framework. The key

interventions available in prison for those dependent on alcohol are clinical detoxification and Alcoholics Anonymous/peer support.

The Government believe more needs to be done to offer offenders the opportunity to get off drugs and alcohol for good and into a position where they can stop offending and make a proper contribution to society. To achieve this we will run pilots to pay contractors by results to rehabilitate offenders with drug problems, launch prison drugs recovery wing pathfinders in a number of prisons. These plans will be outlined in more detail in a Green Paper on the rehabilitation and sentencing of offenders, which will be published shortly.

Prisoners: Drugs

Susan Elan Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice what proportion of people diagnosed with a drink or drug dependency on entering prison had successfully completed treatment for such dependencies on release in the latest period for which figures are available. [28068]

Mr Blunt: The Ministry of Justice does not record data in the form requested. However the number of prison-based accredited drug and alcohol treatment programme commencements and completions for 2009-10 is shown in the following table.

Additionally prison and health records show that in 2009-10 health services delivered 60,067 clinical interventions for drug and alcohol addiction in prisons.

Starts and completions table 2009-10—Prison-based accredited drug and alcohol treatment programmes¹

<i>Programme</i>	<i>Starts</i>	<i>Completions</i>
12-Step (Drugs)	666	387
12-Step (Alcohol)	180	143
Alcohol Related Violence	40	16
Focus	95	84
Prisoner Addressing Substance Related Offending	3,378	2,727
Short Duration Programme	5,202	3,799
Substance Treatment Offending Programme	384	312
Therapeutic Community (Men)	247	155
Therapeutic Community (Women)	14	6
Total	10,206	7,629

¹ These data have been drawn from administrative data systems which may be amended at any time. Although care is taken when processing and analysing the returns, the detail collected is subject to the inaccuracies inherent in any large scale recording system.

Mr Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice pursuant to answer of 25 November 2010, *Official Report*, column 458W, on reoffenders, whether his Department plans to collect data on the reoffending of offenders treated for drug addiction in prison. [28765]

Mr Blunt: We are exploring what data will be required as part of the plans by Government to develop pilots to pay providers by results, including for the rehabilitation of offenders with drug problems.

The details of this are currently being considered by a cross Government working group led by the Department of Health.

Mr Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice pursuant to the answer of 23 November 2010, *Official Report*, column 287W, on heroin addiction, how many adults were remanded or sentenced in 2009-10. [28766]

Mr Blunt: 1,315,820 adult offenders (aged 18 and over at the point of sentence) were sentenced in England and Wales during the calendar year 2009¹. In 2009 an estimated 71,500 defendants were remanded in custody at magistrates court or the Crown court.

It is not known how many offenders were heroin addicts at the point of sentencing.

Sentencing data for 2010 are planned for publication as a calendar year report in spring 2011.

¹ <http://www.justice.gov.uk/publications/sentencingannual.htm>

Prisons

Mr Anderson: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice whether he plans to market-test publicly-owned prisons. [27932]

Mr Blunt: The Government are currently developing their programme for competition in offender services. As indicated in the Ministry of Justice business plan, we will publish this programme in June 2011.

Probation: Finance

Jack Dromey: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice how much funding his Department allocated to the (a) Probation Service, (b) Prison Service and (c) Courts Service in the west midlands in 2009-10; and what estimate he has made of the level of equivalent funding in (i) 2010-11, (ii) 2011-12, (iii) 2012-13 and (iv) 2013-14. [27934]

Mr Blunt: Funding for the Probation Boards and trusts in the west midlands in 2009-10 was £97.1 million and is estimated at £94.5 million for 2010-11. Current estimates for 2011-12 anticipate real terms reductions of approximately 4.5%. Estimates have not yet been made for subsequent years but will be impacted by the funding allocated to NOMS from within the MoJ's SR10 financial settlement with HM Treasury. That funding level has yet to be agreed by the executive management board.

Funding for prisons in the west midlands in 2009-10 was £193.7 million and is estimated at £197.4 million in 2010-11. Current estimates for 2011-12 anticipate real terms reductions of approximately 3%. Estimates have not yet been made for subsequent years but will be impacted by the funding allocated to NOMS from within the MoJ's SR10 financial settlement with HM Treasury. That funding level has yet to be agreed by the executive management board.

Funding of the Courts Service in the west midlands in 2009-10 was £45.818 million and is estimated at £45.626 million for 2010-11. Estimates have not yet been made for subsequent years but will be impacted by the funding allocated to HMCS from within the MoJ's SR10 financial settlement with HM Treasury. That funding level has yet to be agreed by the executive management board.

Sexual Offences: Community Orders

Mr Anderson: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice what the average time taken was between the making of a community order with a condition of a (a) sex offender programme and (b) group general offender behaviour programme and the commencement of that programme in each probation trust in the latest period for which figures are available. [27933]

Mr Blunt: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him on 30 November 2010, *Official Report*, column 709W.

Squatting: Crime

Mr Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice pursuant to the answer of 18 October 2010, *Official Report*, column 543W, on squatting: crime, which commitments in the coalition agreement could prevent the strengthening of the law in relation to squatting in residential properties. [28170]

Mr Blunt: In reviewing the law in relation to squatting in residential premises the Government will be mindful of two specific commitments in the coalition agreement. They are the need to guard against the proliferation of unnecessary criminal offences and to protect the right to peaceful protest.

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